



ABOUT HUNGER & RESILIENCE



*Portraits and Audio Stories
A Traveling Exhibition*

MICHAEL NYE



hunger: a desire, strong wanting, craving, longing, lust, wishing, yearning, famine, pangs, starvation, voracity, insatiable, ravenous, complex sensation, discomfort, weakness, malnutrition, insecure, balanced anxiety, nutrient deficiencies and pain and suffering.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I am deeply grateful for all the men and women in this exhibit. They are our voices and guides. I also thank the following individuals and groups for counsel and support of all kinds throughout the 4 1/2 years I worked on this project.

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Jim Keller	Mark Stoeltje
Tess Martinez	Sarah Lichtenstein

A very special acknowledgement and gratitude to photographer Mark Menjivar who worked and assisted me for four years during this project. We traveled and interviewed together, and he put every ounce of energy and enthusiasm he had into this project. Mark's care and compassion can be found in each of the stories you hear. It was the greatest pleasure to be his colleague and close friend.

This exhibition would not have happened without the remarkable Eric Cooper, Executive Director of the San Antonio Food Bank. Eric spoke so eloquently and authentically about sacrifice and giving, I found myself wanting to be affiliated with his passion, to further understanding and learn more myself. His generous advice and counsel has been critical to this work.

Finally, I thank our son Madison who assisted me mightily during the closing stages of this exhibit and my wife Naomi who advised and encouraged me throughout. I am forever grateful to all of you for witnessing these lives.

MICHAEL NYE



I have never before seen an exhibit like this. These are stories I cannot forget. I carry them with me.

Michael Nye's "About Hunger & Resilience" is more important than any number or statistic. I have had the privilege to watch as kids from local elementary schools, university students, a mother with tears in her eyes, members of the arts community, and senior couples listen to these stories. As I watch, I can only imagine what they are thinking. I have taken individuals from foundations to this exhibit and had them walk with me. I have been able to connect with them in ways I have never been able to connect before. I would share a few of the stories and let them listen. We have all been moved to better understanding.

This exhibition will invite communities to a deeper experience around the issue of hunger. Food banks, and other organizations working to eradicate hunger can use this work as an opportunity to find strategies toward solutions.

In some ways, everyone that comes to the exhibit will experience a bit of hunger. They will hunger to learn more, and they will want to be filled. I think the food bank continues to be a crucial part of that filling — bringing people to the table where they can engage actively. This work is for everyone. It is tremendously powerful.

ERIC COOPER
Executive Director, San Antonio Food Bank



Michael Nye has put a face on hunger in America and given a voice to those who have none.

His powerful and passionate narrative emerges from his close work with each of the participants, both through their recorded interviews and their photographic portraits. He captures their spirit.

That we are inspired from tragedy is what is transformative about the exhibition. There is no doubt that Witte Museum visitors walk away not merely informed but changed. The tears come not from sadness, but from overwhelming comprehension

MARISE McDERMOTT
President & CEO, Witte Museum

ARTIST STATEMENT

Hunger is as old as history, and is wrapped into our genes as the great impulse to survive. Everyone knows the boundary between hunger and satisfaction. However, for many of us in this country of abundance, it is difficult to imagine someone so hungry and weak they would cry or lose the desire to live.

This exhibition is about the experience of hunger. The stories are not intended to summarize or explain anyone's life. There are too many ways a voice can turn. Many of the people I have met have struggled to find the right words to describe the weight of responsibility, loss, kindness and dignity.

Sometimes when I mention I've been working on a project on hunger, people look at me oddly and ask, "In what country"?

After spending 4 ½ years traveling around this country, listening, the reasons for hunger are not so simple: mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, severe physical injuries, old age, lack of education, job loss, mistakes, teenage pregnancy, health related illnesses, crime, sexual abuse, incarceration, chance, natural disasters, war, childhood neglect and generational poverty. Explanations and solutions are profoundly complex.

People die and no one remembers their stories. Everyone in this exhibit knows something important and valuable, a wisdom about their experience that only they know. The fifty individuals represented in "About Hunger & Resilience" are teachers — and we are students. Stories are places where empathy and understanding begin.

"Hunger" has immense short and long term implications, including malnutrition and starvation. Emotionally, it can impact every aspect of one's identity, vitality, and psychological well-being. Many have described the experience as "blinding" and worse than they ever imagined.

