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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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The Silent Revolution

From the rubble of economic collapse, Argentina's recuperadas *build a cooperative future*

ONE MORNING IN JUNE 2002, a group of twenty unemployed factory workers gathered on a treeless sidewalk in downtown Avellaneda, an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires. They came loaded with poles, plastic sheeting, scrap lumber, and rope. In short order, they raised a tent before a nine-story brick factory known as the Cristalux Glassworks. The factory, recognizable by its billboard-sized bas-relief of a worker blowing glass, had once employed a workforce of twelve hundred. Now it stood abandoned and shuttered.

It was late fall in the Southern Hemisphere, and night temperatures dipped into the low forties. The wide, bleak avenue offered no shelter from wind, rain, or sun. The tent was just an orange tarp strung up between the factory's main gate and a light post, the sides anchored to crates. But the workers were determined to keep the tent fastened to the gate until they could go back inside. More than one hundred ex-employees eventually joined the protest, either lending their bodies or bringing food.

Many of the workers had been employed for decades as machinists, loaders, packers, labelers, janitors, or guards at Cristalux SA, whose popular Durax brand was known as the most durable glass in the country. Theirs had been a highly regimented workplace, marked by quotas, strict rules, understaffed assembly lines, and foremen who pushed employees to produce at a maximum clip. Talk was discouraged. Still, the workers had decent wages, social security benefits, and paid vacations.

Then the world caved in. In the 1990s, driven by loan

conditions of the International Monetary Fund that opened the country's markets to imported goods and foreign investors but undermined local businesses, Argentina's economy tumbled into recession. By the end of the decade, even previously prosperous factories across the country were downsizing or shutting down, and an estimated two thousand factories would eventually go bankrupt.

Between 1995 and 2000, Cristalux managers reduced the staff to a skeleton crew of 380, all of whom were dismissed on December 12, 2000. Cristalux shut its workers out of the factory, which closed in a court-administered bankruptcy. By the time the workers raised their tent some eighteen months later, official Argentine unemployment had reached 22 percent.

To avoid seeing their livelihoods consigned to the junk heap of the global economy, the ex-Cristalux workers made a bold request to Matilde Evangelina Ballerini, the bankruptcy judge divvying up the factory's assets. The request, punctuated by the tent encampment and vigil, was not entirely unprecedented. It echoed the expressed desires of workers at scores of similar factories throughout Argentina in those chaotic times: let the workers return to their machines and work to feed their families. Like those who occupied scores of other factories in Argentina, the ex-Cristalux employees had no boss, no manager, no help from labor unions, no real plan, no money, and no ambitions of glory. They just wanted in.

Osvaldo Donato, then a forty-year-old forklift operator with three children, became a hero of the tent epoch. To save on bus fare, he rode seventy-four blocks every day on a bicycle that became the workers' meal cart. A descendant of Sicilian immigrants, with mischievous blue eyes, a ruddy complexion, and a reddish mustache, Donato would ride off with whatever money the workers could scrape together to beg, cajole, or charm food from Avellaneda's fruit stands, bakeries, and cafés. When he pedaled back, his bicycle basket full of bread, vegetables, or pasta, the workers could look forward to a dinner cooked in a blackened pot over a wood fire.

Donato and his compatriots had few other sources of comfort. They had no idea how long they would have to maintain their vigil. Nor could they have imagined how successful they would be at reclaiming their livelihoods. When the dust cleared from the worst of the economic collapse from 2001 to 2003, they and thousands of their fellow Argentines had taken

over more than 150 abandoned or bankrupt factories and businesses, everything from a breadstick factory to a shipyard. They have been running them since without their former bosses. Like the ex-Cristalux workers—who have reconstituted themselves as worker-owners of Cooperativa Cristal Avellaneda—they are producing on an industrial scale under worker control, with humanely paced assembly lines, support for family members, and morale-boosting conditions like adequate staffing.

In most cases, the workers carried out their campaigns against the wishes of owners and their creditors (banks, utilities, and tax agencies), who wanted machinery sold—as scrap metal if necessary—and the real estate put up for sale. But the movement of recovered factories, or *fábricas recuperadas*, was not a typical clash between labor and management. These workers turned the logic of corporate cost-cutting on its head. Instead of eliminating jobs to fatten profit margins, Argentina's recovered factories jettisoned an entire managerial hierarchy to preserve the livelihoods of workers. The upshot: participants in the recuperadas movement have saved about thirteen thousand jobs. They also may have generated one of the densest clusters of new worker-run co-operative enterprises in modern history.

