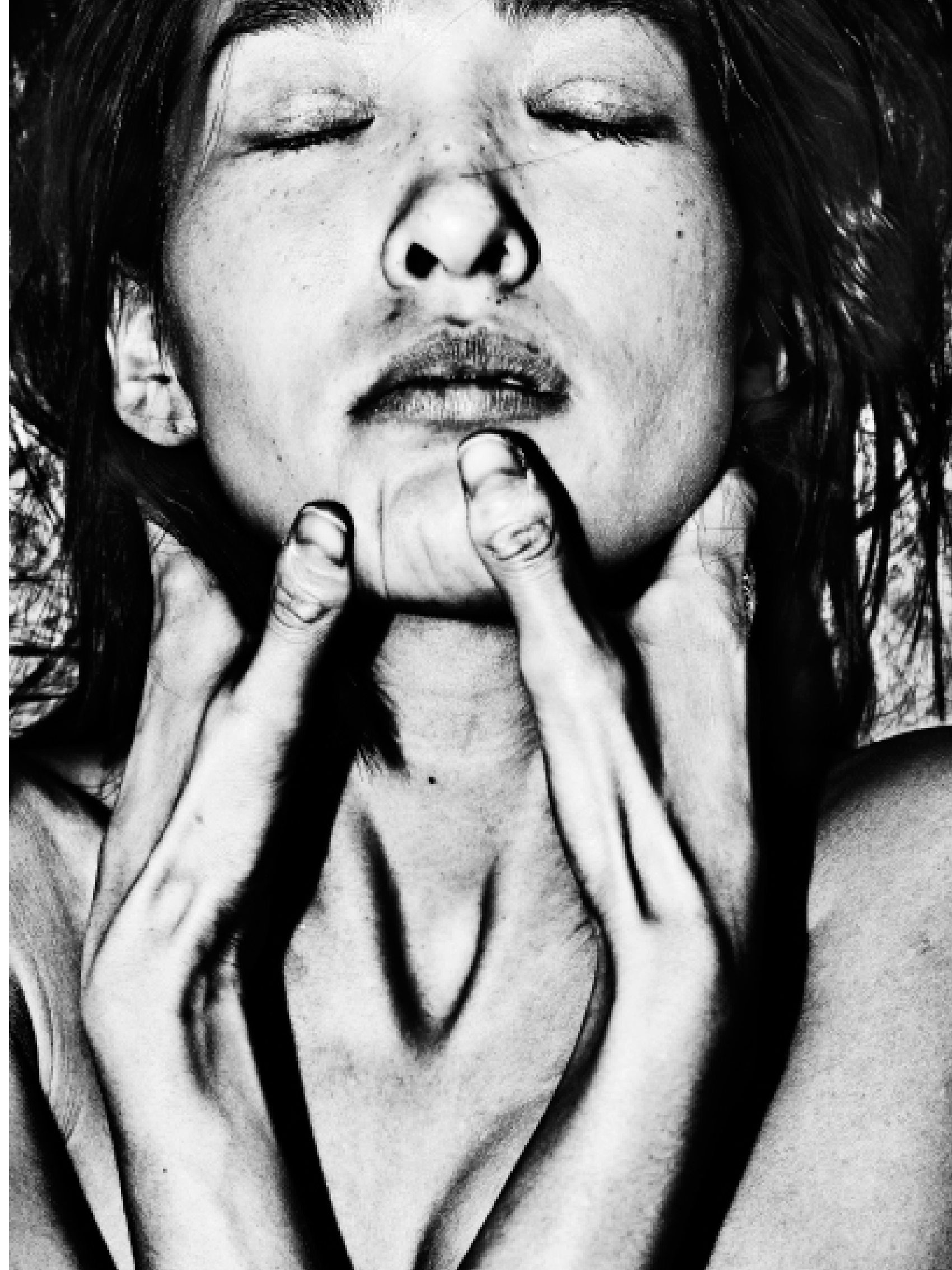


Road of Bo me sse

Magnum photographer
Jacob Aue Sobol's
intense, haunting pictures
chart a continuing
personal journey across
both geographical and
emotional extremes



