

Midway the journey of this life I was 'ware
That I had strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.



ALL PHOTOS © JAI BOOKS/ELISABETH TONNARD

ARCHIVING

A PETRIFIED FOREST

FOR HER COMPELLING NEW BOOK, ELISABETH TONNARD COMBINED IMAGES FROM A HISTORIC SAN FRANCISCO STREET PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE WITH VARIOUS TRANSLATIONS OF THE OPENING LINES OF DANTE'S *THE INFERNO*. BY DZANA TSOMONDO

ELISABETH TONNARD describes her book *In This Dark Wood* as a “modern gothic.” In it, 90 different black-and-white portraits are paired with 90 different English translations of the opening lines of Dante’s *The Inferno*. “Midway along the journey of our life/I woke to find myself in a dark wood,/for I had wandered off from the straight path,” reads one of the translations, by Mark Musa.

Part of the macabre beauty of *In This Dark Wood* lies in subtleties like the items clutched and ferried by these would-be lost souls. Crumpled paper bags and hastily wrapped packages abound, as if they are refugees sent into this gray limbo, bearing their last effects in hand. Or the words on an oft-glimpsed movie marquee that swims

in the gloomy background of many images. Soon, you begin to notice the words suspended in the air—petrified, terror, hell, doomed—only amplify the dread that builds alongside each translation of Dante’s foreboding introduction. All the while, though we know their way is lost, the subjects set forth grimly, one after the other, alone.

Tonnard sourced all of the images from the Fox Movie Flash collection, a massive archive of mid-twentieth century street photography. Held by the Visual Studies Workshop, a nonprofit photographic arts center in Rochester, New York, the archive consists of millions of negatives donated to the institution by Joseph N. Selle. Selle owned the long-defunct Fox Movie Flash, a company that employed teams of street photographers who prowled downtown San Francisco from the 1940s to the 1960s. Selle and his team made snapshots of tourists and pedestrians in the hopes of selling them the portraits. A high-volume business model meant that they took far

Elisabeth Tonnard created *In This Dark Wood* after discovering an archive of images made at night by a San Francisco street portraiture company in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. The people in the nighttime images, she says, “looked as if they were in another place; lost in thought, alienated from their surroundings.”

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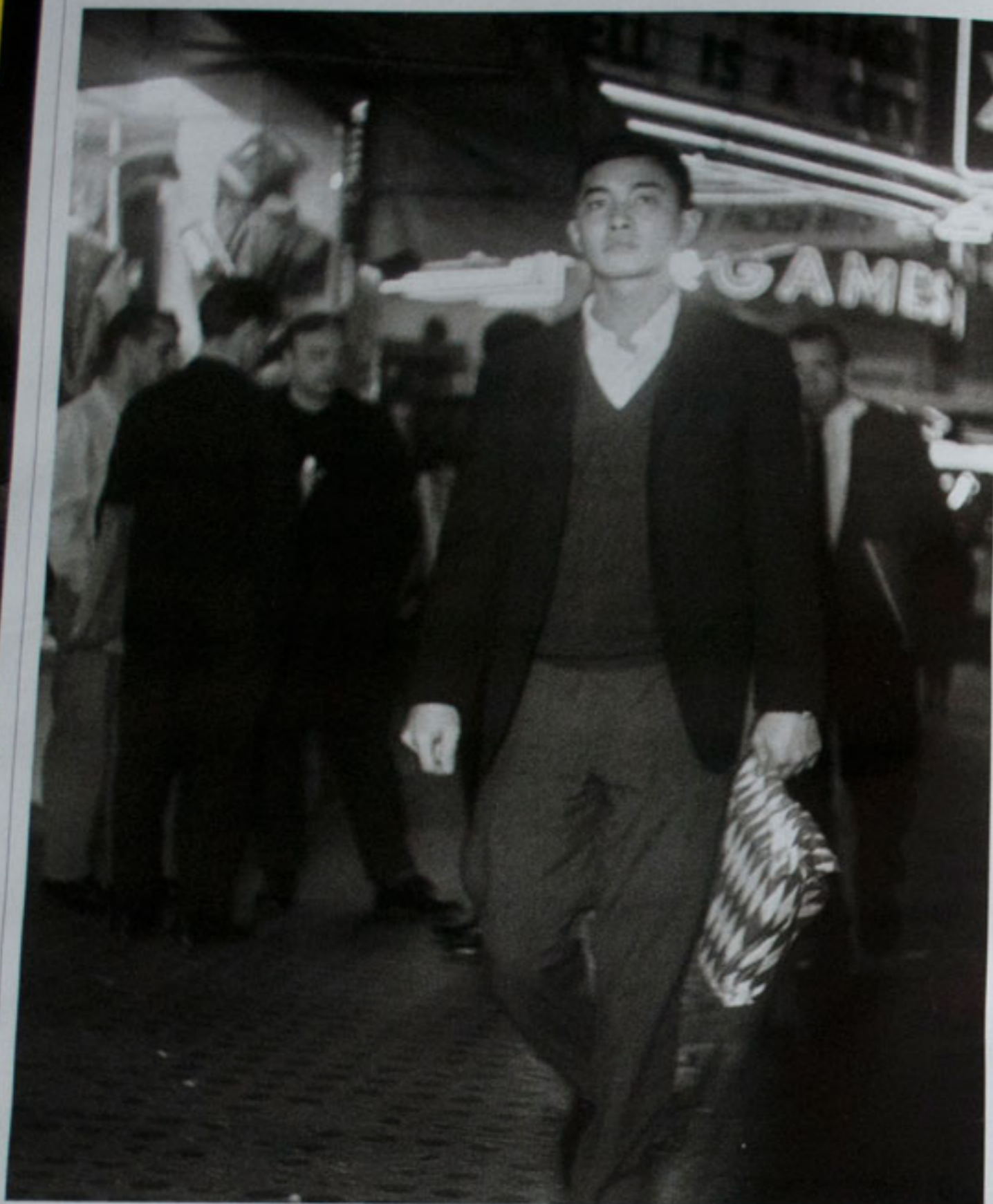
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In her book, Tonnard paired each of the photographs with one of 90 different translations of the opening lines of Dante's *The Inferno*. The translation that accompanies the image on the opposite page reads: "Halfway on the path our life is/I found I was in a dark woods;/For I had lost my direction." The translation that accompanies the above image reads: "About the middle of life's onward way,/I found myself within a darksome dell,/Because from the true path I went astray." Tonnard says she feels as if "each person [in the images] is saying those lines and saying something about their situation in life, and it sounds very unique. But because they are all saying the same thing, it's not very unique at all."