Observers have heralded the recuperadas as examples of—depending on the proponent—socialism, a radical co-operative movement, or classic anarchism, which envisions a spontaneous collapse of the powers-that-be and the rise of a new society in which men and women decide for themselves how to parcel out the tasks of community building, all without hierarchy, institutions, or oppressive regulations. But in organizing the recuperadas out of economic ruin, the workers themselves were not championing any ideology. "Let me tell you how this works," said Gustavo Crisaldo, a thoughtful machinist with prematurely gray hair, now a member of Cristal Avellaneda's directorial commission. "It's this simple: if we hadn't had our backs against the wall, we wouldn't be here right now."

In his 2003 book on the recovered factories, *El cambio silencioso*, or *The Silent Change*, Argentine journalist Esteban Magnani points out that the recuperadas provided a psychological breakthrough for working-class communities, which had long endured with few options. "The fact that there is a path, a possibility of a different outlook after so many years in which there has been a total lack of options," Lalo Paret, a community activist who participated directly in several takeovers around Buenos Aires, tells Magnani, "that in itself is a revolution, a great silent change."

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LIKE MOST DEVELOPMENTS in recent Argentine history, the economic collapse and recovery of factories cannot be understood apart from the legacy of General Juan Domingo Perón, a career military officer first elected president in 1946. With his commanding presence, brilliant smile, and slicked-back hair, Perón dominated the country for nine years and the political passions of many Argentines for many years afterward. Effectively controlling the legislature, judiciary, and unions, he created a political edifice with the Argentine working class as its foundation, a structure that endured even after a 1955 coup drove him into exile. Nationalists, workers, and left-wing students helped return Perón to the presidency in 1973, but he died within a year. His successor, his second wife, Isabelita, could not maintain control over a politically divided country, and Argentina's military unseated her in a 1976 coup, initiating the Dirty War in which thirty thousand people disappeared in a reign of terror. Union and labor activists were among those targeted.

Under the military government, Argentina aligned itself with the free-market policies espoused by Washington DC. Bit by bit, the junta began undoing Peronist policies: it dismantled the tariffs that protected national industry, racked up massive debts with international lenders like the IMF, eliminated subsidies to industry, privatized state industries, and cut social programs. Though the country returned to democracy in 1983, it remained paralyzed by the loans and obligations initiated by the junta. By 1989, the economy was in shambles and government spending to shore it up had created hyperinflation that reached an annual rate of over 1000 percent, prompting a reversion to many of the pro-American economic policies initiated by the junta.

That so-called Washington Consensus was embraced by Carlos Menem, president from 1989 to 1999, a Ferrari-driving, side-burned Peronist Party *caudillo* who seemed to forget his party's working-class base. Menem wooed the IMF, the World Bank, Washington, and, most of all, Wall Street, zealously applying the economic formulas they preached. He privatized all the key state industries, kept a tight rein on the labor unions, and reduced duties on imports like autos and glassware. He also pegged the country's currency one-to-one with the U.S. dollar. The fixed exchange rate—the government simply decreed that one peso was worth one dollar—was the lynchpin of Argentina's plan to curb inflation. Ultimately, it precipitated the wave of factory collapses throughout the country.

Especially at first, Menem's economic plan attracted significant

foreign investment, enriched foreign banks, and gave middle-class Argentines confidence in their strong currency. It enabled them to travel, buy imported electronics and clothes, and pretend they were a part of the developed world.

By the late 1990s, the policy began to show its cracks. All production costs had to be computed in dollars, and businesses typically borrowed in dollars as well. Because of the artificial strength of the national currency, Argentine products became more expensive than imports from countries like Brazil and China, where currencies were weaker. That meant that locally produced goods like Cristalux's became less competitive not only within Argentina but also worldwide.