What we are given, what is planted in the first fields in our lives can be deeply mysterious in its generosity or insufficiencies. The poor in our communities are often the least heard and the most forgotten. I have been profoundly inspired by each participant, as well as food banks, soup kitchens, charitable organizations, churches, individuals, volunteers, and so many leaders and helpers giving unselfishly.

I have felt with even a greater conviction that we all need to speak of the essential needs of our human family, and grow in our understanding of how difficult life is for so many in our country. These stories are about all of us as we live with our uncertainties and the realization that we too could experience hunger.

Listening is another way of seeing. It has been a privilege to have these passionate conversations. It has changed me. I tried to honor each story by being faithful to its spirit and the way it was spoken. Hunger is an issue of human rights. Everyone has the right to be heard, to be listened to, and to receive help when hungry.



~ TAMMY ~

The pages that follow are portraits and excerpts from the full narrative which each individual has generously shared.

~ T I A ~

I live in Jackson, Mississippi. I have three children, a nine year old daughter, a six year old son, and a three year old daughter. I'm not sure what I'm destined to do, but I know the fact that I remain teachable. That I remain open-minded, eager. I love to see a smile on somebody's face and know that I did that.

I wanted to quit every day, after my husband died. I wanted to quit and crawl in a hole. I wanted to quit and lay in a casket beside him. I wanted to do anything that would cause me not to feel the pain, and not to have deal with the hurt, and not see my children's faces.

My husband's death was two turning points in my life. It was a turning point where I had to realize that I'm the adult, and this is what had to be done. And it also made me realize that, just as easy as it was good, it can be bad...just that easy, just that fast.

Hunger starts somewhere. You're already at hunger before you see it happening. It's not a choice. Some people can do hunger for two days...two weeks. But if it's necessary, I can do it longer. I can see it all the way out to the end. Being hungry...it's worse than you ever imagine. Hunger is not having food, not having means to get food, having no resources. Knowing that there's not going to be any food.

My children would sometimes ask me things like, "Are we just eating noodles today? What we eating today?" But as they saw me getting more and more limited with money, they stopped asking and just started watching.

How do you tell your children to be self-confident and feel worthy? I let them understand that everybody's an individual and comes the way they are, and life is not fair. Life is not easy. Life is what you make it. If you make every situation bad, it's going to be worse. You're worth what you give, you're worth what you believe in. That's what you're worth. And that's what I teach them.



~ALEJANDRO~

I remember it was summer...it was hot. And dry, and dusty. The backyard was huge. We had a pecan tree, so glorious and majestic, strong and healthy. I remember that it was going to be lunch, and there wasn't any food in the house. It's very hard to describe the physical aspects of hunger. It's like you have a lion in your stomach that wants to be fed.

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My sister gathered us, and she said that we were going to gather pecans for lunch. Luckily, for our sake, she had made a game of it, because we were hungry.

