

Kevin O'Connell  
Excerpts from Selected Artist Statements

From: Nocturn (2007)

Noc•turn (nők'tûrn')

Noun: part of a prayer service originally said at night, dating back to the fifth century.

I made the Nocturn images during the spring of 2007, roughly one year after receiving a bone marrow transplant as treatment for acute leukemia. That spring I suffered serious complications that required I be treated with an eight-week course of a powerful steroid. The steroid caused insomnia, and like many insomniacs I began to dread the sunset. There is something about unoccupied nights that lend themselves to fear - perhaps it is a primal response, an imprinted memory from our early evolution when the dark was full of unseen predators, dangers, and mystery. In the dark and fatigue my mind would drift toward irrational thoughts, panic attacks, and the ever-present dialog with death.

Ultimately, I realized that all I could do was try and engage the night. I photographed. I photographed at night in my back yard, which like most urban areas is filled with the ambient light of streetlights and floodlights, and the glare off the sky from light pollution downtown. In the middle of the night the yard is a place filled with small mysteries: the wind through the trees, a noise in the alley, a neighborhood cat looking for company. These mysteries meshed with my own. Through the entangled branches of trees and bushes I saw likenesses of galaxies, supernovas, and black holes - microcosms that served as a comforting reminder of the nature of things.

## 100 Days (2006)

On April 28, 2006 I received a bone marrow transplant as treatment for Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS) that was in transition to Acute Myelogenous Leukemia (AML). I had been diagnosed with the disease five months earlier following a routine physical exam and was told that the only option with “curative potential” was a bone marrow transplant. Otherwise, I could expect to live twelve to eighteen months\*. However, the transplant itself would be a perilous journey, offering an average three-year survival rate of only 50 to 60 percent\*.

If I was lucky, I would be able to locate an unrelated cell donor on the National Bone Marrow Registry who would be a perfect match (my only full sibling was not). Less than half of all patients needing a transplant are able to find a perfectly matched unrelated donor.

I was lucky. The Registry located a young woman, a collage student, who was a perfect match and willing to donate.

I had decided, with the support of my wife Maddy, to relocate to Seattle for the procedure. The process required two rounds of high dose chemotherapy and almost 30 days in the hospital. After the transplant I was very depleted. I had lost a lot of weight and strength, and had an assortment of minor complications. As a form of rehabilitation, Maddy started taking me to Discovery Park for exercise. The park is 500+ acres and contains areas of old-growth forest. It was the perfect counter-point to the beehive of activity and sterility that were the daily visits to the clinic. In the beginning I could barely walk twenty feet down the trail. But when I was able, we returned two or three times a week.

The walks began in May when Seattle was nearing the end of its rainy season. The city was still shrouded in clouds and misty showers fell almost continuously. The forests in the park were dark, mysterious places but they were coming back to life. I was deeply moved by the rich saturation of the green taking hold in the woods and the abundance of life. I realized that I hadn't smelled the earth in months. It was a place of wonder.

As a form of mental therapy, I began photographing with an old Polaroid camera. I slowly became stronger and was able to venture farther down the trails. With tripod, camera, and backpack containing a meter, film, garbage bags (for the Polaroid refuse), and one or two liters of gator-aid, my progress was literally at a snail's pace. Walk ten feet and rest; another ten feet, rest. But the rests gave me time to see.

After the initial "processing" right there in the forest, I took the pictures back to our apartment and put them in a box. The stack grew and remained in the box, unseen, until several months after our return to our home in Denver. When I took them out I realized what I had. The pictures were my journal. They are the story of my psychological and physical transformation during that time. The season changed from spring to summer while I made these pictures. And in many ways, I changed as well.

These pictures are very important to me; they will remind me forever of that time and place. I need this because the fact is that I am still in this journey.

## Epilogue

The National Bone Marrow Registry requires that donors and recipients remain anonymous for the first year post transplant, after which time both parties have the option of disclosing their identities. In the spring of 2009, after two years of corresponding by email and cards, I finally had the chance to meet the remarkable young woman who helped save my life.

Lizzy is now a graduate student. She is humble, selfless, determined and well humored, and I know that she will do great things. The encounter has left me joyful and exuberant for the future. I doubt that I'll ever be able to find the words that adequately express my gratitude for what she did for me. Words are difficult to come by, and my effusiveness and attempts at poetry run the risk of embarrassing all involved. But I am sure of one thing – Lizzy's actions are something I will continue to ponder until my last day on this earth.