As wages were slashed and jobs dried up, the *conurbano*—a ring of working-class cities like Avellaneda encircling Buenos Aires—became a sprawling rust belt. At the end of Menem's ten years in power in late 1999, the Census Bureau's household survey revealed a chilling fact: 5.8 million people in former working- or middle-class households in the conurbano, nearly half the area's population, had slipped into poverty. By late 2001, Argentina's unemployment hovered around 30 percent, the economy was projected to shrink an unprecedented 15 percent that year, and banks had frozen the life savings of millions of Argentines.

THE AUGUST 2000 OCCUPATION of GIP Metal, manufacturer of steel tubes, is widely credited with launching the recuperada movement. As in most of the takeovers, GIP's owners had wanted to hand their assets to a bankruptcy judge, who would decide how to satisfy creditors. But according to Magnani's *El cambio silencioso*, fifty-four of the company's metalworkers smelled a rat. The owners, they suspected, were rigging the bankruptcy so they could profit from dismantling the factory.

The employees decided to squat in the plant. Lobbied by the workers, a judge found evidence of fraud and blocked an eviction order. A federation of co-operatives convinced the city of Avellaneda to expropriate GIP Metal and cede it to the workers' co-op until they could buy it. By 2001, they were running the factory themselves. With minor variations, this became the blueprint for subsequent factory recoveries.

Meanwhile, ex-president Menem's neglect of the working class was beginning to backfire. On December 19, 2001, hungry protestors throughout Avellaneda and other heavily Peronist communities gutted of jobs converged on supermarkets and demanded handouts, breaking in and taking food off the shelves when their demands were brushed aside. On the heels of that action, students, housewives, and retirees swelled the ranks of demonstrators downtown, banging pots and pans and demanding among other things that the government end Argentina's submission to the IMF. The next day, the protests moved to the

historic Avenida de Mayo, and before it was over some thirty-five people were dead, including a half-dozen civilians killed by police within a stone's throw of the presidential palace.

The show of force did not slow the recuperada movement. In subsequent months, a network of leftists, students, grassroots groups—along with politically active unemployed workers known as *piqueteros*, or picketers, and ordinary citizens grouped into neighborhood associations known as *asambleas*—helped workers fend off repeated eviction attempts at occupied factories.

LIKE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of the country's newly unemployed, the ex-Cristalux workers had been surviving the economic collapse on unemployment checks and odd jobs. But a core group of the workers continued to meet. On May 25, a national holiday commemorating Argentina's 1810 declaration of independence from Napoleonic Spain, more than one hundred Cristalux colleagues gathered outside the factory and voted to pitch a protest tent. Within days, a vanguard of six workers was camped outside the factory, sleeping and shivering under a temporary tarp.

Once the larger group raised the actual tent a week later, between six and twenty workers at a time maintained a vigil in eight- to ten-hour rotations modeled on factory shifts. "There was a lot of want, a lot of hardship," said Diego Ojeda, a laconic sixty-six-year-old security guard with a fleshy nose and white hair. Ojeda can't remember the tent days without choking up. "There wasn't a cent to bring home, and some of our *compañeros* became estranged from their families along the way."

Six weeks into the vigil, a judge ruled that the workers could legally occupy the factory. On July 19, 2002, a worker climbed over the factory wall, opened the gate from the inside, and welcomed some two hundred employees who, cheering and clapping, stepped inside the Cristalux factory for the first time in nearly two years.

They were shocked by what they saw. Most of them wept. The factory was completely gutted—rat-infested, piled high with rubble. Anything of value had been taken; what couldn't be taken was wrecked. Looters had smashed circuit boards and the workers' beloved machines, sliced open coils of cables to scavenge wire, and littered the floor with the remains.

"You really did feel like turning around, closing the door, and never coming back," said María Diego, a tough, curly-haired woman who was a twenty-year veteran of Cristalux in quality control. Half of the people who entered the factory that first day did just that.

Cornelio Ledesma, a sixty-two-year-old maintenance worker from Chaco province, chose to act. The next day, he came back with his machete and set about clearing the vines and creepers that had taken over the ten-acre plot and choked off the driveway circling the factory. "I was thinking, hey, is this the middle of the jungle?" Ledesma remembers.

