

## KIT EASTMAN

*Femme Fatale*, 2016  
Photo-intaglio print,  
9 x 9 in image on 15 x 11 in paper



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## DAVID DOWNIE

### Me Jane

Okay, I'm an unlikely Jane, and maybe that's why it didn't work between us. I still can't believe the first thing I said when I introduced myself was, "Me? Jane." And then you laughed and said, "Tarzan." While we were still shaking hands, you leaned over and kissed me on both cheeks, in front of everyone at that party full of French people, even Professor Lafayette, who turned out to be gay. I thought you might be too, you were so suave and so like a Frenchman.

Actually, you kissed me twice on one cheek, left-right-left, for a total of three. I felt your stubble. You said in that lilting tenor of yours that was the way you greeted people in Paris, whereas in the provinces, where your Huguenot grandmother came from, it was four. Four kisses among strangers? I hated you instantly, because you had a French grandmother and would boast about it in public to a stranger who'd made a fool of herself. My face flushed the same red as my hair.

Since I see the reviewers describe you as an "expatriate Franco-American intellectual," I think you'll understand me when I say hatred is as strong as love. I'm sure I've misquoted someone important, but you get what I mean.

You are possibly not aware that we met exactly twenty-one years and seven months ago, give or take a day. How could you be aware of it or remember? People wrote letters back then and mine were returned undelivered. I wrote three that first fall, after it happened, and while I would never hold you responsible for the two sent to Paris, Texas, I made sure to underline "France" on the third. I watched the woman at the post office in Des Moines and told her not to add "TX." I still have them in my sewing basket.

Do you even remember me? Jane. The girl from Iowa, not Ohio, as you kept saying. Idaho you knew because of the potatoes and because Hemingway blew his head off there. But those other I and O states were all the same to you, a West Coast guy from Northern California. Jane? The girl with red toenail polish and carrot-colored pubic hair? Those were the two things about me that seemed to excite you most.

Brace yourself and blame this on Rich, or the Internet and social media and your website if you prefer—I sure haven't hounded you over the decades. Our daughter will be in Paris the day after tomorrow. She is determined to meet you. Yes, I said, I mean, I wrote, "our daughter."

From your website I can see that you still have a sense of humor and are good at arithmetic—you always looked twice at the check before you paid at Chez something or other, that bistro on the Left Bank, where else, with the butcher paper on the tables, as if that made sense in our day and age, even back then. You always ordered from the bottom of the wine list, the cheap end, like the other stubble-cheeked student guys I could barely see through the smoke. You said your grandmother had taught you that only a fool doesn't add up the bill twice, and you tried to teach me to count in French, "four times twenty nineteen" just to say "ninety-nine." So, I'm sure I needn't instruct you about the gestation period of human beings.

Twenty-one years and seven months ago I was what, twenty-three years old? Of course, I was twenty-three and slim and you said "pretty" though some said "gorgeous," like Ginger in *Gilligan's Island*, though I felt like Mary Ann, the plain Jane. You were twenty-eight, much older and *très* sophisticated. Why I had to meet you the first night of that summer session abroad I don't know. Why I had to meet you at all I can't understand, though it may have been destiny and beyond my control. I still have some skepticism in me, but Father Christianson may be right. The fact is, back then I was on the pill. I did not lie to you about that and believe me I had no intention of wrecking my career. Mistakes happen, not that I regret having Samantha. I don't. What I mean is, I obviously forgot to take a pill, or maybe two in a row, probably because of all that Côtes de whatever you had me drink that night on the Pont des Arts midstream over the Seine. Let me rephrase that sentence, because I wouldn't want you to think I'm a victim-type personality or bereft of humor—Samantha calls me the Punching Bag for reasons that may become apparent. Believe me it's not easy to write this, and I wish Sam was not forcing my hand.

