

## *New Life*: Q&A With Kevin Williamson

By Kendall Pestana | May 3rd, 2020

**Kevin Williamson is an American photographer based in Boston, MA and Upstate New York. A BFA candidate in photography and art education at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, his work is an exploration of boyhood, time, and the tension between the past and future in a fictionalized rural town.**

**KP:** Hi Kevin! Your thesis work is a really beautiful and exciting combination of narrative storytelling and photography. I'm wondering if you have a working title for this series so far.

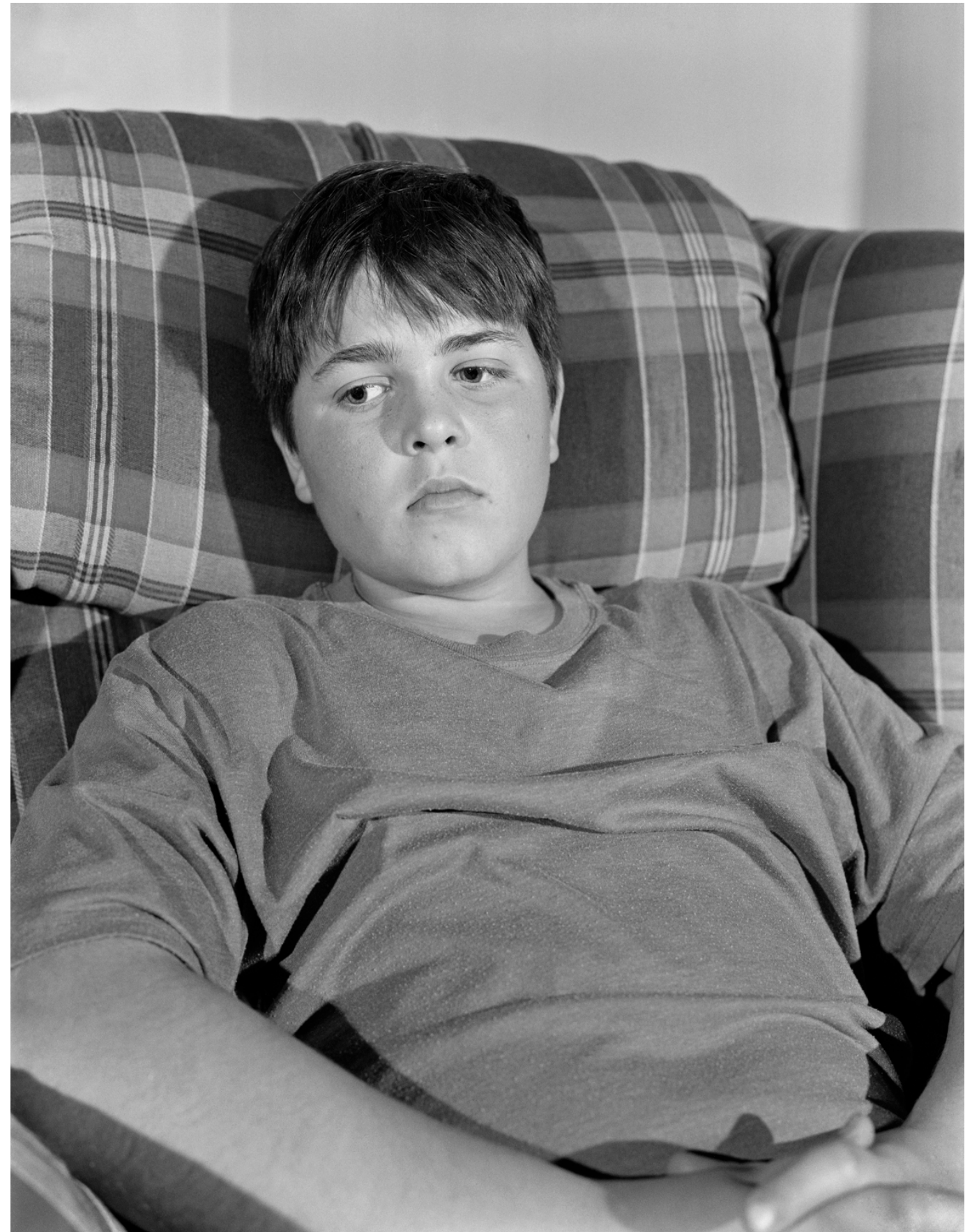
**KW:** I have titled this project *New Life* after the church that I photographed. I saw it as a metaphor for hope in this town that is seemingly devoid of it.