Every night, workers slept inside the factory to guard against thieves, and for months they had no electricity or gas. The gaps in the skylights let in rain and cold. Pigeons nested in the rafters. At one point, the workers rented out part of the wrecked factory

The Working World

To Brendan Martin, a thirty-three-year-old American and director of a Buenos Aires–based financial nonprofit, the outbreak of worker-recovered enterprises in Argentina embodies a dream: "alternative economic systems, beyond the oppositions of capitalism and socialism."

Martin is short, wiry, intense, and dresses in old sweaters, jeans, and work boots made by a Buenos Aires–based co-operative. He looks the part of an idealist who wrote a thesis on co-operatives at Wesleyan University, visited the famous, prosperous co-operative community of Mondragón in the Basque region of Spain, and spent a decade mulling over how to create a financial system for co-operatives. Often such dreams of alternative economies go nowhere.

But in 2004, while chief technical officer for a Wall Street financial services firm, Martin saw *The Take*, the documentary on Argentine factory recoveries by Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis. He almost fell out of his chair; a new generation of co-ops was rising out of a ruined economic order in Argentina. In November 2004, he packed his bags for Buenos Aires.

Less than a year later, he was overseeing a $200,000 fund for microloans to worker-run co-operatives. Martin's nonprofit, called The Working World and staffed mostly by Argentines, has helped finance a range of recovered factories, from shoemaker CUC and metalworks Crometal to balloon maker Cooperativa La Nueva Esperanza. The Working World website also now hosts an online store to help co-operatives market products internationally, including Cristal Avellaneda's "Blue Orchid" line of glass dinner plates (see main story).

"The experience of work is at the center of our lives," Martin says. "If the workers hold the decision-making power, you can work on your own time—say six hours of work a day is plenty." A new generation of co-op workers, he notes, has extended its energies beyond immediate tasks, opening cultural centers for neighborhoods and banding together to pay for surgeries needed by fellow members. "The workers don't have much money," he says, "but their lives without a doubt are much more enjoyable."

to filmmakers who were shooting a low-budget Argentine horror film. During most of those early days, the workers cranked out rudimentary glass ashtrays and vases from a makeshift furnace just to make money for food. Donato continued his bicycle foraging trips, often bartering glassware, scrap metal, and cardboard that he salvaged from the factory's ruins.

The group had a goal: to rebuild one of the four forty-ton furnaces necessary to produce on an industrial scale. The workers likened the task to a post-earthquake rescue. Many used their bare hands to drag trash, scrap metal, and rubble out of the plant, taking eight months just to clear away the debris. To construct the furnace, they sifted through the ruins for machine parts, the vital high-heat bricks, and the pyrometers needed to measure the furnace's temperature. To buy remaining material and parts, they began setting aside what they could from the sale of ashtrays and other wares that they hawked at bazaars, in markets, and door-to-door. They held neighborhood raffles, asked for money at universities, and placed a tent-era collection jar outside the factory. Similar scenes were repeated at recuperadas throughout the country.

On Friday, June 10, 2005, three years after entering the factory, workers turned on the big furnace for the first time. Avellaneda's mayor was in attendance, the old shift-change siren sounded, and many of the workers wept again. They would be able to triple their production and take home a decent paycheck.

MORE THAN 90 PERCENT of the fábricas recuperadas in Argentina operate as co-operatives, partly because municipal and provincial governments often recommended that recuperadas form co-ops to negotiate expropriations. But, like their contemporaries, the Cristal members quickly learned that the co-op structure allowed more than a convenient and relatively inexpensive way to lobby politicians and judges; it allowed an organic rearrangement of the entire workplace.

Today, the average ex-Cristalux worker will emphatically insist on using the factory's new name, Cooperativa Cristal Avellaneda, often shortened affectionately to Cristal Avellaneda. It is a 180-member co-op comprising full members and *aspirantes*—or new workers—who elect a six-person directorial commission by a majority vote.

Like most of the recuperadas, the Cristal co-op has the simplest rules imaginable and the simplest pay scale—equal, across the board. Twice-monthly assemblies discuss and vote on all important matters facing the factory. If a majority approves a proposal, the directorial commission supervises its execution, assigning project managers to work out the details. The members elect directors every three years, but choose only a few seats at a time to ensure administrative continuity. A vote can reverse any decision (including an election) and can change any line in the statutes. It isn't a perfect system. Assemblies are often chaotic, boisterous affairs. "A lot of cussing goes on," said Diego Ojeda, the security guard. But when the shouts die down, decisions get made, sometimes quickly.