Put it this way, I made a conscious choice. I never sent the private investigators out to find you after those letters came back, because I thought my responsibility was greater than yours, and you were against marriage and families anyway. Besides, there was Rich to think of.

You and I drank a lot of wine despite the heat, so it wasn't just that one night on the bridge, with the barges and tour boats going by on the Seine, the slow water lapping at the riverbanks, and people dancing on the planks,

many of them rotten and unsafe as I recall. I look back and find it hard to believe I stripped to my bra and slip and laughed at myself when you stared at the little butterfly on my unfashionable undies. I was far from a virgin, so I won't pretend otherwise. I could laugh at myself then and hey, I try harder now, though it's not easy when your daughter calls you a coward and a hypocrite. Where I grew up, everyone drank milk and coffee, not necessarily together of course, and though I did spend four years in New York City before that summer session, I never got used to wine.

Just so you know, I finished my architecture degree at Columbia, but because of Samantha it took me an extra two years. I never got the PhD, not that you should care, since as I remember, you got one and then tore it up. After I'd been working in an architect's office for three years—basically as a glorified draftsman—my husband, I should say my ex-husband nowadays, got offered a job in Omaha. That's in Nebraska, in case you've forgotten your US geography.

Rich took the job because it was a smart move for a marine engineer, believe it or not. We moved with Samantha to Omaha and had Ken a couple of years later. I've been in the legal department at Mutual of Omaha ever since. Remember *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*? I'll bet you watched it too, and *Gilligan's Island*.

No, I'm not a lawyer—I never had time to finish graduate work in architecture, let alone go to law school. I'm a paralegal, but they pay me well, because I can handle the claims involving structural collapse, usually of grain elevators and silos but sometimes of real buildings too. That's why I spent so much time in New York for the company, when the marriage fell apart, and maybe that's when Samantha slipped from my grasp, I mean she slipped out of my life, meaning she went from teenager to grown-up and decided it was time to rebel against momma. After the high-speed craziness of Manhattan, I was glad to get back to the safety of Omaha and grain elevators, believe me.

There's a nice hoppy scent to the air around here, once you get away from downtown and the cars and trucks. And yes, since you asked, there are skyscrapers, about as good as the ones in that ridiculous suburb of Paris called La Défense. And we also have a river. You may have heard of it. The Missouri? It's bigger than the Seine, and the whimsical, wiggly pedestrian bridge over it is actually a lot

more interesting from the architectural standpoint than the Pont des Arts. But you're right, it's not romantic, it has no ironwork arches and rickety planks and benches with views of medieval towers and the Louvre and its spotlight sculptures. And I have never fallen in love on it and drunk wine and dreamed of a lifetime with a self-adoring, hyperintelligent louse.

But I am straying. With what Rich contributed in alimony and child support over the years, and the house, I've done all right. He got Ken, by the way. Sam stayed with me until she moved out six months ago.

I'm telling you this, I mean I'm writing you this, because I don't want you to think I'm after your money. I don't need your money and I don't want it, and furthermore I don't believe you have any, or you'd do something about your teeth, as seen on your website, and in that program that aired on Franco-German TV, the station called ARTE. Boy, talk about pretentious.

What happens between you and Sam is up to you. I don't know what French law is like. I emailed the head of our legal department in Paris—yes, a little company here in Nebraska has offices in Paris—and he said it was complicated. As I recall, everything is complicated over there, from the counting and the plumbing on up. Even the cars have yellow headlights or at least the older ones did twenty-one years ago. Are there still those urinals on the sidewalks under the trees, with the domed green newsstands, and do Parisians bathe now?