**KP:** As someone from Upstate New York, do you feel that your upbringing has influenced your work and the themes you've chosen to investigate?

**KW:** Absolutely, I think that there is a direct connection between where I live and this place that I am creating in my work. I grew up in a suburban area, situated between urban New York and the more rural Upstate landscapes. My family would vacation farther Upstate in the summers, and I became fascinated by myths about small mountain communities, particularly in times before they were heavily inhabited. I began to notice a contrast between the beautiful mountains and often dilapidating towns in this region. My thesis work explores what it would be like to experience these places as an insider.

**KP:** Pictures like this one of your brother are tangled with a sense of longing, anxiety, and uncertainty which becomes even stronger when paired with images of dilapidating rural towns. What do you feel these pictures are saying about time, boyhood, and changing American values?

**KW:** It's interesting that you bring up longing. I think that part of the reason that this work turned out the way it did is because of my own longing to escape, to be somewhere else. To be rid of my own anxieties about what the future holds. I feel like most people can relate to these feelings at one point or another. This world that I am creating is a place of uncertainty. It is not devoid of hope, but there is definitely anxiety for what lies ahead. There is a certain kind of sadness that accompanies the idea that this boy has grown up in a place that only allows for anxiety for the future. All of this definitely correlates to a shift in American values. Tough manual work becomes automated, family owned shops turn into superstores. Those who do not adapt are left behind, and younger generations are left with a choice. Do they hold onto the past, or move forward with progress?



From *New Life*



**KP:** Describe your artistic process. Do you stage these photographs? Happen upon them? Some combination of the two? There is a strong documentary sensibility in many of these images that feels believable, but also carefully constructed.

KW: It's a combination of the two. For some of the work, I travel to small towns and make photographs in a typical documentary tradition. Other pictures, particularly those of my younger brother, are collaborations where we play around with a more specific narrative. Just about every person in the work, whether it's someone I just met or a family member, is playing a fictionalized version of their actual self. The staged photographs are often inspired by things that I see while visiting the small towns. They are imagined narratives, intimate pictures that I could not make as an outsider to these places. Ultimately I want both styles of picture making to work together seamlessly.

**KP:** The tradition of black and white 4x5 film is rooted deep in the history of photography. How does this process inform your work? Do you ever have the urge to work in color?

KW: I am not opposed to working in color for other projects, but I feel like this work benefits from being in black and white. As you mentioned, there is a deep history of large format black and white photography related to documentary tradition. My pictures visually reference that tradition, but explore more contemporary ideas. This work looks at how and why people hold onto the past, so black and white film felt like a natural choice.

**KP:** There's an undercurrent of anxiety and strife in images like the man holding the gun, and "Tony is a thief". It feels almost ironic when paired with an image like the "New Life" church. What are your intentions behind these subtle contradictions?

KW: I am really interested in playing around with contradictions. I want to complicate the lives of the people who live in this place. There is not one human experience, and I am trying to bring a multitude of perspectives into the work. The overarching contradiction is people's hope for the future while they hold onto the past. The gun, a weapon designed to do harm, is being held delicately by the subject. Can love and violence inhabit the same space?







KP: I've noticed a tension in your work between young and old, newness and decay. Pictures like the abandoned house and rusted out cars contrast heavily with the images of your fresh-faced younger brother making his way in the world. In what ways have you felt this clash between the old and the new?