The co-op structure allowed an organic rearrangement of the workplace. Cristal has the simplest rules imaginable and the simplest pay scale—equal, across the board.

Though many members found the world of suppliers, sales, distribution, accounting, inventory, and personnel management less mystifying than expected, the reconstitution of an entire industrial organism was no simple task. Few workers had finished high school. "It was like a new world for all of us," said Osvaldo Donato. "We had to make decisions all of a sudden, assume responsibilities, not simply do as we were told."

A third-generation factory worker, Donato had begun factory work at age fifteen. For most of his career at Cristalux, he moved pallets in the factory's warehouses. During the tent days, his bicycle and good-natured hustle in finding food earned him the workers' respect and admiration, although he wanted nothing to do with running the co-op. But then a corruption scandal forced the workers to impeach the entire directorial commission, who had come under a cloud of suspicion for embezzlement. In elections that followed, Donato replaced one of his former colleagues.

When we talked in January 2006, in a Spartan office harboring only a desk, three chairs, a phone, and a fax machine, it was the middle of Argentina's summer. The factory workers who came to consult with Donato, protective face masks hanging from their necks, were bathed in sweat from the sweltering weather and the furnace's heat. A red and white banner of one of Avellaneda's professional soccer teams fluttered slightly whenever a floor fan turned in its direction. Donato looked drawn, overworked.

"I think that if you ask any member of the directorial commission if they would rather resign and go back to their old jobs, they would say yes," he said. "But we created this co-operative out of need. Our colleagues have chosen us for the responsibility of coordinating the co-op, and we can't shirk the duty." It's a duty that comes with few privileges or amenities. While the six-seat directorial commission passes for "management," its officers don't earn higher wages. They resist any impression of authority. Donato may spend more time now in the no-frills warren of

offices ringing the factory floor, but he still punches the clock like everyone else, and wears his khaki pants and work shirt and black work boots.

On the assembly line one morning, I spoke with María Diego, the curly-haired veteran of the tent days. The glass plates came relentlessly, pushed two by two on the metal rollers of a conveyor, cooling to a translucent blue by the time they reached her. As we talked, she worked alongside two others, a young man and woman. In the old days, only two workers would have been stationed here. "Before, there would be a lot of explanations due if you stopped the machines," says Gustavo Crisaldo, Donato's officemate and member of the directorial commission. "Today, if anyone could get hurt, we stop the machines without hesitation."

As they worked, Diego and the others drank yerba mate, an indigenous South American tea, and listened to an old radio playing pop music—practices that Cristalux SA had forbidden. "No one's looking over your shoulder now," Donato says. "Before, you'd work for hours loading boxes, killing your back, and if a supervisor saw you sit on a box for one minute of rest, you were on probation." Unlike the previous owners, Cristal Avellaneda gives workers the opportunity to recruit new hires from among family and friends, reinforcing the tight-knit atmosphere at the plant. Cristal Avellaneda has also hired a half dozen retirees in the engineering, design, and maintenance departments, some of whom function as unofficial elders and trainers.

AMONG THE RADICAL CHANGES weathered by Cristal Avellaneda members are their expectations for pay and success. With only one of its four industrial-scale furnaces operating, the factory employs a fraction of its former workforce, and produces perhaps one-tenth of its former output. The Cristal workers take home less than seventy dollars a week, just enough to get by. Any raises, or even the addition of any positions, would have to be approved by a membership-wide vote that would take into account a host of variables, including debts, necessary investments, and reserve funds. And for the foreseeable future, those needs will likely take precedence.

"If a screw has come loose and fallen on the ground," says Gustavo Crisaldo, "the mentality before was that you would kick it under a machine somewhere so that no one would see it. Now, you have to realize—that's your screw that you're kicking; if you don't bend over to pick it up, that's money out of your pocket."

While the old management had scorned recycled material and used it as little as possible, the raw material for glassmaking at Cristal Avellaneda now consists of 30 to 100 percent post-consumer recycled glass. Workers bring in used bottles, soak them in buckets of water, remove their labels, sort them by color, and put any shards through a machine called the *Rompehuesos*,

or Bone Crusher. They have also modified a junked 1950s-era Chevy truck to feed sand and glass into the furnace, and bring in used cardboard, paper, and string for packing material.