Anyway, Rich was the nice, boring guy I told you about when we met. I didn't think it appropriate that you and I should have sex, out of respect for him. Well, that idea clearly didn't resist temptation for more than a few hours, any more than I could resist eating chocolates from those stores that looked like jewelry shops. Rich and I dated in New York, before I went on the summer abroad program. His last name is Hanley, from Philadelphia. I mention it because that's Samantha's last name, and mine too, and it might come in handy to know, in case she needs your help or something. I sincerely hope she doesn't try to change her name to yours, now that she knows the truth. Rich told her, not me, by the way, I mean I did not tell her about you, Rich did. Nice present, huh? "Happy twenty-first birthday, Sam, you're not my daughter after all." I'm not sure how he found out, but probably it was from Jeanie, my roommate

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at Columbia. She knew the truth. That I loved you and not Rich, I mean.

Though I'm delighted you're her biological father, I just can't see her as Samantha Pomquist. I realize you didn't choose your last name, but you could have at least done something about the "J. Randall." Heaven forbid anyone call you John or Randy, though you certainly were randy, and I guess I was, too, or I would not have had to drink cranberry juice for a month and walk bowlegged. I remember thinking how stuck up you were, because you wanted to be J. Randall or JR and that was before the TV show. You did like being Tarzan when we were alone, though. That was why I knew you weren't who you pretended to be, and could be loved, though not forever, and not as a father.

It took Samantha a couple of seconds to find you, by the way, and she downloaded everything worth reading. Sam was weaned on a mouse though she now uses a touchpad and smartphone. She just Googled and typed in "J. Randall Pomquist Paris" and got about 8,000,000 hits in 0.67 seconds. Actually, hold on just a minute, I'm getting

*Enigmatic smiles were your specialty. You must have studied your expressions in the mirror every morning, and I don't mean while you were smoking and shaving that scratchy blue stubble off your cheeks ...*

exactly 3,214 hits in 0.48 seconds, so you see, she's not always right. There you are on the lower part of my screen, with your neat, close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard, your gray teeth, and, wait, are those the same wire-rimmed glasses? Gosh. I guess they were expensive and high quality. That's incredible you have the same glasses. Parenthetically, your website is on screen three—it's not in the top twenty Google hits when I search. You might want to hire some SEO people. I know a couple in Madras—the real Madras, in India. We had snail-mail problems with them too, even though Madras, Oregon, is nowhere near Paris, Texas, and the letters were never returned stamped with French words meaning “unknown at this address.”

Why you opted to call your site [www.jrandallpomquist.com](http://www.jrandallpomquist.com) I don't know and it's none of my business. Maybe people wanting to hire you know to look up your name, or somehow associate French movies with “Pomquist,” not that I know many people interested in French movies here in Omaha, or anywhere else for that matter. The Nouvelle Vague was a long time ago.

You've done pretty well for yourself, at least in terms of peer recognition. You may not be making those art films

or “*films d'auteur*” you used to get excited about. Doing documentaries on farm issues, and those TV commercials, isn't bad, is it? I'm trying to be charitable. Truth be told, I can't help wondering how you square the advertising campaigns with the spiel you give about “progressive social policy” and global warming and all that other fine stuff in those interviews? The *New York Times* called you a “lock-step intellectual,” it's in an article on screen four, whatever “lockstep intellectual” means. That petition you signed—it's on screen two and if I were you I'd do something to get your name off it. Why do you bother fussing with our little problems of democracy, if I may ask? I sure wouldn't dream of telling the French what to do. If they want to say “four times twenty nineteen” instead of “ninety-nine” and elect an oligarch mafioso, that's fine by me.

I can imagine you smiling enigmatically. Enigmatic smiles were your specialty. You must have studied your expressions in the mirror every morning, and I don't mean while you were smoking and shaving that scratchy blue stubble off your cheeks, your perfectly symmetrical cheeks. A “smirk” is what I would call your Mona Lisa smile. Why you were blessed with such good looks, and an ability with languages, and in bed, I don't know, given that you are, or were, such a heel. I've sworn off blasphemy, and I'm not kidding. It's easier than giving up milkshakes or fries. I'm joking of course, kind of, but you wouldn't get it, and you probably don't know what a modified Atkins is. Diets never worked for me anyway.

