



El. Ret  
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**The Retypist**

**Tim Youd Travels the World,  
Turning Classic Novels into Works of Performance Art**

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by **Mary Wisniewski**  
photos by **Sarah Elizabeth Larson**

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This spring, Los Angeles artist Tim Youd was on an odd historical quest—what kind of typewriters did Nelson Algren use to write “Never Come Morning” and “The Man with the Golden Arm?”

Studying photographs of Algren with the typewriters he used in the 1940s, Youd settled on an Underwood Standard for “Never Come Morning” and a Remington Rand Model 17 for “Golden Arm.”

Youd needed to get the right typewriters for his “100 Novels Project.” For the last ten years, he has been on a quest to retype one-hundred English-language novels from the last century, when typewriters were regularly used. He retypes each novel on the same make and model of the machine used by the author, in public, in a location with significance to the book. The project has taken him all over the United States and Europe—a library in Dresden, Germany for Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse-Five;” a decommissioned Sing Sing Prison guardhouse for John Cheever’s “Falconer;” the sidewalk in front of Marie’s Crisis Café in New York City for Patricia Highsmith’s “The Talented Mr. Ripley,” etc.

Youd retypes each book on one sheet of paper with one backing sheet, using no spaces between the words. He re-feeds the two sheets into the typewriter, over and over. They

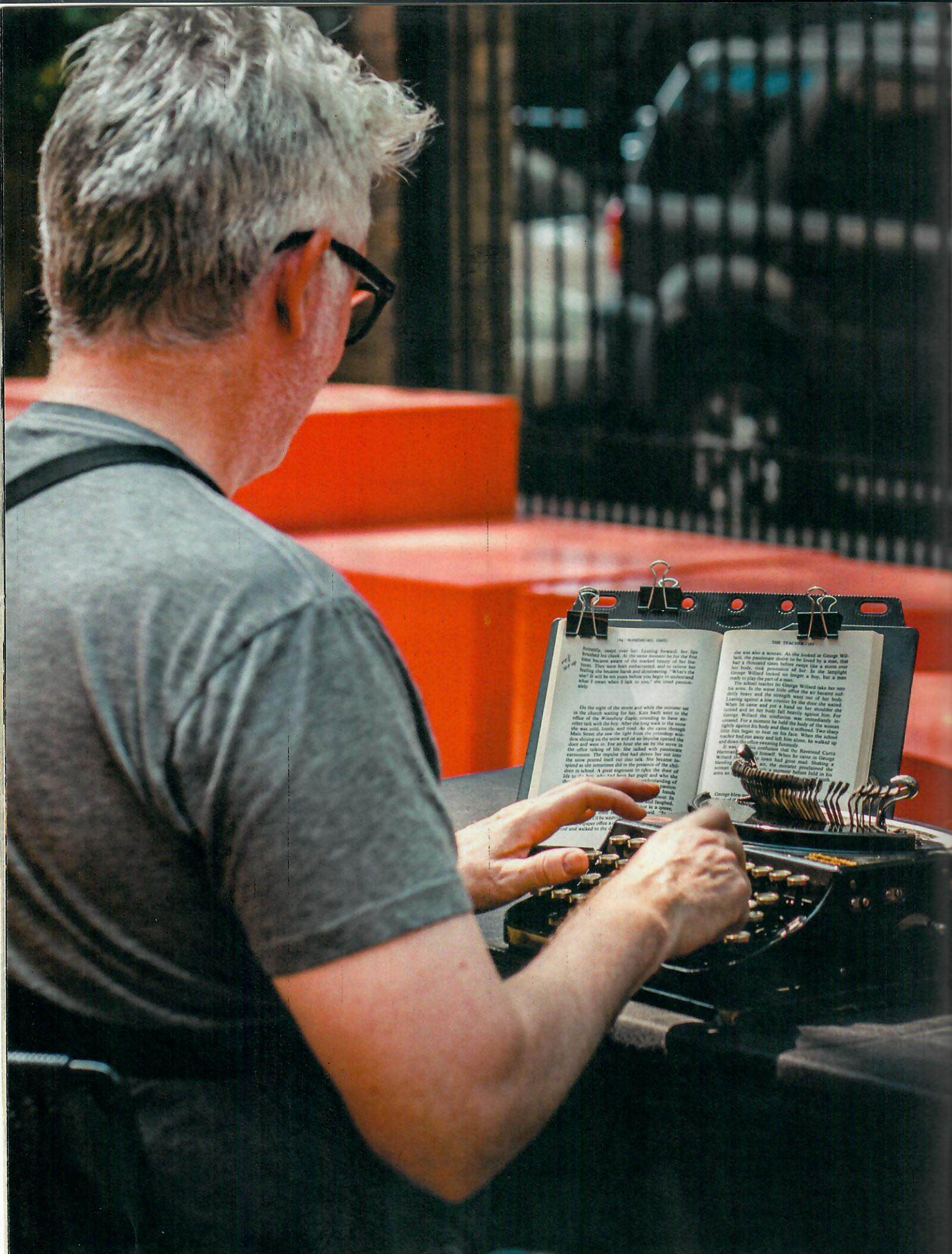
become tattered and saturated with ink. Then he places each page on white backgrounds, making a framed diptych. There’s the book, compressed, with the experience of deep reading, atmosphere and action crushed into a physical relic.