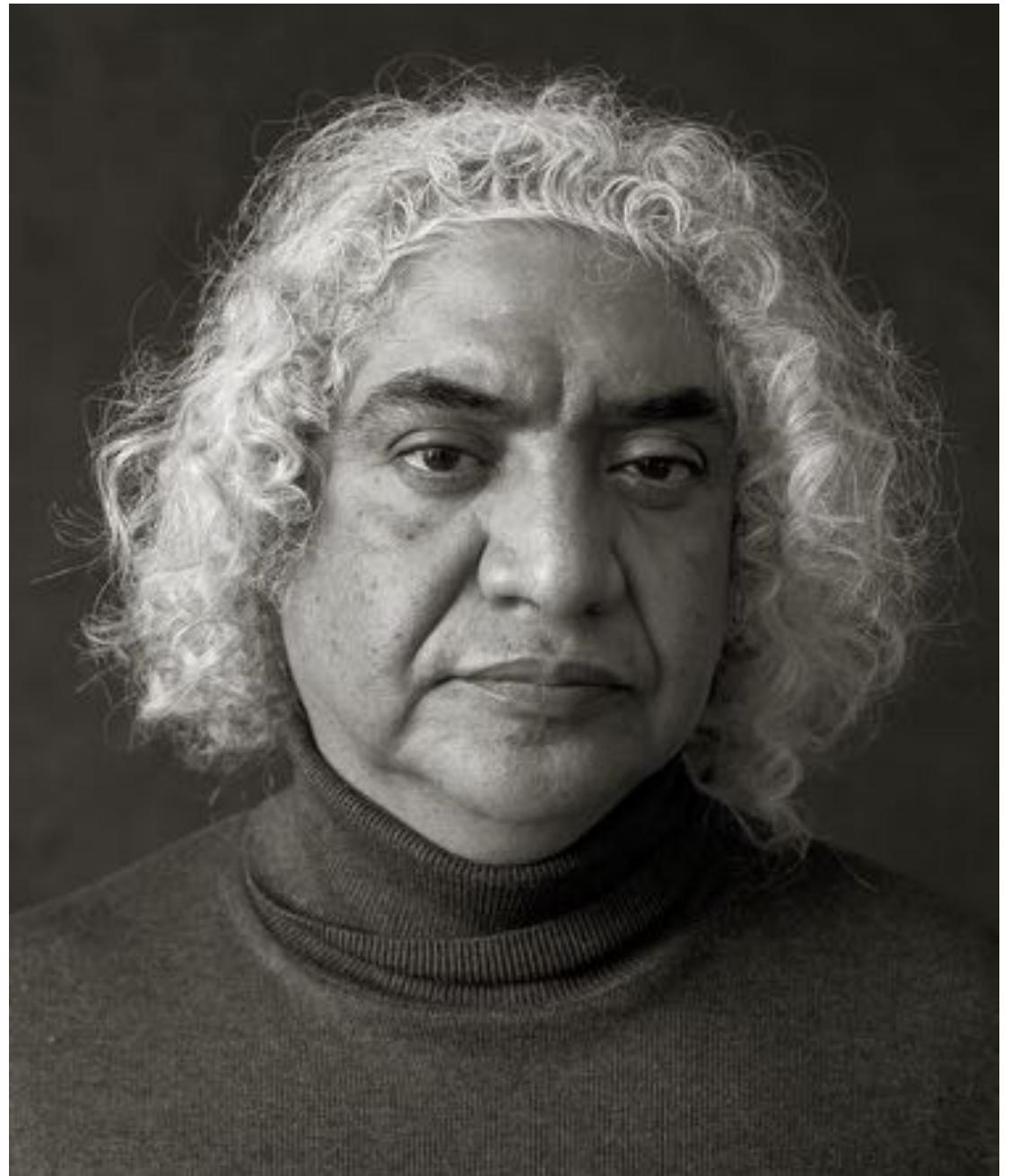
It was hot, boy, it was hot. And there's this longing for it to get better.

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There's a sweetness about my sister. She's got great, deep compassion and love. And I remember her going back inside...you know, those screen doors that slam...and she came back out with these plates, and salt. And it was like we were going to eat a steak. I was starving, and my sister was caring for us.

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I think the hardest thing is that my parents had done the best that they know, with what they had. This idea of hunger goes deeper in the sense I probably was starved for my mother's affection. For her compassion. For her caringness. But she was so occupied with other things. I hungered for food a lot, I hungered for peace. There is this emptiness that makes you afraid of the world in a sense.



~ FELICITA ~

I never was in trouble, you know, or nothing. But the only thing...I was poor. Everything that I did, I did it for my grandkids. Sometimes I go to the neighbors' and sometimes I ask for a little flour or beans. And I used to go to the other ladies...Do you need help? Do you need to clean the house or something? And they say yeah, Can you do it? and I say yes. So when I get two, three dollars, I go and buy something for my grandkids.

Sometimes at night, I say well what I'm gonna do tomorrow? I was thinking...to see what I'm going to give the kids for next day. I went to the Safeway. My kids were asleep. I went down there, I saw the people. I went to steal. I steal about five grapes in my jacket. One grape for each kid. They need food, you know, they need something different you know. And then I went outside. I felt sorry, it was bad to be stealing, you know...but I had to.

There was an old man, I don't remember his name, and he said Well, ma'am, you need food? And I said no. He said Don't be embarrassed. He said What do you need? I said I need milk and cereals. Don't worry about it, I'll give you some. He gave me those big boxes of cereals. And bananas, pears, oranges, and everything. He gave me some Carnation, you know the boxes? Oh, I was happy. I told the kids, I got some milk already. Grandma, is that fresh? I said Yeah, but it wasn't fresh. It was from the box. And I told the kids, Well mijo, you're not going to be no hungry no more.