A lot of things have changed since you left the country. Judging by the bio sketch on your site, I suspect you might be aware of some of what's going on. You probably travel back to see your family in New York, or for work. I notice you made a documentary a couple of years ago called *Tracking the Elusive GM Soybean*. The French title definitely sounds better. Just think, you were nearby and didn't know how close you came to running into me under a grain elevator or in the dark corners of a silo. Corn is what we're really good at here in Nebraska, not soybeans, if you must know. Amazingly you and I probably agree about genetic manipulation, but for different reasons. I'll bet you're out of touch with your native country in other ways, nonetheless, and just as cynical as ever. You never called it cynicism. You called it “realism” and “irreverence.” Whatever. I am trying to smile, but I refuse to use

## KIT EASTMAN

*Paris in Love, 2014*  
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COURTESY THE ARTIST

*Unlike you, or the  
you I knew, I am not  
embarrassed by my  
background.... You're  
the castaway. I hope  
you're a happy one.*

ALL CAPS or those silly smile marks and other emoticons or shortcut buttons.

I've attached Sam's email with her flight information and cell number. There's also a JPEG of her from about six months ago. It would be nice if you could pick her up. I think the airport is Charles de Gaulle, which is where I flew in. I suspect it has changed since then and gotten even more confusing for young foreigners. Do those "people movers" still work? The unsupported spans in Terminal A seemed way too long, but I'm not an engineer and didn't even build the home I live in. I just never "got" French contemporary design. Remember that huge textbook we used? Mine is now a doorstep.

I suggested Sam make a sign with "Pomquist" written on it, but she refused and said if you weren't at the airport she would go to your office during her stay. Sam is a spirited young woman, as you'll see. I think you'll recognize her easily enough. For one thing she looks an awful lot like you and me. She's nearly six feet tall and has my red hair, which is still red and not gray yet. Otherwise she has your narrow long nose and small ears and even your big green eyes, luckily without the black single eyebrow on top, like Milton the Monster, which is what I called you sometimes when I was feeling in an unfriendly mood. She wears red-rimmed designer glasses when her eyes are too tired for the mauve contacts. I think you wore glasses when you drove your little motor scooter, didn't you? That may have been an affectation, but it's probably a necessity now.

I don't want you to think I approve of tattoos and body piercing. She did that on her own, I mean she had it done while I was gone, in New York, and now it's too late. She says it's a real diamond and I don't know how she can stand to chew.

You'll be wondering why I'm so sure Sam is your child. Beyond the fact that women just know such things, and we really do, I had genetic testing done the year Sam turned eighteen, meaning three years ago, to put my mind at ease. I had a feeling Rich wasn't her father and that he'd find out sooner or later and blab. There was an outside chance he might have been, I mean, he and I did know each other in that way before I left New York for Paris, and we picked up again when I got back, once I got over the urinary infection. "Honeymooners' curse" is what the doctor called it, as if you and I had been married, as if you believed in something that "bourgeois," which is a word I've never actually heard anyone else use except when joking. Not that I approve any longer of sex outside marriage, nor do I think you know what you're talking about in that other petition you signed, on screen two if you do a Google search on yourself. Rich is shorter than I am and blond with blue eyes. He's also not exactly an alpha male. He refuses to drive my red Cherokee Sport for instance, and he stays slim whatever he eats. Sam could not be his daughter. Besides, like I say, I knew it was you. Rich says that's why I kept her.

What I did was, I took that hairbrush of mine, and that pair of boxer-trunks you left behind, and I had samples analyzed. Do not shake your head. First of all, it was you who left the underpants at that dingy little walk-up. Remember—on Rue de Rivoli, down at the unfashionable eastern end? No way was I going to wash them for you. I thought you'd at least have the decency to come back and pick up your clothes before I left. This was years before Monica Lewinsky, so when that mess came along I understood her behavior in relation to Bill's semen on her dress, and that's another reason I never bought that "vast right-wing conspiracy" stuff Hillary Clinton came up with.

