

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY



BIG APPLE DREAMS: BILL HAYES ON NEW YORK AND HIS NEW
BOOK

By Anushree Majumdar, January 7, 2018



When his partner of 16 years suddenly died in his sleep, Bill Hayes felt as though he was at sea — grief washed over him in waves big and small, and San Francisco, his home for 25 years, suddenly became the place he needed to escape from. New York, eternally running on ambition, hope and adrenaline, mirrored his insomniac self — when night came, neither he nor the city retired to rest. In the opening chapter of his memoir, *Insomniac City: New York, Oliver, and Me*, Hayes writes about sitting at his kitchen window, and watching the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, standing tall over Manhattan: “Such a beautiful pair, so impeccably dressed, he in his boxy suit, every night a different hue, and she, an arm’s length away, in her filigreed skirt the colour of the moon”.

“You could say that I wrote about New York in a way that is anthropomorphised, describing those two buildings like an old married couple, who watched over me. The city took me in and raised me at a time when, suddenly, at age 48, I had to start my life over,” says Hayes, a few weeks ago, on his first visit to India. There’s a literary festival to return to, but for now, there is time to meet the faces that we meet as we stroll down the Bandstand promenade in Bandra.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

Hayes's partner, author and neurologist Oliver Sacks, passed away in 2015, and the 56-year-old writer and photographer's memoir was published last year to acclaim. In the wake of Sacks' death, Hayes turned to the stack of journals he kept of his life in the Big Apple, and wrote *Insomniac City*, a letter to the city, and the love of a lifetime. The second year has been more difficult, he says. "There's more of a sense of complete absence, underscored a little bit by the fact that I find myself talking about Oliver all the time. Also, I'm one of three co-editors of his posthumous work, so he's much more in my mind; and that's a wonderful place to be, but it also reminds me of what an amazing person I've lost," says Hayes, who documented Sacks's final days in a section of his memoir titled *How New York Breaks Your Heart*. Next month, a photobook with the same title will be published by Bloomsbury — a continuation of Hayes's documented relationship with the city.

Over the past century, New York's street photographers such as Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Paul Strand, Vivian Maier, Bill Cunningham, among others, have captured what Henri Cartier-Bresson described as "the decisive moment" in the making of a photograph; thereby differentiating between the actions of looking, seeing and watching in a way like no other artform. "I think looking has a kind of analytical quality to it. Seeing is much more open, to what is actually being imprinted on your retina, and on to your mind. It doesn't come with analysis or judgement. Watching has a feeling of bringing your conscious thoughts to an image or whatever you are seeing. I try with my photographs to capture what I see, but inevitably, what I see has a perspective of beauty or love or sadness," says Hayes, who cites Diane Arbus as an influence on his work as a street photographer.

Portraits, in black-and-white and in colour, form the bulk of the collection — solo New Yorkers and those in love; workers and leisure-seekers; street corners, park benches, and fire escapes find a place in the pages of the upcoming book. "I feel like it's a time capsule of a period in my life, and my life in New York, that was changing...The biggest change has to be technology — people glued to their cellphones or with their headphones on — you used to be able to meet the eyes of the people you meet on the street, and now it's a little hard to get their attention," says Hayes.

This does not appear to be an issue in his street photographs of people in Mumbai and in parts of Kerala, where he holidayed for a week. The latest entries on his Instagram account are of men in bright shirts, baristas in Bandra, fair-goers in Alleppey, a tailor in Mararikaluma. Hayes returned to New York in time for the new year. Has the city broken his heart recently? "When I moved in, I had a sliver of a view of the Hudson from my apartment, and I would be able to see the sunset on the river. It wasn't a grand view, but it was my view. I saw that buildings were being constructed and they went higher and higher, and soon, my view disappeared. Maybe another building will get demolished and I'll be able to see the Hudson again. I'm optimistic, but I also have to live with that reality."