“It’s the thing we’re most familiar with, when we look at a book,” Youd explains. “It’s the two pages, the rectangle of black in a rectangle of white, so while you’re looking at my diptych you’re also looking at the book.”

Last year, he was in Chicago to retype “Winesburg, Ohio” by Sherwood Anderson at the Arts Club of Chicago, and “The Jungle” by Upton Sinclair, typed under the Union Stock Yard Gate at Exchange and Peoria. This summer, he’ll be at Phyllis’ Musical Inn on Division Street in West Town—a vintage bar on the stretch of “Polish Broadway” where Algren used to drink and study characters. Youd will type “The Man with the Golden Arm” primarily at the Newberry Library, which has some of Algren’s papers. He’ll also spend some time at the Arts Club.

Youd always reads the books before he types them, and he’s both looking forward to retyping “Never Come Morning” and dreading it. The 1942 novel about a Polish boxer named Bruno Bicek portrays scenes of rape and other brutality, and so rattled local Polish-American leaders that some wanted it banned from Chicago libraries.

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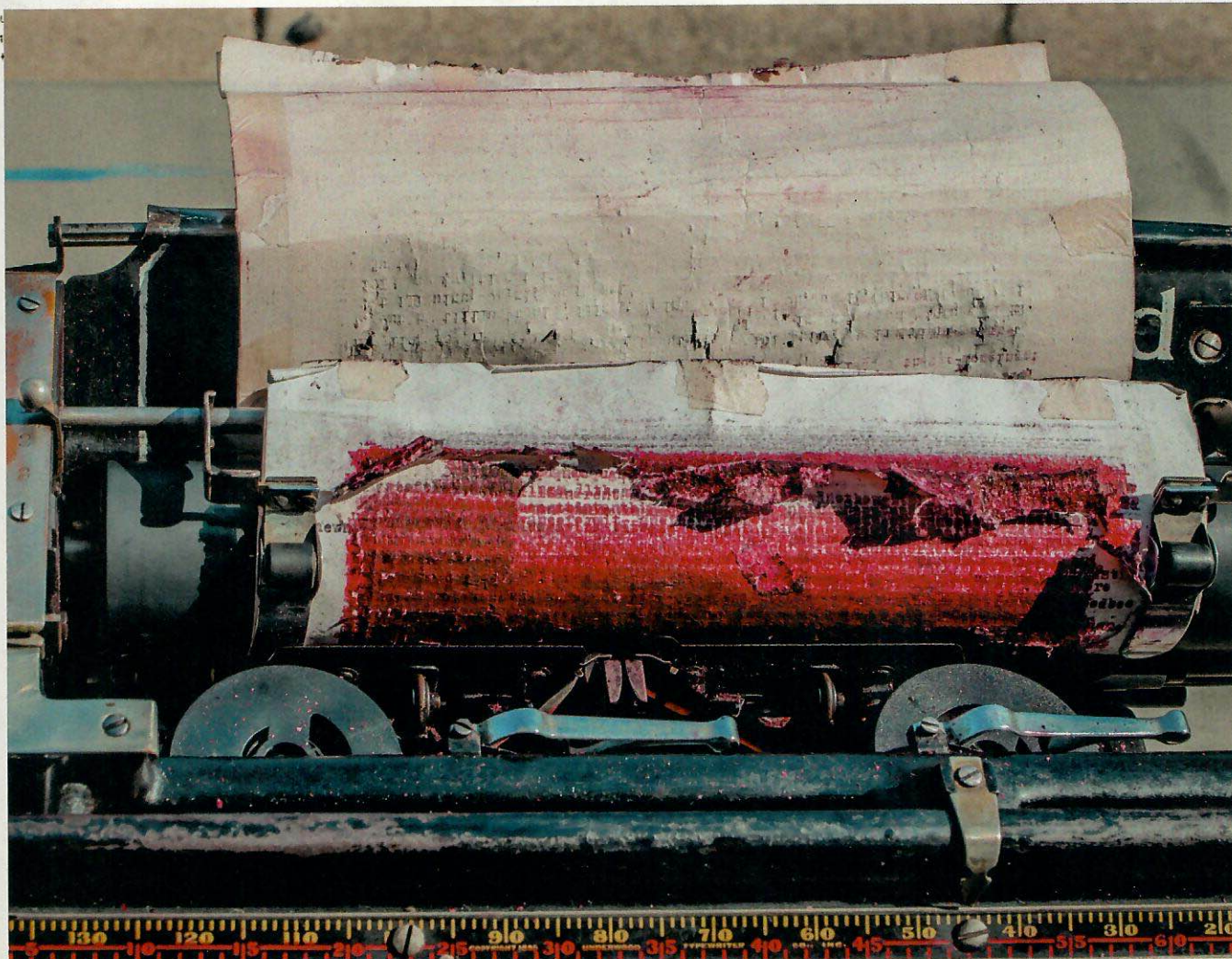
...suddenly, swept over her. Looking forward, her lips  
 trembled as she thought. At the same moment her face  
 turned ashen. She was aware of the marked beauty of her fea-  
 tures. They were both enhanced and in motion. Her  
 feeling she became harsh and disconcerting. "What's the  
 use? It will be ten years before you begin to understand  
 what I mean when I talk to you," she said passion-  
 ately.

On the night of the storm and while the minister sat  
 in the church waiting for her, Kate Kelly went to the  
 office of the Washington Eagle, intending to have an-  
 other talk with the boy. After the long wait in the room  
 she was told, loudly and rudely. As she came through  
 Main Street she saw the light from the printing work-  
 shop shining on the snow and on an invisible opened the  
 door and went on. Five or ten feet she saw by the snow in  
 the office taking of life. She talked with passionate  
 expression. The reporter that had driven her out into  
 the snow poured itself out into talk. She became in-  
 sistent as she sometimes did in the presence of the child-  
 ren in school. A great argument to open the door of  
 life to the boy who had been her pupil and who she  
 understood of  
 hands  
 and  
 and walked to the

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...she was also a woman. As she looked at George Wil-  
 liam, the passionate desire to be loved by a man, that  
 had a thousand times before swept into a storm over  
 her head, took possession of her. In the lamplight  
 George Wilford looked no longer a boy, but a man  
 ready to play the part of a man.