What I'm saying is, when a woman loves a man desperately and hates him too, maybe because she sees a life with him and he doesn't, she might be inclined to do something like keep his dirty underpants or a dirty dress. So, yes, I did save your boxers. I took them back to New York, deluding myself into thinking you'd show up one day. I kept them in

my sewing basket, where Rich would never find them, and if he did, he'd think they were a rag, which they were, because I had cut them into strips. I used the same hairbrush for twenty years. I still use it today on Fred, my sheepdog. Rich never has so much as touched that brush and he's blond, like I say, like Fred, so it's not contamination from him. It didn't take long to scrape down to the bottom of the brush between the bristles and find a couple of black hairs. Your hair. There's no question you're the father, and there never was in my mind, even though I convinced myself otherwise, for the sake of Rich and Sam and Ken.

Just so you know, she is not named for Samantha in *Bewitched*. Rich's sister is named Samantha, and whether she's named for *Bewitched* as my roommate was, I don't know. Ken was my Uncle Ken's name, so it has nothing to do with the doll, which was invented when Uncle Ken was already born. "John" was never an option for Ken nor "Randall" and certainly not "Tarzan." Speaking of which, I'm proud to say I enjoyed *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* when I was growing up, though I can't remember the host's name, the elegant man with the mustache and dark suits. I guess I could find it on Google. I did watch *Bewitched*, and I can still sing the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*, which was not some dumbed-down show but very smart, and, as everyone now knows, a precursor to the survival reality shows.

Unlike you, or the you I knew, I am not embarrassed by my background, and I'm sincere when I say I identify with Mary Ann, I mean the original Mary Ann, not the "real" one, meaning the one pretending to be the fictional one in that old TV series. You're the castaway. I hope you're a happy one.

Don't worry, Samantha is not planning to stay with you. You probably live in some loft with no guest room, whereas I have two—both nonsmoking. She's meeting a couple of friends from Los Angeles and plans to party hard. That's where Sam lives by the way. LA. (You'll notice I refuse to use "BTW" and "FYI" and you'll be pleasantly surprised that your daughter is literate, if not exactly a good Christian, but that wouldn't bother you, unless there's been some change in your nihilistic outlook.)

To be precise, Sam lives in Manhattan Beach, which is not Los Angeles as she keeps telling me. So, if I'm reminding you of your callous misplacement of Iowa, I think in

fairness I should at least attempt to be accurate. Apparently, the house she shares with fellow art students is one block back from the beach and does not have much of a view, but she doesn't care because she's hardly there. While I'm not familiar with Manhattan Beach and its surfers, I'm guessing you are, probably for negative reasons. San Francisco is somewhat north of there, and you always did say you were a city boy and hated nature and especially surfers. You said something unpleasant about Southern California, where I assumed at first you were from. Everyone at Columbia I met back then was from somewhere near Los Angeles. You said SoCal was "ranch style" through and through—one story, two at most, with brains to match, whereas New York, San Francisco, and Paris were multistory. I'm sure it was something cavalier like that, because I remember thinking that kind of architectural metaphor was facile and typical of you, when you were playing at being tough-minded, and it reminded me of what you said about Ronald Reagan's dyed hair. I liked *General Electric Theater* for your information, even though it was reruns by then, and I even liked *Bedtime for Bonzo* and won't deny it.

The fact that I have a ranch-style home in Omaha may come as no surprise to you, since the suburb where I grew up in Iowa is only five hours away from here, and I'm sure my intellectual credentials fall short by Paris standards. But it is ironic that your brainy, arty daughter has wound up in a one-story beach house, or near-beach house, and that she voted for a Republican representative because he's pro-choice, without realizing that if I had "chosen" the other way, she wouldn't be around, and I would have my career, and I might even have flown back to Paris and stuffed your dirty underpants down your handsome throat or convinced you to marry me and come home. We could have lived in New York and been architects together.

