

YONDER EXPECTATIONS

by

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Abstract

Skyscraper foundations are as embedded in the earth as Appalachian heritage is rooted in my existence. I am drawn to the city, but feel grounded in the mountains. These truths seem mutually exclusive, but perhaps they can coexist when experienced through the proper medium. A two-hundred-year-old farm, family tragedy, and big city dreams converge into a contradictory reality. However dissonant to present melodies, Appalachia will remain a constant harmony to my future narrative. These works question the stability of identity and recognize the fluidity of what it means to be home.

Introduction

In 1803, Cornelius Sales traveled from Morganton to Asheville, North Carolina, what was then a small town nestled in the valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He traveled with nothing more than a hunting dog, a shotgun, and two dollars and fifty cents. Cornelius bought two hundred acres of fertile mountain soil and started a family farm below Big Cedar Mountain where, two hundred years later, I grew up. That's the way my papaw, Bud, tells our story. Now, ninety acres of decaying barns and rusted tractors are being reclaimed by the land that they once dominated. At the same time, my career in commercial photography is leading me towards adopting an urban lifestyle in New York City. I am caught between a deep connection to the Appalachian Mountains and a desire to live in a cosmopolitan city.

Papaw grew up playing in the natural spring by the highway and running through the pasture barefooted so that the cow-pies squished between his toes. In high school, he and his friends started a volunteer fire department in the Reynolds community. Papaw went on to earn a degree in horticulture from North Carolina State University in 1959. He continued his work with the fire department while tending the farm. He is now a member of the Western North Carolina Agricultural Hall of Fame and a recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine award due to his contributions to state-wide agriculture.

Developers have been drooling over the farm, untouched Asheville acreage, for as long as I can remember. Buncombe county purchased land from my family to build Reynolds High School, and later Reynolds Middle School, both of which I attended. I was proud to be a Sales of Sales Farm, the farm where my classmates' parents bought flowers in the spring and the farm that is visible to the football stadium crowds in the fall. Both students and faculty knew of the Sales', and even if they didn't, they knew my dad. Dad also earned a

degree in horticulture from North Carolina State University and worked on the farm for several years. He started volunteering with the fire department, and eventually became the fire chief after papaw retired. As the chief, his supportive relationship with the schools only became stronger when my sister and I attended there.

I remember the fall that my mom, dad, sister, and I moved a half mile up the driveway, out of a double-wide trailer into the house where I spent most of my childhood. I picked my bedroom upstairs for its view of the Cedar Cliffs, the mountains that I had started to see as a symbol of home. I was going to earn a degree in horticulture from N.C. State and take over my grandparent's greenhouse business, also visible from my window. I would be a volunteer at the fire department and eventually take my dad's place as chief.

I found a hobby in photography when I was fourteen years old. I saved my money to purchase my first serious camera and soon realized that my newfound passion could become my career. I made portraits of my friends and family and captured the Appalachian Mountain landscape. Now, I could be like the Asheville photographers who took senior portraits and had work for sale in the local restaurants. The farm would make a great location for portrait sessions, and there would be a never-ending supply of landscape photos along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

My parents divorced when I was an upperclassman in high school. Their separation helped me realize my privilege as a white male in a financially stable, two-parent home. My parent's ending their relationship did not reduce my privilege, but it did open my eyes to how my life circumstances could have been worse, and how they were worse for other people. My mom moved across town, while my dad stayed on the farm. I packed my bags for Appalachian State University in the fall of 2015 with my sights set on a degree in

commercial photography. I wouldn't be gone long, and the Cedar Cliffs would be waiting for me when I returned.

During my sophomore year of college, I found that moving to New York City would be advantageous to my career. When I returned from a semester studying abroad in Italy, I wept as the plane flew over the mountains. I had forgotten how much they meant to me and the connection I felt with them. The idea of moving to the city became more complicated. I frequently fantasized about taking the train to work on a high-production photo set and working my way up the career ladder. Fulfilling this fantasy meant leaving the mountains whose presence grounded me. I tentatively planned to live in New York for several years and eventually make my way back to Asheville, my heritage, and my family. Kate, my girlfriend turned fiancée, and I would build a house across the pasture from my dad's house and raise a family under the Cedar Cliffs, just as my parents and grandparents had done.

Dad died in April of 2018. He was driving to accept an award on behalf of the Reynolds Fire Department when his vehicle swerved off the interstate and burst into flames. Our community mourned. Students sang the A.C. Reynolds Alma Mater as the funeral procession of 50 firetrucks from across the state passed by the school.