~ JOSETTE ~

I'm a fourteen year old girl, I have four brothers and four sisters. I think...skies are beautiful. When they change colors, sometimes they look orange, they look pink. When you wake up in the morning and you smell the earth, you smell the grass...that's beautiful. I think trash is beautiful.

I admire that my mom is so responsible. She's my best friend. I understand my mom's face. When she gets upset or mad, one of her eyebrows goes up and I know what she's thinking and I know how she's feeling. My parents are so willing to give when we don't have much to give. I learn from them.

What goes through my mind when I go to bed hungry...I usually don't sleep, I'll stay up and read a book...or just think. And I start getting upset. I'm upset because I know that my brothers and sisters don't have any food in their stomachs either. And they're littler than me. And when we don't have enough, you know, it hurts. You just want to punch holes in the walls. You want to take your anger out on anyone or anything...but you can't.

Last month when my mom was in the hospital, there wasn't any food. And it was around dinnertime...Nobody really talked. And I just remember...I broke down and I started crying because it was crazy, and it was hard. And I blamed myself, I blamed my dad. I blamed my brothers and sisters for being born, because I thought that it was their fault too. You know, it's frustrating.

You know, almost everybody has an enemy, or somebody they don't like, or somebody that doesn't like them. But I don't want to have enemies, I want to be everybody's friend. I think I'm different.



~ R I C K ~

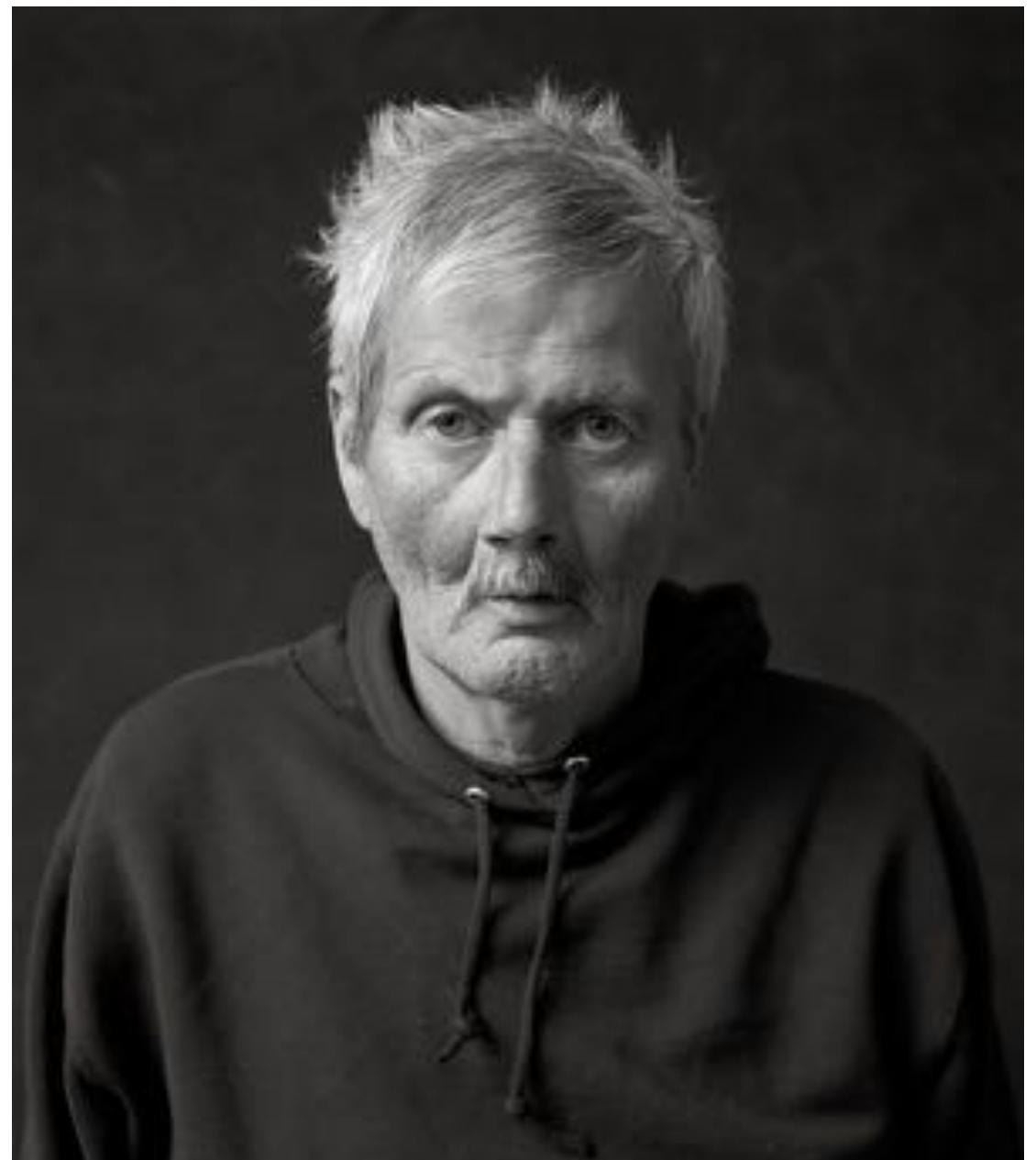
My mother...was an alcoholic. My first memories, she was an alcoholic, and everything that comes with it. Running bars, strange men. And she always picked the ones that were pretty violent people.