That's one reason I tell people the French do not understand how complex our American society is. You told me your grandmother didn't dislike the Germans during the war and occupation, but that her brother, your great-uncle, whose name escapes me, was a Resistance fighter. It's the same kind of thing over here now, though we're not turning people in yet or anything.

For a long time, I wondered when Sam had been conceived. I blush to think of what you and I got up to, but let's not be coy. Everyone did it back then, especially in

New York and Paris, and I sincerely hope they've seen the error of their ways by now but I doubt it. You probably still smoke, and you may be living with some chain-smoking, glamorous intellectual French woman twenty years your junior or maybe twenty years your senior, which is also fashionable I hear, a woman who is incapable of putting on weight. I'm glad I quit smoking even if I did plump up into a punching bag, and I wish Sam had never started smoking or reading Nietzsche. Genes are amazing things.

You must be curious about when and where. I'm sure when it was, and where. Of all those sticky afternoons in my nasty little narrow-walled oven of a maid's room with peeling paint and a slanting tin roof, or the nights at that even narrower place you rented over a bookstore, where I heard the toilets flush overhead all night, I'm certain it wasn't there and it wasn't then. It was the night after the Pont des Arts, the night I unstitched the butterfly from my underwear, and stabbed my thumb with the needle doing it.

We'd gone to the Louvre, but it was too late and the museum was closed. You said you wanted to show me I.M. Pei's pyramid. You claimed one day someone would come along and blow it up and return the Louvre to its original state, whatever that was. I thought the pyramid a successful conversion, and I told you so, but if the company sends me over now to check damages after a blast, in case you arrange one, we can discuss the aesthetics in person.

I expect you knew the park gates would be open at night, or maybe they're always open at night in summer, since the sun goes down so late in Paris. People were walking in the dusk under the trees, those long rows of trees aligned on the diagonal, with beds full of red and yellow and purple flowering shrubs that smelled so sweet. I think the trees were sycamores, but they might have been something else, horse chestnuts or lindens, maybe, hung with sweet blossoms. There was a pond full of mosquitoes that bit my bare legs, and a bench, a mossy stone bench that you straddled so you could look back at the pyramid and hold forth on how crass and stupid and American it was even though the designer was born Chinese. I straddled the bench facing you, and you stopped midsentence and leaned forward and brushed a long red bang off my pale forehead. And we kissed. Our lips brushed softly. Our tongues touched with a sparkling electric current. And

then somehow, I was in your lap and the tip of my nose met your ear lobe when you lifted my skirt. You must have used the technique before, on other girls, because you were so smooth I didn't know you'd done it, and it wouldn't have mattered if I'd known, because it was heaven on earth and that's not blasphemy. People walked by and no one seemed to care, like it was the most normal thing ever for a couple to make love in public, and when I thought you'd stop, you didn't, and I didn't. I can still feel how it felt, and remember the sunset through the leaves, and the lights in the cafés behind, and the laughter, and the feeling that I would never do this again, ever.