The school teacher let George Wilford take her into  
 his arms. In the warm little office the air became sud-  
 denly heavy and the strength went out of her body.  
 Leaving against a low counter by the door she wanted  
 when he came and put a hand on her shoulder she  
 turned and let her body fall heavily against him. For  
 a moment he held the body of the woman  
 George Wilford's condition was immediately in-  
 stantly against his body and there it suffered. Two sharp  
 teeth bit into his face. When the school  
 and down the office entrance. Suddenly  
 it was a confusion that the Reverend Curtis  
 Harwood of himself. When he came to George  
 Wilford he found him gone mad. Shaking a  
 warning, with the minister proclaimed the  
 same day  
 George-More



"It's probably the most difficult read I've ever had—the only thing that kind of compares with it is 'American Psycho,'" Youd says. "The thing about 'Never Come Morning' is that it's a love story, and it's very hard to reconcile that with everything that goes on, what animals we turn into... It's unvarnished, unromantic. It's almost too real."

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, Youd had a physical connection with books from an early age—as a baby he was caught tearing the pages out of volumes in the library of his father, a child psychologist. In high school, Youd read Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" and it knocked him out of his suburban innocence.

"There's something about it that's so shocking. Beyond the grisly details, it's a first initiation into the knowledge that everything is rotten in our society and no one is up to any good, anywhere." Youd recalls that "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey had a similar effect on him.

After college and a couple of years at a New York City investment bank, Youd headed to Los Angeles to make movies, but found his personality ill-suited to such a high-conflict business.

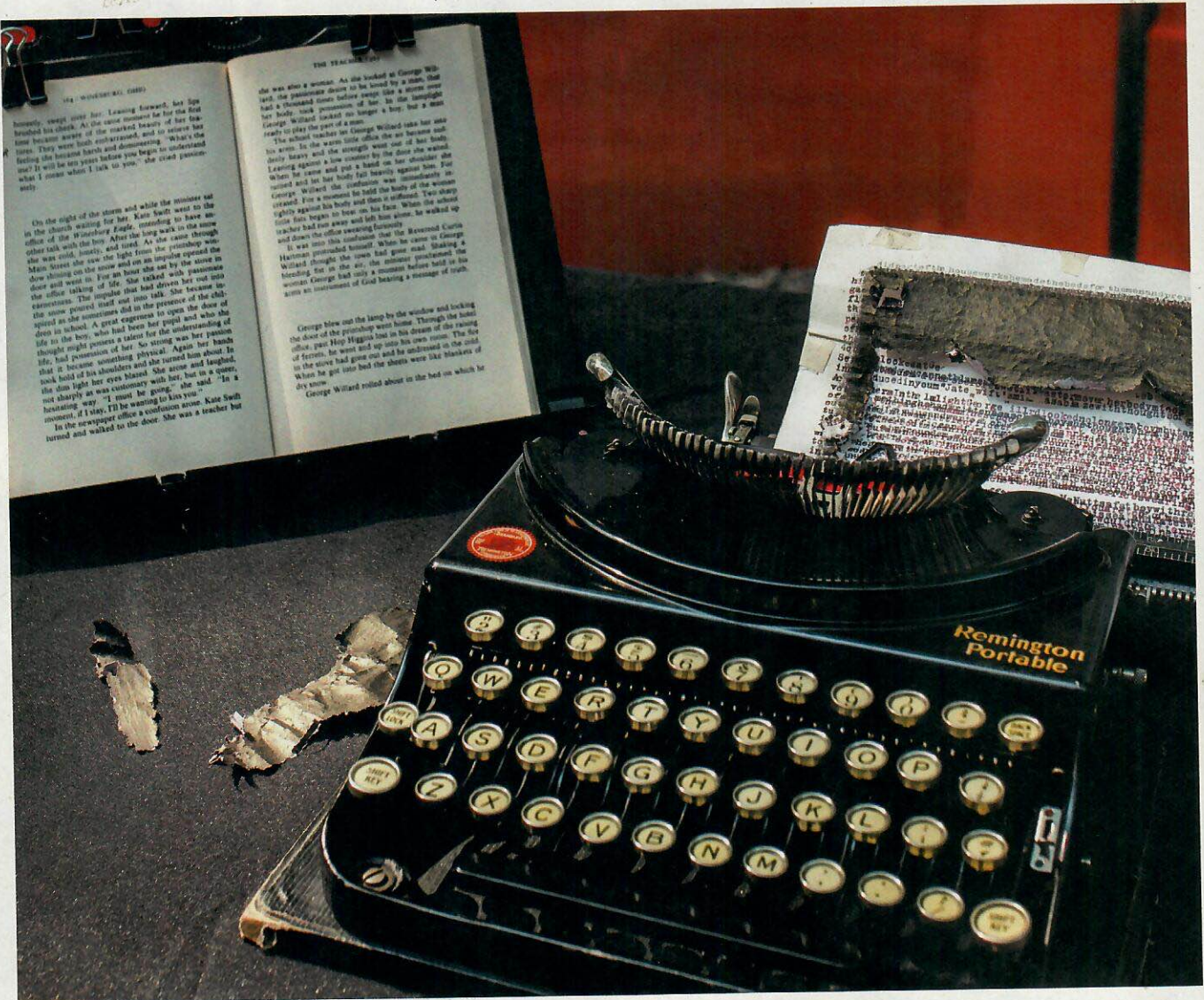
"I can get mad, but I don't stay mad," he says. "I didn't want to put myself in a confrontational situation every day when I wake up." His mother had been an amateur artist, and Youd, who had always liked doing art, took a drawing class and started to feel better. Married with five kids, six rescued dogs, two rescued cats and a rescued lizard, Youd has figured out how to make a living as an artist. "It took a lot of good luck and support from friends and family—I've managed to get through it," he says.