*The Cedar Cliffs look down on the fairest, and the best school of all,
They echo back the songs that we sing them, and loyally call,
The mountains, the valleys, the home, and the throng,
All are for you, dear old Reynolds, keep your hearts brave and strong.*

My dad's house, now my house, my childhood home, stands empty on the farm. My aunt is caring for my grandparents, who are getting too old to properly run an agricultural business. Property taxes are becoming a burden on unused farmland. Apartment complexes are being built on adjacent properties. Kate and I are preparing to move to New York City by the end of 2019. We plan to return to Asheville, but when and what we will come home to, and what we might bring back with us, is uncertain.

The process of creating "Yonder Expectations" was extremely fluid. Many experiments in technique and approach were necessary to finding my voice. Some initial pieces were too specific to my experience and not accessible to a general audience. I found that architectural masterpieces and recognizable buildings such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum clouded my message. I found it easier to give nameless buildings a new, unconventional context. The goal of the following images is to cause viewers to take a second look, cock their heads, and wonder. Each of the composites contain a message about my past, present, or future. Some of them echo my long family history and my childhood memories. Others speak to my current situation as a college student between homes. Still, more are speculations on what is yet to come.



High on a Mountain

It does not make any sense for a thirty-some story building with a white-fenced, gravel driveway to be perch on an Appalachian hilltop. The viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the skyscraper, which is prominently featured in the brightest area of the frame. The more rural structure in the image plays a secondary role, nestled in the shadows of the hill. However, this same area of the image contains the most human element of the piece. The trucks parked in the driveway and the small light indicate that someone has inhabited this space, even if they are momentarily absent. If curiosity seizes an onlooker, and they intend to make their way along the gravel road to better inspect the skyscraper, they must pass by the rural structure. When they do, will its inhabitants offer a friendly wave? Will the passerby be too enthralled by the looming skyscraper to notice?

Some people raise their eyebrows when I tell them I'm moving to New York City. They say something along the lines of, "Wow, that will be a fun adventure!" but their eyes seem to say "*good luck...*" This image projects how I think other people sometimes view my intended path. They think that I will ignore my friends, family, and neighbors on the road to a higher ambition. They think when I get there, I'll see the truth, and be disappointed that I let my curiosity get the best of me.



The Big Rock Candy Mountains

In reality, these buildings would be visible from a few miles in almost every direction. My family's prominence in our community sometimes makes me feel like I'm being closely watched. People want to know what I'm going to do next. I want to live up to the family legacy, tend the land, and help my fellow community members. The houses that are on the family land now will still be around when I return, but dream of building new structures that will modernize the greenhouses and house new entrepreneurial pursuits. If I bring skyscrapers home with me, I hope that people still feel welcome in a place that might look and feel different than it once did.



Peg and Awl

The barn is in good condition. The farm is probably still functional. The farmer doesn't need to work, though. She's sold the plot next to the barn to a developer for a luxury apartment building with a 24-hour gym and a rooftop pool. The floodplain that her ancestors chose to cultivate is irrelevant. Soon, it will be developed too. More buildings will make the tight frame tighter. Will the inhabitants feel as rooted to the land as the foundation of the building they live in? Will the farm remain in operation? Will there be a farm to operate?



Lone Prairie

The building is modern. It was probably constructed in the last few years, but the trees around its base must be forty. This cluster of trees must have been either left untouched when the valley was logged, or planted there years before the skyscraper was constructed. It's possible that the new building replaced an older structure. If the older structure wasn't a ruin when it was replaced, the skyscraper became its ruin in replacing it. Contemplating architecture of any kind requires a viewer to consider the structure's context. The context in this image stretches beyond an urban building in a rural landscape. This urban edifice stands where a rural building once did, thereby assimilating into its context. My Appalachian identity may take a new form, but it will always be present.



I Wish I Was a Mole In the Ground

My mom moved into a 1950s ranch house after living on the farm for half of her life. The renovation project was a massive undertaking, and the final result is a testament to the resiliency of my mom. The house has become a symbol of her hard work and has provided her a sanctuary amidst a chaotic series of life events. Mom has paved a path for my life that does not have a specific end, but is clear and free from the challenges that she faced as a child. I am travelling in a direction that she may not have expected and may not exactly align with her idea of security, but I know she will always welcome me home.