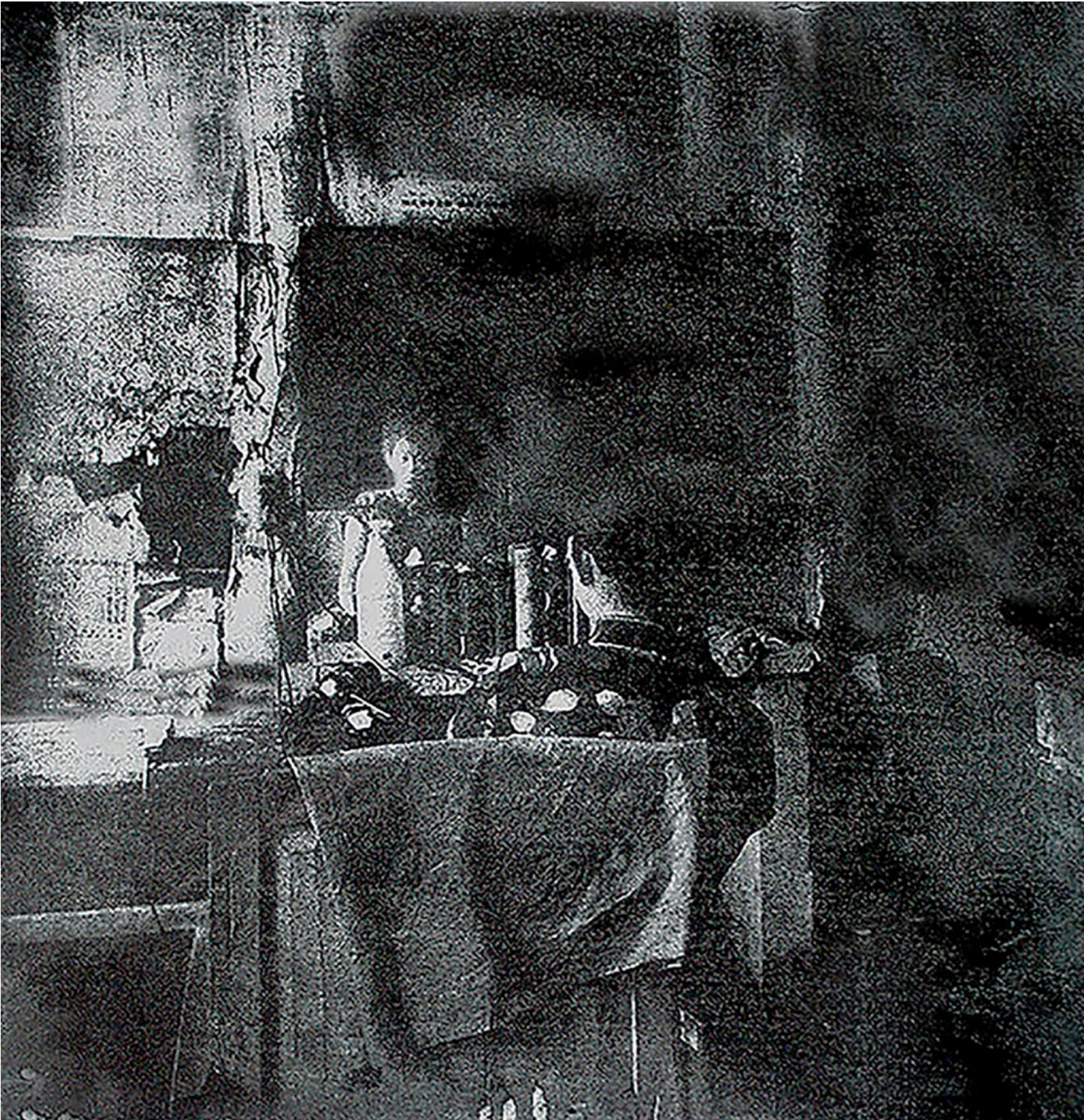
And the result is Samantha. For twenty-one years I have looked at your face in hers. Now you can look at mine again, at least once.

I will send you by Priority Mail the results from the lab tests, plus several strips from your underwear, if you wish, but the others I think I should keep. I do know a lot about corn by the way, in case you want to make another documentary, and wouldn't bother you in the guest room. If you do decide to come over, you'll have to smoke outside.

A native San Franciscan, **David Downie** moved to Paris in the mid-1980s, where he lives with his wife, photographer Alison Harris. His travel, food and arts features have been published worldwide. Downie is the author of *The Gardener of Eden* (to be published in January, 2019), two previous novels, and over a dozen nonfiction history, travel and food books, including the highly acclaimed *Paris, Paris, A Passion for Paris, Paris to the Pyrenees*, and *A Taste of Paris*.

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