more pictures than they ever sold, leaving a vast archive of images that had never been printed or seen.

In This Dark Wood is not, technically, a new book. A prolific self-publisher, Tonnard released the first edition in 2008 and continued printing copies in small batches over the intervening years. In 2012, she and J&L Books publisher Jason Fulford reached an agreement to print a trade edition. Fulford first met Tonnard and saw the self-published edition in 2010, when he was lecturing at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. "The book really surprised me—such a simple concept and understated presentation, but with a result that is very moving and emotional," Fulford says in an e-mail to PDN.

Working with a publisher has been a new experience for Tonnard, who has more than 30 self-published works. She acknowledges feeling as though she has surrendered some ownership of the work, but the prospect of wider distribution excites her.

"I felt like I have reached the audience I can reach with my publications, they have seen this book, they know about it. So this is a good thing. I'll close the open edition that I had and give somebody else the chance to bring it to a larger audience,"



Tonnard explains.

Tonnard first encountered Selle's treasure trove during her time in Rochester as an MFA student in 2006. Combing through what was merely a fraction of the negatives, Tonnard lit upon ideas for two different artist's books. The first became 2007's *Two of Us*, a meditation on "the double," making liberal use of photographs from the archive and a Baudelaire poem. The second idea became *In This Dark Wood*.

"In that collection of 18,000 scanned images I had, there was one roll of about 1,500 images which was shot completely at night. There was a contrast in that roll, there were more people walking alone than in the daytime rolls. I also noticed that the people looked as if they were in another place; lost in thought, alienated from their surroundings," Tonnard says. "There were all sorts of people in that book [of images], but they all share this expression on their face."

Tonnard can no longer remember exactly how she began to associate these images with *The Inferno*, but recalls having "a very beautiful, very old" copy of the poem in her studio at the time. Her experience working on this book seems to mirror the experience of reading it: she found herself surprised by the synergy the text and photographs developed as the work progressed.

"It's as if each person [in the images] is saying those lines and saying something about their situation in life, and it sounds very unique. But because they are all saying the same thing, it's not very unique at all," Tonnard muses.

The conceit seems simple on its face, but each perusal of *In This Dark Wood* reveals another layer of meaning. The candid night photography is imbued with new pathos from Dante's poetry, with each solitary pedestrian pressed into service in an epic tragedy. The result is a remarkably malleable work that is both repetitive and ever-changing. pdn

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