

October 23



## Interview with Photographer Greg Saulmon

Greg Saulmon is a writer and photographer from Holyoke, Massachusetts. A long career in the newspaper industry—managing breaking news and investigative reporting, producing data visualizations, and shooting photos as an editor at *The Republican* in Springfield and *The Daily Hampshire Gazette* in Northampton—shaped his approach to taking pictures. His photographs have been displayed at the Hosmer Gallery at Forbes Library, the Taber Gallery at Holyoke Community College, the Wistariahurst Museum, and the Vermont Center for Photography, and were featured as an installation at MASS MoCA during the 2013 Solid Sound Festival.

### Where did you get the concept of *Midnights* as a theme for the show?

The short answer is Taylor Swift. I'd been listening *a lot* to her record of the same name when I was offered the opportunity to do a show at the Dye & Bleach House Community Gallery. *Midnights* is a great title for a collection of songs—and, since I've always been drawn to night photography, I thought it'd be interesting to organize a collection of photographs around the theme of this magical, mysterious hour.

But the germ of the idea goes back several years. During my time as an assistant managing editor at *The Republican* newspaper in Springfield I considered shooting a recurring photo feature called “Midnights in...” which would have featured nightlife and night scenes in communities around Western Massachusetts. I never got that idea off the ground; it would've meant putting in a lot of extra hours on top of my regular editing responsibilities. But the concept continued to intrigue me, and I'm glad I finally found a chance to bring it to life.



### **What were the challenges in shooting this project?**

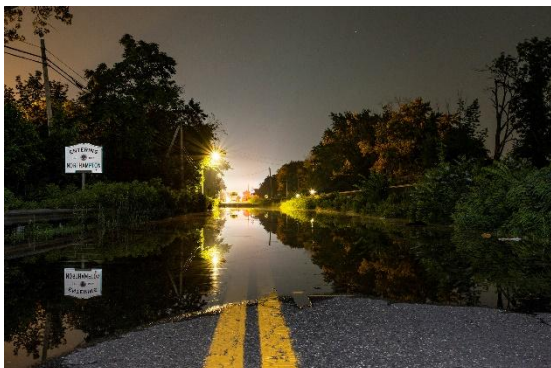
Shooting *Midnights* proved challenging for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that I'm more of a morning person. It was often hard to motivate myself to go out and shoot, which usually meant I wasn't even leaving the house until 11:30 p.m. I spent three nights in a row shooting the Valley Flyer train crossing a canal in Holyoke, trying out different focal lengths and compositions. In the end it was very worth it—on the third night, I also ran into the guys fishing on a bridge over the Connecticut River, and on the way home through the city's downtown I spotted the guy flying a huge American flag from the back of his moped. I ended up getting three images for the show that night, but by the end of that week I was dragging. Thankfully the work was as invigorating as it was exhausting.

There were also technical challenges. I shot much of the show with a 45mm perspective control lens, which allows you to create dreamlike, ethereal images by changing the angle of the focal plane. This selective focus effect is similar to the “tilt-shift” setting on Instagram. It can be a difficult lens to work with even in ideal conditions. It's manual focus only, it renders the camera's light meter useless, and it takes a ton of practice to figure out exactly how tilting, shifting, and rotating the lens will affect what part of the frame is in focus. I still don't have the hang of it.

Finally, shooting at night can be hard simply because you can't always see what you're doing, or what you're shooting. It was so dark up on Arunah Hill in Cummington, Massachusetts—where I shot the photos of amateur astronomers with telescopes—that all I could see through the viewfinder were the stars. I couldn't see the subjects that were a few feet away from me, so I had to focus by feel and intuition. Behind almost every photograph I've chosen to show is a festival of failure.

### **When did you start doing photography?**

Early in my journalism career, in my late 20s, I was the editor of a monthly arts and culture newspaper. I had more photo slots to fill in each month's edition than I had budget for freelance photographers, so I started shooting odds and ends to fill the gaps. I'd always been a writer, and I enjoyed discovering a different way to tell stories. Eventually I moved into a job in the newsroom of the daily newspaper, and for the first few years I was an early morning editor on the online and breaking news teams. I started around 6 a.m., which was about two hours earlier than the first staff photographer's shift. That gave me a lot of chances for on-the-job training as a photojournalist, and allowed me to shoot a wide range of subjects in all kinds of weather and lighting.



**What are your favorite subjects to shoot? Has this changed over the course of your career?**

I enjoyed the excitement of shooting breaking news, but what I came to appreciate most were the opportunities to win someone's trust, learn about their life, and share their story with sensitivity and care. For one story, I photographed families who'd left Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Months later they were still stuck in "temporary" housing in a local hotel. It was an honor to help humanize the issue and bring their situation to light.

Another photo story I worked on focused on the director of the Ms. Massachusetts Senior America pageant. I spent time at her apartment in a senior living community, and photographed the contestants during rehearsals, at the pageant itself, and as the winner prepared to leave for the national pageant in Atlantic City. I enjoyed witnessing their camaraderie and community, and appreciated having a window into a world I didn't know anything about.

**What photographers have inspired you? Have you found yourself emulating aspects of their work?**

I love the idea of exploring a subject deeply over time. So I'm always inspired by documentary photographers like Bruce Davidson and Mitch Epstein, or photojournalists like Ilana Panich-Linsman, Jessica Rinaldi, and Lynsey Addario, who've all produced fascinating long-term photo essays and projects. Rinaldi's Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Life and Times of Strider Wolf," about a boy being raised by his grandparents in rural Maine, is just breathtaking—and it must have required a high degree of empathy and emotional intelligence. Those are skills that are easy to take for granted, but that I think are critical to producing compelling work.

On the aesthetic end of things, I'm prone to emulating Gregory Crewdson. We're completely different in terms of process. He shoots cinematic set pieces that are elaborately staged and lit, where he's working with a crew and shutting down city streets. But the mood he captures—a sense of mystery, often with undertones of darkness, loneliness, or unease, set in places that seem like they're not quite in the past but not quite in the present—is something I find irresistible. In this show, I was attempting to conjure Crewdson when I photographed the man crossing the street on a snowy night outside the Ivory Billiard Lounge in Holyoke. I chose that location specifically because it made me think of Crewdson's work.

**What do you hope for viewers of *Midnights* to experience?**

I hope people walk away with a sense of curiosity and an appreciation for the small moments you can witness when you're willing to slow down, look closely, or change your routine. The world is full of wonder at all hours of the day. I think most of us have some sense of that, but sometimes we need reminders. At least, I do.

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