Sixteen Tons

During the early twentieth century, the commercial exploitation of Appalachian land to extract coal and timber began to intensify. The coal industry became one of the largest employers in Appalachia, and embedded itself in mountain culture. Now, with the introduction of modern technology, a new form of coal mining dominates the Appalachian region: Mountaintop removal. Coal companies start removing layers of earth from the top of the mountain and work their way down. This process typically obliterates all evidence of any geographic features. The human domination of nature also appears in Appalachia in the form of massive structures on top of mountains, like the Sugar Mountain Resort in North Carolina. This image makes a statement about the urbanization of Appalachia. The region is rapidly urbanizing as the landscape is manipulated by man. In the future, we may see the rise of cities on mountaintops, or what used to be mountaintops.

When I return to North Carolina, this scenario is unlikely to have become reality, though I wonder how New York's influence on my lifestyle will be viewed by those around me. This dichotomy, like the Sugar Mountain Resort, will elicit excitement from some, but disdain from others. I was certain of my choice to move to New York for several years. Recently, I have questioned if I absolutely *need* to go, and if I don't, do I *want* to badly enough to make potential sacrifices?



Mountain Dew

Early Appalachians used the landscape as a survival apparatus. They built their houses and communities in what they called “hollers” to be protected from the elements. This image depicts an outsider. An oversized, rectilinear presence in an otherwise pastoral scene. The land does not seem unwelcoming to the building, but the outsider probably refers to its new home as “app-a-lay-shuh.” It is unclear whether the building is tucked into the holler in a vain effort to protect itself from the elements, or if its developers thought they could keep the neighbors from questioning its presence by locating it according to cultural expectations. There is a tension created by the building extending out of the frame. The viewer wants to see the top of the building, but also wonders what the landscape would look like without the tower there at all.



Wildwood Flower

The new neighbors are shrouded in ambiguity. She gifted her land to her children and they sold her soul to developers. Her gardens were on that plot. When late summer finally comes and the vines have matured, sun-warmed cherry tomatoes make way for corporate offices and mass housing. New projects appear in the kitchen window every few months, each one closer than the last. Not to worry, there's room for more.



Can the Circle Be Unbroken

The Fraser Fir is only native to a few of the highest elevations in the Appalachian Mountains. The tree is an important part of the High Country economy and Christmas tree farms are scattered throughout the region. The specificity of the Fraser Fir and its terroir are juxtaposed starkly with a concrete giant that certainly does not belong. I feel like my desire to move to a city is viewed as brazenly impetuous by people in Appalachia. I can usually brush off any judgement I feel. It is a challenge to cope with the idea that the culture of the place where I feel rooted rejects my dreams for growth elsewhere.

Conclusion

The photography industry, like other artistic service industries, is divided between “fine art” image-makers and “commercial” photographers. I think this is a false dichotomy that is toxic to the industry as a whole. Many commercial photographers are hyper-focused on technical perfection, but find it difficult to conceive of a concept that is emotionally captivating. Meanwhile, a lot of fine-art photographers have interesting visions, but often lack the technical skill to communicate it to viewers. Each type of image maker has shortcomings that the other can help surmount, but there is a rift between them.

My commercial work is heavily dependent upon technical precision and visual cleanliness. I sometimes find it difficult to create conceptually-strong imagery. “Yonder Expectations” is my first serious attempt at creating images that do not have an explicit commercial application. The idea of skyscrapers in a rural landscape is a conspicuous juxtaposition. A viewer’s mind knows that these buildings do not belong where they are. My intention for these images was for them to be slightly technically imperfect on purpose. A slight technical weaknesses in the photos would further accentuate the disjointedness of the urban structures in rural environments and confirm for the viewer that these buildings are out of place. However, upon finishing the project, I and other image-makers have noted a technical resemblance between these pieces and my commercial architectural works. The buildings in “Yonder Expectations” may feel out of place, but they don’t seem as though they were artificially manipulated into their environments.

Completing this series did not answer any of the questions that started my project. However, it has helped me navigate convoluted thoughts of which I now have a better understanding. These images have shown me that time is a recurring theme in what first

seemed like many incomprehensible emotions. This project is not finished, and it may never be. Images about my future will become past expectations for the present, and gaps will need to be filled.

In New York City, I will be an outsider. Vernacular makes it easy for people to identify outsiders. Just as Appalachians have a disdain for folks who call them “App-ah-lay-shun,” New Yorkers might think it strange for a Southerner to use language like “fixin’ to,” “y’all,” or “over yonder.” It’s fitting that a word like yonder indicates a non-specific, general direction in the far-off distance, while also being a part of my heritage in which I am deeply rooted. I have dreams and plans to follow them, but where they will take me and how far I will travel to reach them is unclear. One aspect of yonder expectations is certain: My home’s across the Blue Ridge Mountains.