But the biggest efficiency at Cristal came from the artisan practice of glass blowing, which had defined the factory at its inception in 1896. Revived after several decades of absence, the practice allows Cristal Avellaneda to produce two types of glassware from the furnace, which turns sand, recycled glass, and a mineral mix into molten glass. A spout near the furnace's bottom lip oozes a glowing liquid, like incandescent honey, into receptacles on the production line. The resulting pancake-sized discs of soft, red-hot glass are pressed into the shape of dinner plates by whirling, stainless-steel presses. Meanwhile, up above on scaffolding, workers dip long metal poles into another part of the furnace. They gather dollops of molten liquid, twirl it onto long tubes, and blow through these to create bulbous water glasses. Immediately afterward, they dip their creations into water, sending clouds of white, steamy smoke billowing upwards. There's no such thing as a "throwaway": defective glassware is broken up and fed back into the maws of the furnace. It is now working at full tilt, producing forty thousand glass plates a day, plus the hand-blown water glasses.

COOPERATIVA CRISTAL AVELLANEDA has a few other variables going for it. The factory has expropriated the use of the old Durax brand name, kept the loyalty of some traditional customers, secured key distributorships for supermarkets and neighborhood stores, and hired a new sales manager and sales agent in 2005. It also has semi-solid legal status. By 2002, legislators of the Buenos Aires province had expropriated sixteen factories, including Cristalux glassworks, and had passed a law to let workers stay at the plants until they could buy them, lease them from the bankruptcy administrator, or gain title by permanent expropriation. But like most of the recuperadas, Cristal's expropriation status is temporary; it comes up for renewal at the end of 2006.

Even if they gain full ownership over machines and property, recuperadas still face external challenges. "The market doesn't care one bit that a shoe was made at a co-operative," the activist Lalo Paret told me. "The market says this shoe is worth this much and that's the way it is." Donato claims that Argentina's dominant glassmaker these days, Rigolleau, artificially depressed the price of glass plates on the market after Cristal's furnace began operation. And co-operatives, like all enterprises whose measure of success extends beyond the bottom line, often find it difficult to obtain credit and financing (see sidebar on page 64).

But regardless of how the recuperadas fare over the next few years, they have articulated an alternative economic culture—and not just inside the factory walls.

Bartering has become common within multiplying networks of recuperadas and co-ops. At the Desde el Pie shoemaking co-op in Laferrere, one of the poorest suburbs of Buenos Aires, the Paraguayan immigrants who run the co-op broke out Cristal Avellaneda plates and cups at a recent barbecue to celebrate the construction of a new shoe factory. At Cristal Avellaneda, many of the workers wear Desde el Pie work boots. The Bauen, a worker-recovered four-star hotel in Buenos Aires, grants free lodging to members of recuperadas who travel on business, and functions as a hub for co-op organizing.

In gratitude for the support of their takeovers, recuperada co-ops are also giving back to their communities—everything from kindergarten scholarships to print-work training. Cristal Avellaneda's workers, who say they would not have survived the tent era were it not for the food charity of neighbors, marched alongside the neighborhood groups when the government recently planned to close two passenger train stations in Avellaneda; the stations remained open.

Meanwhile, Donato still goes out to barter or buy food on his bicycle rounds, but now he returns with richer rewards, handing out pastries to the workers on the morning shift: "When I come around the factory floor, they say, 'Hey Donato, do you have any *facturas*?' And I say, 'Look at you! You used to be grateful for a piece of hard bread, and now you're demanding pastries!'"

Still Life of Lies and Truth

In the grass bent beneath the sleeping elk
you can't find anybody's dreams—it doesn't
have anything to do with your life,
with the cup of tea placed on the ledge,
the shoes in disarray beside the door,
or with your hands holding the telephone
having forgotten who you were calling.
If you are missing something, it's not there,
don't even look. Not more than in the cobwebs
of your shed, or in the chair still rocking
after your guest has gone to the next room,
or in the dew on your roof. Your life
is too pure to possibly survive
intact, your living it. And if you're trying
to find the beginning of your sadness—
or the end—it's not here in moonlit
sleeping clouds of elk breath. Go back to sleep.

—Sam Taylor