The typing project got its start when Youd was sitting in his studio and reading a book. He started contemplating the book as a physical thing.

"I recognized that there's a rectangle of black text inside a rectangle of white page and the same thing next to it," Youd says. "I closed the book and

**LEFT:**  
Typing  
Sherwood  
Anderson's  
Winesburg, Ohio:  
Arts Club  
of Chicago,  
September 2021

**ABOVE:**  
Typing Upton  
Sinclair's *The  
Jungle*: Union  
Stock Yard Gate  
at Exchange and  
Peoria, Chicago,  
September 2021



**ABOVE:**  
Typing  
Sherwood  
Anderson's  
*Winesburg, Ohio*:  
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**RIGHT:**  
Typing Upton  
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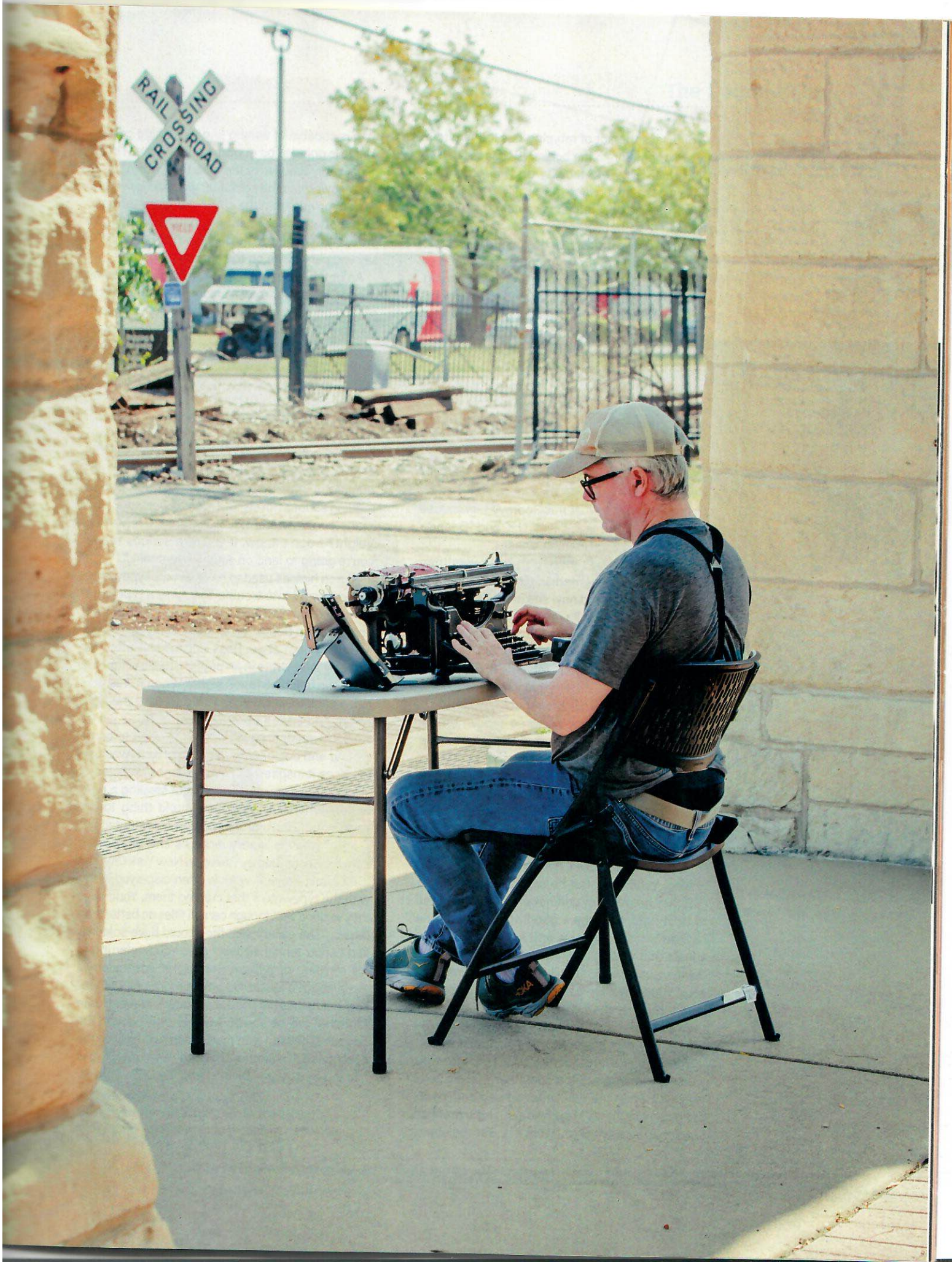
crushed it between my hands and said to myself, 'What would it feel like if I put all the words on one page, physically, the weight of the text and the texture?' That led to the idea of using the typewriter "to be the tool to echo the nature of the book." Youd recalls that Hunter S. Thompson had typed out Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" as a way to study how a novel works. With all this in mind, Youd typed out Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" on an IBM Selectric in his studio, as an experiment.

This led to more retyping, and by the fourth or fifth book, Youd thought it could be a performance, connected to the idea of a literary pilgrimage. He remembered a visit he and his wife had paid to Ernest Hemingway's house in Key West, Florida, with its host of polydactyl cats descended from

Hemingway's own pets. He wondered how many of the tour bus visitors, taking pictures, had actually read much Hemingway.

"They buy a mug and go have a beer or something," Youd says. "It was on my mind that it's an attenuated notion—the literary pilgrimage—if you're not investing yourself in the work itself. That helped me understand that what I was doing could be a performance."

The performance has its challenges—sometimes the retyping is done outside, open to varying weather. If the typewriter is old, the platen or roller can be as hard as a rock, so the paper will start to pick up holes quickly. There is also more wear if the book is long. "I have to patch them and tape them to hold them together enough to enable me to stuff whatever's left back into the typewriter," he says.



Youd says the act of retyping has led him to a closer connection to the books. "Because I'm a visual artist, I like the tactility and the action. It brings me that much more physically in touch with the words. The best reader is somebody that's really excited by the words."

"I couldn't have articulated this before I first started, but it started to dawn on me about fifteen or twenty novels into it that what I really was doing was to try to be a good reader, and to be a good reader every time I sat down at the typewriter," Youd says. "It's a requirement of good reading, to be reading something a second time."