I don't know how it come about, but she took us to this Mexican family. She said she'd be right back, so I wasn't too concerned. But she just never came back. Poor Mexicans didn't know what to do with us.

I started drinking heavy when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old. I'd say by the time I had reached sixteen, I was a full blown alcoholic. I drank to get drunk, and to pass out. I didn't like liquor, and I didn't like the taste of it, and that's not why I used it. Strictly for the effect. I didn't like who I was, it took away my shyness, it took away my inferiority. It made me feel like somebody. And I thought it was the answer to life. Little did I know that I'd found the end at the same time. You die slowly and horribly.

I believe starving to death is probably one of the worst kinds of death that one could experience. It's long, slow, and agonizing. Hunger is not missing a meal. Hunger is, you go to bed hungry, you wake up hungry, and you're hungry all the next day and you go to bed again hungry. And all you think about is food. It's impossible to sleep. And the gnawing in your gut...I've heard people go into a restaurant and say, "I'm going to get this because I'm starving." They don't know what starving is. Let them go a week without something to eat, and starving will take on a whole new definition for these people.

If you go hungry long enough, you see things that aren't there. You become extremely paranoid. I think fear starts to take control. It's just a bad experience to have to live with. Unfortunately a lot of the world lives that way.



~ PEPPER LEWIS ~

I've worked on them shot hole rigs. I've surveyed. I've welded. I've done some roofing. Done a lot of cowboyin' in four states. I've mechaniced, I ain't never hired a mechanic. When I was thirteen, my grandpa gave me a muffler and told me to build a car around it.

Cowboyin' ain't crawling off a buckin' shoot onto a horse or a bull. That ain't cowboyin'. That's just rodeoing. Cowboyin' is living the life. There's nothing like riding in pretty country on a nice horse.

I was riding horses for a man. This trail went under this bridge and this horse, he blowed up and went to pitchin'. I rode him through the pitchin' part but he pitched up under this low bridge and throwed me up into this concrete pillar. And when he did, it busted my skull and 'bout three discs on the top of my back, then he drugged me 'till my boot come off. Well, I was all bloody and stuff.

They done tests. I haven't worked since then.

I waited 'till five o'clock and I was helping myself to some bent cans in a dumpster. And there was lots of different kinds like ravioli and canned peaches, soups, chili and all kinds of good food. I was bent over in there and my leg sticking out and then that lady'd come out of there and told me, "You can't get that food out of that dumpster or I'll call the law." She give me a big box of groceries, but I wasn't trying to steal no food. I was getting it out of the dumpster.

I didn't consider it stealing.

I know exactly what hunger is. It's doing without. I didn't eat nothing last Thursday or Friday. It just makes you short-fused, feel like your belly's rubbin' on your back bone. I don't know what to say. If you got a loaf of bread, you can make it, or a can of beans.



~ HELEN ~

My lifeblood...my energy...was totally disrupted by the accident. A big truck comes around the curb, and my last thought was "My god, he's not stopping." And he didn't. He hit me full force, from the rear, and the flash of that second, to where I woke in the hospital, my whole life changed.

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Within six months, I didn't have a job, I was not physically able to continue making pottery, I didn't have any money left to pay rent, and I was living in my car. So I pulled into a motel parking lot, and I spoke to a woman, they called her the bag lady. And I said I am sleeping in my car, where would be a safe place? And that was my first contact verbally with someone else who was homeless.