The history of the Road of Bones is as eerie as it sounds. Built on top of the bodies of forced labourers who were buried and paved over on the spot where they collapsed, it is now officially known as the Kolyma Highway and crosses the coldest part of Siberia to the northeast coast of Russia. To follow the Road of Bones is to journey to a forgotten frontier of the Asian continent – the edge of the world where time seems as frozen as the landscape and people can do little but persevere. For Magnum photographer Jacob Aue Sobol, who spent two winters documenting the realities of life in this harsh and isolated region, the Road of Bones is a road littered with memories of his own personal and photographic journey, which began when he was a young man discovering more than he expected in Greenland.

IN 2012, Jacob Aue Sobol was a passenger on the Trans-Siberian railway when it stopped at Irkutsk by the shore of Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake. It was midwinter and the lake ice-white as far as the eye could see. "I was so fascinated by the sight of a frozen Lake Baikal that I really wanted to get off and travel further north," he recalls. "I've always been attracted to the north, but instead the train headed south to Mongolia and Beijing."

At the time, Jacob was working with Leica on a project called *Arrivals and Departures*, and he returned to Siberia for five successive winters, documenting the lives of people in this remote and sparsely populated territory. But what did he see in the view of a frozen Lake Baikal that compelled him to return and make the hazardous detour north? "It's difficult to explain exactly what it was, but I think it's related to my life in Greenland when I was 23 years old. I came to Greenland and I fell in love with Sabine."

A young Inuit woman from Tiniteqilaaq on Greenland's east coast, Sabine was Jacob's lover for over two years. He arrived at the turn of the century as a young graduate of Copenhagen's prestigious Fatamorgana photography school, intent on documenting the clash of Western and indigenous cultures in the Danish territory. He reflects: "We were only 150 and there were no other foreigners, so it was 150 Inuit. The life there had a huge impact on me,

my travels, the way I work and my personal journey, I think. This attraction to something cold and harsh combined with the warmth of falling in love with Sabine, it has something that I have followed since."

Jacob became further assimilated with the community by learning to hunt and fish with the other Inuit to provide for Sabine and her family. He admits to becoming a "very ambitious hunter" and quickly realized he was of greater worth to the community bringing home a seal or fish after a day on the ice rather than two rolls of exposed film. "So my position changed from taking pictures to being a great fisherman and hunter." The change of role proved temporary, however; one morning, a frivolous Sabine broke into a spontaneous dance in the house they shared and Jacob picked up his camera. "She was dancing around in a very good spirit, and this moment I wanted to take a picture of her. But it was not because I had to do great pictures – it was because it was a moment with her that I wanted to remember."

From that moment, Jacob became Sabine's biographer, photographing her daily in moments of great intensity and intimacy that sometimes bordered on the intrusive. In 2002, he returned to Copenhagen without Sabine, who chose to stay in Greenland, but two years later she was the subject of Jacob's first book with a title bearing her name. The 53 duotone images spread across 112 pages infuriated one reviewer. The ➤➤➤

[Previous page]
Woman from Siberia,
from *With and Without
You*.
[Right] An image from
Road of Bones.