The images in this series were made over the period of time immediately surrounding my transplant. The images are in two groups: Part I “walls”, and Part II “the park”. The “walls” pictures were made immediately after my second round of high-dose chemotherapy, when I was confined to my apartment. The “park” series began after immediately after I was released from the hospital post-transplant. This time period following transplant, the “ 100 Days”, is significant in that roughly 20 to 30 percent of patients do not survive\*.

\* While I’ve quoted some statistics and survival rates in the text (noted with \*), the reader should keep in mind that these figures were either specific to my condition or were generalized lagging data from 2005 that are now antiquated. Breakthroughs in cancer research and treatment are occurring at a breathtaking pace. To patients, families of patients, and caregivers – there is always room for hope.

Please consider joining the National Bone Marrow Registry @:  
[www.marrow.org](http://www.marrow.org)

From: *The Sublime: False Auroras* (2003)

For the last ten years I have been exploring many of the ideas originally put forth by Burke; specifically, the qualities of vastness, light, darkness, and formlessness found on the earth. What makes these ideas especially intriguing today is that we now have two earths: the natural earth and the man-made earth. People have continued to loose touch with the natural earth and at the same time seem oblivious to the profound changes fostered to the earth by humans over the last forty years. These changes are the man-made earth, and they are a new sublime.

The “False Aurora” images are pictures of the ambient, man-made, light in the night sky above cities. These are photographs of light pollution: pure energy cast into the sky. Cities contain a seemingly endless supply of lights that have all been created as a resistance to

the dark. We have made a proverbial campfire to protect us from the fear and unknown of Burke's darkness. There is irony in the fact that we burn the energy we dig from the earth to create a celestial neon sign that allows us to see that which is in front of us, while at the same time obscuring our view of the heavens. It is a modern day Allegory of the Cave. The night skies will never again be dark in my lifetime and I marvel at the sight of this radiance we have created with an astonished sadness. There is a terrible beauty in these false auroras that fills me with an ominous sense of what is to come.

From: Chords (2001)

This is a series of photographs of a single light pole in Eastern Colorado that evolved out of the earlier Plains landscape work.

I refer to the images as "Chords" in deference to Barnett Newman's "Note" series, and because of the application of the various definitions of the word. The light pole can trigger differing emotional responses when presented in under a variety of circumstances (...strikes a chord...), especially when shown in groups of two or three (musical reference); and, the light pole, taken out of its literal reference, also lends to geometric or structural interpretations.

From: Plains (2000)

Sometimes I leave the car on the side of a dirt road and walk into a field. Depending on the day and location it can be either quite pleasant, or very hostile. Often, there is a huge sense of vulnerability. The wind is almost a constant, and one's own verticality seems to exist in defiance of the landscape. For me, the vastness and space of the plains serve as a metaphor for our place in the world and the nature of things.

From: *Pictures from Iowa* (1999)

Traveling east from Denver the change is gradual but distinct. The windswept and sparsely populated grasslands of northeast Colorado and western Nebraska slowly give way to farms, cattle and people. The immensity of the landscape subsides. Water becomes less scarce. By the time you reach the Missouri River at the Nebraska - Iowa border the landscape is more “compact”. Hills and forests take away the horizon. Life here has a different palate: in the summer it is green, in the winter it is gray. The soil is dark and fertile. The sun that scorched the plains now envelops and caresses. For me, having spent much of the nineties taking pictures on the plains of Colorado, the Midwestern landscape and the change it represents, is remarkable.

The natural process of decay plays a large role in these photographs. The land reclaims manmade structures. Living things die, decay, and become part of the soil from which they have risen. In observing this cycle we are reminded of our own mortality, and the tendency of all things toward chaos. Yet at the same time we observe the elegance and the sense of order with which the process takes place. This duality represents a paradox which confronts us all: to be at peace we must accept and respect the natural cycle but at the same time I believe that to grow, individually and as a society, we must resist decay. But it is difficult to find a balance. Perhaps it is a search that is more important than any answers revealed. I hope this work serves as a gentle reminder that without searching, we are stagnant. To stagnate is to decay.