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I grew up in a farmhouse with lots of family. Security. My father played the guitar, my grandfather, the violin. When the sun would go down and the work was done, and we were in our backyard, we danced in the grass, and twirled around. It was magical. The breeze, the air, the moon, the sweetness of the smells that come from the earth.

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Having been successful as an artist, being able to have a home...and then to wind up trying to deal with life moment by moment? Finding food. Having people look at you like you're less than human...You want to shake them and look in their face, and say "Do you have any idea who I am?" You want to tell them everything, but you can't.

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I've had many times where I've had no food at all. It destroys your will. You look in the mirror and don't know who you are. You're a creature people want to look away from. Like a dog that's covered in dirt in a ditch. You know he's there, you've heard him whine, but rather than try to do something about it, you hurry away.



~D I N A H ~

I guess in a way I'm unique. I got a room full of inner tubes and tires. I even go out on the streets and pick up old ones that have holes in them and give them a good home with me. I'm very sentimental over tires and tubes...Why, I don't know, I guess it's just part of my childhood days and part of my mental illness.

I'm proud of myself for keeping a job, and earning a little bit of my own spending money. I hold store signs on street corners promoting the sales of furniture. I hold them up in the air on a long stick, and put it on the ground.

They pay me thirty-five dollars a day.

Sometimes it gets to where I can't afford to buy food...Last time I went dumpster diving was last week. I think I found some old chicken bones, but there was hardly any meat...I mostly sucked on the bones. To get the taste, get the flavor. Sometimes I eat bits of hamburger that people leave. Sometimes I eat the crumbs that are left in the box. But people give me the glare. They give me, oh, shame on you, you're not supposed to be doing that. But it's none of their business, cause if I'm hungry, I'm hungry.

In January, on my birthday, I bought me two great big old tractor tires. Antique tractor tires. They have rusted wrought iron rims, and wheels, and the tire's still in good condition. I don't know, I just feel comfortable with them. I feel safe. Because if I run across some people that don't like me, then to heck with them.

I make my own friends by making friends with inner tubes and tires.



~ E R I C ~

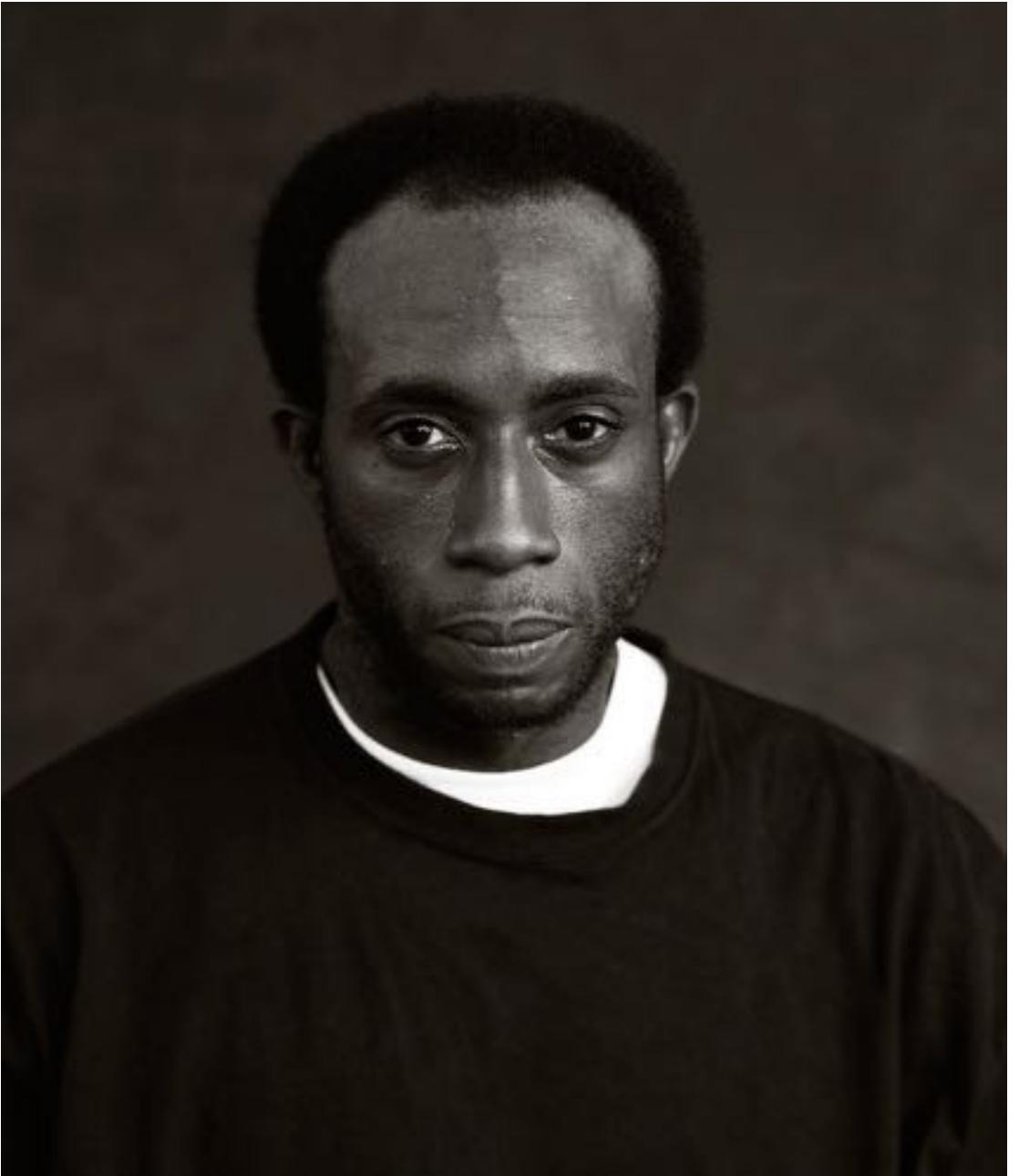
The night of the hurricane, the rain and wind was so intense, so strong, the house was really shaking, like you shake a salt and pepper shaker, man. After we heard that the levees had broke on the radio, the water began to rise even faster, and to come underneath the floorboards of our house. That's when fear really gripped our hearts.