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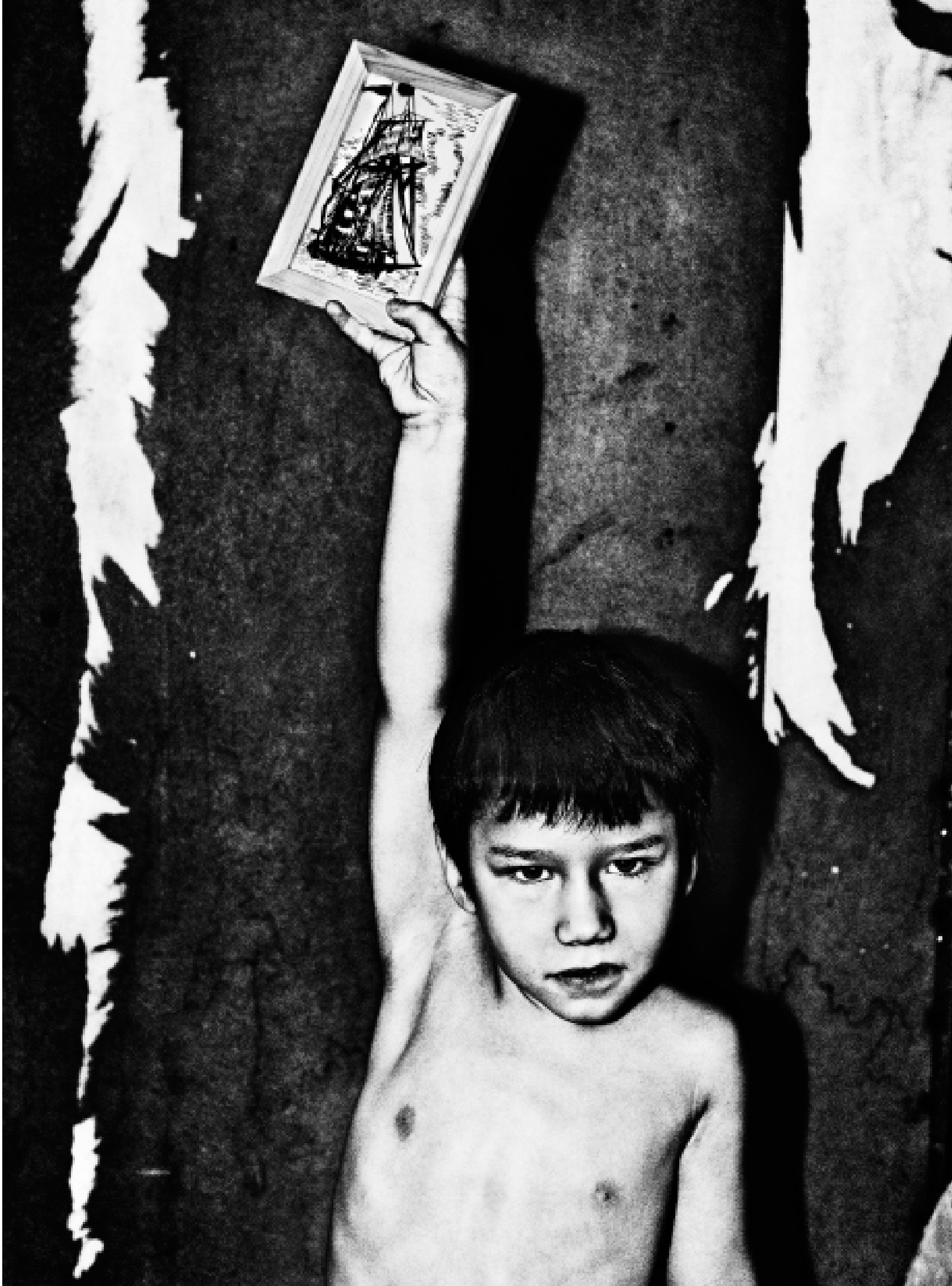
Danish editor of the *Greenland Post* wrote: 'Jacob Aue Sobol has made a ruthless book. His intimate, sensitive and even beautiful portrayal of Sabine is an act of personal betrayal for which he will hopefully be held accountable ... Under any circumstances, it is a sin to publish an extremely private book about a coincidental lover you've exploited for a couple of years.'