Asked if he has a favorite book, Youd responds that the novel he's typing at the moment is usually what he's most absorbed in—he spent April retyping the novels of Willa Cather in Nebraska, and got so into Cather he read her short stories at night. Some novels have stood out for him as revelations. He was particularly moved by Virginia Woolf—he retyped "To the Lighthouse" on an Underwood Portable at the Godrevy Lighthouse and Penwith Gallery in St. Ives, U.K. and "Orlando" at Monk's House in Rodmell, Sussex.

"Virginia Woolf has more good answers than anyone else I've ever read, in terms of range and style and insights, and how she moves so smoothly from difficult to really readable. There's something about her that's just untouchable." And while he hadn't appreciated Walter Percy's "The Moviegoer" when he first read it, retyping it, on a Smith Corona Sterling at the Prytania Theatre in New Orleans, was "emotionally wrenching."

Youd has about one hundred typewriters at home, and has made oversized typewriter sculptures. He also has created paintings using typewriter ribbons, acquired from repair shops.

After retyping all these great novels, Youd was inspired to write a novel of his own. He has a first draft. It's hard to find the energy for it—after a day of giving your best mental energy to retyping somebody else's novel, it's hard to do your own writing, Youd says. But he says the retyping process has helped him understand what is needed to do it right, to make a good novel. Though he has written short stories and screenplays, Youd admits that writing is a "heavier lift" for him than doing visual art. "But I'm a pretty determined person," Youd says. He composes on the typewriter, in longhand and on computer—and has gotten the best results so far from composing on the typewriter and transferring it to computer.

Youd doubts that literature has suffered because of the move to the computer. "That's what was said when the typewriter arrived and it was replacing longhand. Maybe something's changed, I can't necessarily tell you what it is. But somebody

who is capable of writing and sustaining concentration is going to be good, no matter what. I'm not necessarily a buyer of the idea that moving from the typewriter to the computer was bad for writing, or that moving from the computer pre-internet to the computer post-internet is bad for writing. It's probably changing it, but I feel too old-mannish to say you can't write on the current computer."

An optimist about both the writing and reading of good literature, Youd also doesn't think that current technology is interfering with the practice of serious, close reading. Some studies have found that students comprehend more when they read printed material, rather than reading things off a computer screen. Youd isn't sure if that's true.

"I don't know if it's a generational thing," he said. "I do know that there are still people young and old who want to read closely. I'm always a little leery of the idea that the good old days were really better. I can't imagine a scenario where people aren't reading novels. There are never enough people reading serious novels and there never were. How many people were reading Algren, even at his height? I don't know. If you're a serious reader, you're going to land on Algren eventually."

Algren himself used to have favorite typewriters, and once got into trouble by loving a typewriter not wisely but too well. He started his first novel, "Somebody in Boots," on a "big bosomy housewife-ly Underwood" at Sul Ross College in Alpine, Texas, as he later wrote in an unpublished memoir. He loved the machine "upon sight." When it was time to go back to Chicago, he tried to steal the typewriter, and ended up in a noisome Texas jail for weeks, waiting for a circuit-riding judge to come around and decide his fate. The jail term was useful, since it inspired all the jail scenes depicted in all of Algren's novels. "The idea of stealing a typewriter—what a brilliant and stupid thing to do," Youd says. "That's probably Algren in a nutshell."

Youd sells his literary diptychs and other work from the Cristin Tierney Gallery in New York City. The "100 Novels Project" work is often displayed along with the typewriters that created them. Youd says they've done well, though certain titles do better than others. "The gallery said they could have sold 'Naked Lunch' ten times over," says Youd, referring to his retyping of William Burroughs' controversial novel about a junkie. "Algren is more of a cult person, but he has his passionate fans." "Never Come Morning" will be Youd's seventy-fifth book in the project. "The Man with the Golden Arm" will be the seventy-sixth. Another Chicago novel retyping is coming next year—"Divine Days" by Leon Forrest.

*Chicago dates are being finalized. Check back at the Cristin Tierney website for updates: [cristintierney.com/artists/30-tim-youd](http://cristintierney.com/artists/30-tim-youd)*