I'm a leader. I believe and know in my heart that I'm a leader. Every day, me and a few guys, we had to get in a canoe that we had managed to find, and go from store to store to try to find some food to bring back to the roof and make sure everyone at least had something to put on their stomach other than starving.

I felt forgotten when the food got really really really low. The scraps that we had got really really low, and it really got to me. We made sure that the children ate first, foremost of all. And then the women would have the next pickings.

When we got to New Orleans international airport, the military guy was passing out the food, and when I first stuck my fork inside the food, actually I was trembling. I was so happy and excited, the adrenaline was pumping so fast, that I was actually getting some food. I felt like one of those people in one of those third world countries, man, you know, hunger. To really get some real food, man, I felt exhilarated, I felt excited, I felt like I just wanted to dance and jump...

I can't explain it, I was just so happy. I was just so happy.



~ K A T H Y ~

When I was a kid, my favorite place to go was the woods. Loved to sit and watch the bats in the trees. I'd hide, and I'd hear my mom yelling and screaming, trying to find me, you know, I would hide out from everybody.

The depression hits so bad. I've been through periods where I didn't even want to get up off the couch. For four days at a time. The only thing I'd get up for was to go to the bathroom, and change my daughter's diaper and fix her a bottle.

I had gotten to the point where I wound up begging for help. I also had no food, I was being put out on the street, going through a divorce, two kids, I was losing everything. I just spent most of my day in oblivion. I just couldn't handle the guilt, the fear, the questions of "Where are we going to sleep tonight, Mom?" "What are we going to eat?" "Are we going to eat today?" How do you explain to a two year old or a four year old there's nothing to eat? All they know is that they're hungry, and the pain in their stomach. And you...sit there and say, "Honey, I'm sorry. I don't have anything to cook you. I don't have nothing to give you. I have nothing." And they...they don't, don't stop.

I finally started learning a couple years ago how to live again. My biggest goals are to teach my daughter to be a good, caring and respectable person. To remember that she's not just a person, she's a member of this society. That we are all responsible for each other.



FACE TO FACE

While it will be impossible to overlook the art of portraiture evident in the fifty large black and white photographs by Michael Nye at the Witte Museum, the photographer is otherwise erased from the subtle naturalness of these powerful images.