Unsurprisingly, the review hurt Jacob. The memory of his life in Greenland still haunts, yet it has proven to be the greatest influence on his subsequent photo projects to Guatemala, Tokyo, Thailand, America, Mongolia, and now Siberia. The choice of locations and subjects, the way he engages with strangers for the camera, and the reliance on harsh, direct flash can all be traced back to those formative years on Greenland's desolate east coast.

When he first travelled north of Lake Baikal and discovered the bleak origins of the Road of Bones, Jacob found similarities with Greenland in the vast distances and small remote communities shrouded in the ice and darkness of winter. He travelled through the province of Yakutia to the capital, Yakutsk. "It's the coldest inhabited city in the

world, with temperatures down to minus 60 degrees centigrade in the winter," he explains. "How is that possible? How do they live there? When I came to this city it was in January, it was at its coldest and everything was packed in ice – the trees, the buildings. It was like a huge ice cube, and that made me very curious about the people living there. The Road of Bones starts in Yakutsk and then heads northeast to the very east coast of Russia, so it was in Yakutsk that I found out about this road."

Here, in Siberia's wildest frontier, the native population are reindeer herders and horse breeders, following the centuries-old traditions of their tribal ancestors. But since the 1930s, more Russians have moved in from the west – first as forced labourers in Stalin's brutal gulags, then latterly as hopeful miners digging for gold and diamonds. Jacob immediately detected an uneasy co-existence between the two communities. "In Yakutsk, there is this conflict between the Russians and the native population, the Yakuts. They are Asians, so you feel this kind of tension, because at some point the Russians came and took their land – like so many other places in the world. They started building mines and finding gold, ➤➤



[Right]
Russia, 2012.



I'm not a very individual person. I don't know how to be alone. I can't be alone, so no matter where I go I always have someone with me.

diamonds and other stuff. The reason why there is a city [there] is because of the gold.”

Morten Bo, founder of Fatamorgana and Jacob's mentor, recently wrote that his protégé 'seeks out people who are on the edge.' Yakutsk and the villages along the Road of Bones seem filled with people who meet that description, but Jacob dismisses the remark and the inference that these are the only type of people that interest him: "Oh, I don't really feel it's correct," he refutes. "With Morten Bo, this is his interpretation of what I do. He has a very strong personality. But the fact that I always photograph people on the edge, I don't think is true. Actually, I photograph normal people, everyday people, especially when I travel in the villages. It's not like I'm looking for someone who is completely isolated. [On the contrary] I photograph a lot of young couples in love and I photograph families who live in these small villages."

Some may find it difficult to accept Jacob's subjects as 'normal people, everyday people,' given the technique he deploys to portray them. His framing and cropping is uncomfortably close and he uses flash so direct and stark that every outline of the face and

body is traced with a hard, black, ribbon-like shadow. Indoors or out, he always shoots with flash and produces black-and-white prints of exceptionally high contrast. It is a style, he says, that has evolved: "If I look back at my work, I can see that it has become more and more contrast-y and more and more harsh, but if you look at Sabine, I look at the prints I did of her at the beginning, it's very soft." "But you were in love then," I respond. "Yeah, but I'm still in love now. You're right, things have happened that maybe have broken some dreams for me, some ideas for me, but I feel the same kind of love in my pictures now."

His use of flash started in Greenland, too, a practical response to the 24-hour darkness of the Arctic winters. But even when the sun emerged, the flash stayed on. "During the winter, you didn't see the sun for one-and-a-half months, and inside their houses it was dark all over, so I decided 'Okay, I want to show how they live as well,' so I started using my flash. Then slowly it built into my work and became part of my aesthetics as well, so in Tokyo, even though it was bright outside, I started using fill-in flash when I was out on the street photographing. You use the



[Previous spread]
Veronika & Natalie,
Road of Bones,
Yakutsk, Russia, 2016.
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natural light, but you add a bit of fill-in flash. That's how I get all the skin tones so shiny."