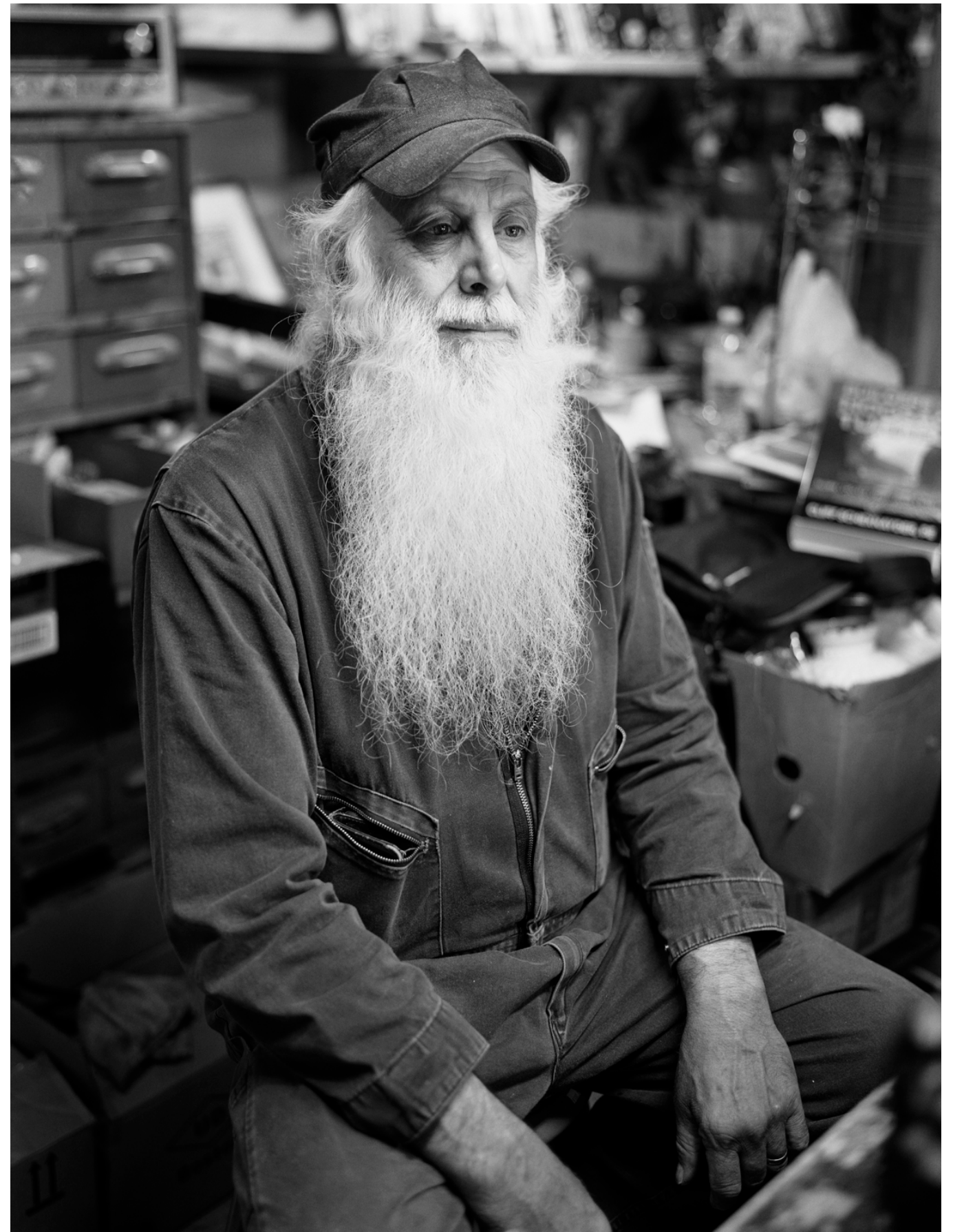
KW: There is definitely a clash between the old and the new. This struggle is at the core of my work. When you think about these old towns, there is a certain amount of nostalgia for the past. Things like old cars and buildings are held onto, and they are almost treated as artifacts. Remnants of better times. The pictures of my brother represent the newness in this world, as he is confronted by a deep history.













**KP:** How do landscapes and nature photography function as a metaphor in your work?

KW: When I make those pictures, I am simply thinking about beauty. I love spending time with nature, and I think that those pictures show that love. These are quieter pictures, and they offer a natural resting point for the viewer. When it comes to the editing process, the landscapes begin to take on different meanings. I see them as setting the stage for the drama of the town to happen. Depending upon what they are paired with, they can begin to take on darker meanings. After reading the story about the boy who falls in the river, water begins to be associated with death rather than life. It all comes back to the contradictions. I think that these pictures can simultaneously be about beauty and destruction.

**KP:** Last question! What is next for you? Do you think you'll continue this project or start something new?

KW: I think that this project is far from over, and I am looking forward to continuing it. I still have many ideas that need to be seen through. I really want to dig deeper into the story and the characters in the work. This is somewhat of a new way of working for me, and it has been pretty exciting to see results from it.

**KP:** Thank you so much for chatting with me, Kevin! I look forward to seeing what you do next.