Rather, "About Hunger and Resilience" is inhabited by the faces we gaze into while their voices relate their own stories (heard via headphones). Like Nye's last Witte exhibition "Fine Line: Mental Health / Mental Illness," this one depends on the viewer's openness and empathy. We enter a dimly-lit spiritual sanctuary with each station presenting a self-contained, unique encounter. The effect of peering into exquisitely detailed portraits and hearing such authentic voices will compel us to forget our socialized preconceptions. The participants do not speak in the cliché of the victim, but document, in human terms, daunting circumstances often beyond their control. Nye writes: "These stories are not intended to summarize or explain anyone's life," since "explanations and solutions are profoundly complex."

One can see why Nye was moved by what he calls "the human presence" in these lives. He traveled around America for more than four years, spending three days with each person, listening with an open mind before making photographs. This astonishing exhibit reveals faces in unselfconscious reflection rather than subjects captured in a dramatic moment. In search of a "longer moment," as Nye puts it, we can witness instants of unfolding illumination into a reality about which we know only slogans. It is not a strategy to win a political argument, but an artistic process that does not judge. "Everyone in this exhibit knows something important and valuable, a wisdom about their experience that only they know," writes Nye, for when it comes to understanding such personal disclosures, he believes they are the teachers and we are their students.

The reasons for hunger are legion, and anxiety has spiked since formerly middle-class workers have lost jobs and homes. How close to food insecurity are more families to the margin of sustainability? A catastrophic illness or serious accident can bring down a family without sufficient health insurance. Natural disasters have created exiled communities of the homeless and hungry, whose situations have been exacerbated by mental illness, alcohol and substance addictions, crime, incarceration, and the loss of dignity. For many, hunger is not only a present reality that carries past baggage, but also a tangible fear of future hunger.

For those who have been malnourished for years—one participant describes hunger as "your belly rubbing against your backbone"—they experience desperation, loss of vitality, and deep depression daily. Many have been supported by food banks, soup kitchens, charities and churches that include the generosity of countless volunteers; but these are stop-gap measures that do not effect the roots of the larger crisis that has expanded with the recession and the phenomenal growth of agribusiness that has moved small farms off the American map.

There are heart-breaking comments made by the participants in this exhibit, including one recording that is an anthology of voices responding to the question of what do they hunger for beyond food? The responses are varied, telling, and basic: Acceptance, to understand why, for meaning in life, for being heard, for knowledge, for the optimism to keep on living, and for wisdom. "I have felt with even a greater conviction that we all need to speak of the essential needs of our human family," writes Nye. "These stories are about all of us as we live with our uncertainties and the realization that we too could experience hunger." Being confronted face to face with the universality of suffering due to hunger, we cannot dismiss them as "others" who deserve their fate.

"Hunger is an issue of human rights," declares Nye, and we would be human and right to agree. While we hear a humane "documentary" in these recorded voices, Nye's magnificent portraits are true works of empathy and art.

ROBERT BONAZZI

Author of *Maestro of Solitude: Poems and Poetics* and
Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me



ABOUT the ARTIST

Michael Nye lives in downtown San Antonio. He practiced law for 10 years before pursuing photography full time. Recipient of a Mid-America National Endowment for the Arts grant in photography, and a Kronkosky Foundation grant, he participated in two Arts America tours in the Middle East and Asia, and has exhibited and lectured widely in museums and universities, including Morocco, India and Mexico.

His journeys to photograph around the world included projects in Russian Siberia, Iraq after the first Gulf War, Palestine, China and Labrador.

His photography and audio exhibitions, "Children of Children: Teenage Pregnancy" and "Fine Line: Mental Health / Mental Illness" have traveled to over 120 cities in the United States and continue to tour.

"About Hunger & Resilience" debuted at the Witte Museum in San Antonio, Texas in 2010. He is married to writer Naomi Shihab Nye, and they have one son, Madison.



ABOUT the EXHIBITION

There are 50 portraits and 50 audio stories. Mounted below each portrait is a wooden box containing an audio player and headphones. The stories range from 4 to 6 minutes each. Many sites have used this exhibit as the centerpiece for related programming including panel discussions, lectures, student field trips, public radio and other educational activities.

"About Hunger & Resilience" can be installed on walls in formal museums and galleries, or almost anywhere with easels that have been specially designed to hold the photographs, lights and audio components.

With the optional easel installation, the exhibit can be installed in schools, libraries, community centers, food banks and conferences.



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