Shiny skin tones, high contrast, direct fill-in flash and dark black shadows – this is not the recipe for the most flattering set of portraits. Looking at the way he portrays the people living along the Road of Bones, it is hard to see how Jacob feels the same kind of love for his pictures now as he did when photographing Sabine more than a decade before. In Yakutsk, Sakha, Churapcha, Verkhoyansk, Magadan, his subjects gaze at the camera without expression: his is an emotionally absent and blank canvas that calls to mind the work of Diane Arbus and Roger Ballen. Like Arbus (and to a lesser extent Ballen), Jacob has sought out identical twins to photograph in some of his projects. The Road of Bones provided a few – embracing closely head-to-head, wrapped in each other's tightly bound arms. These are a stark contrast to the more distant study of a pair of unsmiling raven-haired sisters from Yakutsk, sitting stiffly in separate, identical chairs. Jacob himself is a twin, and the peculiar emotional connection – and separation – experienced by twins is another powerful force behind the motivation for his photography; this along with the early death of his father, his love for

Sabine, the random journeys to far flung destinations, and long absences from home and family.

I read another quote from Morten Bo: 'Love, lust, caring, doubt and the fear of losing: this is home for Jacob.'

Jacob giggles.

"Is Morten talking through his backside again?"

"No, no, no, no. I mean, maybe he's telling the truth. He's closer to the truth than I am – than I even know myself. He will say that at least."

"How long have you known each other?"

"Since 1998. I was a student at his school, Fatamorgana, for one year. He's a very strong character and often I need a long time away from him, but he keeps coming back."

"Well, you do that when you go travelling. You're getting away from Morten then?"

"What did he say again?"

"He said: 'Love, lust, caring, doubt and the fear of losing: this is home for Jacob.'"

"Yeah, but it is true. When he says 'the fear of losing', it's true because that is almost what my whole life has been about."

"Because you lost your father; you lost Sabine?"

"Yeah, I lost my father when I was a teenager. He died ➤➤➤"



[Previous spread] Russia, Moscow, 2013.

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It's the coldest inhabited city in the world, with temperatures down to -60 degrees centigrade in the winter. How is that possible? How do they live there?

in a car accident, and he was gone from one second to the other. Since then, this fear of losing has hung [around] me like crazy. If someone walks out the door, I'm afraid I will not see that person again. I try to work with that all the time, of course. It's not very comfortable, but it's always there. And I think with my twin brother as well, because in some sense I feel like I've lost him, too... This symbiotic relationship you have with identical twins when you are children, and then when you grow up you have to create kind of your own identity. I never felt like a whole human being because he's not there. That is a challenge. Maybe, I thought that myself? Maybe that's one of the reasons why I want to be so close all the time, because I need someone to be there. I'm not a very individual person. I don't know how to be alone. I can't be alone, so no matter where I go, I always have to have someone with me."

Jacob's journey down the Road of Bones is not quite over. The photography may be finished and the exhibition at this year's *Photo London* already a distant memory, but he is now immersed in making the book, to be published some time in 2018. Jacob reckons he has 50,000 images to edit, but the greatest challenge

will be conveying the vastness of a province fifteen times larger than Great Britain, along with the distances between locations.

"But I have an idea with it," he says. "With *Road of Bones*, I'm thinking about putting in more landscapes and pictures from the road between the villages – not that they have to be chronological, but more the feeling that you are moving from one location or village to the other. It's such a huge country. How do I show this in the pictures as well? You know, sometimes you drive for 15 hours on something that is not a road to get to the next place. For me it is difficult to take interesting pictures of a road, but I'm trying, and we will see in this book how I am able to create the story of these huge distances between the people." But, as Jacob knows all too well, the distance between people is far more than physical.

Keith Wilson



Road of Bones will be published in 2018. A 40 page Road of Bones booklet featuring **26 tritone images** is available now for *25 from **Sobol Studio** www.jacobauesobol.com/shop/road-of-bones

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