

## Book/Plate

### (Record a Star as Dreamers Do)

In February 1888, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a Harvard observatory, a camera-equipped refractor telescope and its operator gazed up together into the night sky and photographed what would become known as the Horsehead Nebula. The long exposure, made possible by a shutter left agape as if awestruck and an equatorial mount compensating for the Earth's rotation, let the universe into the camera, where a superabundance of stars settled upon the silver gelatin of the photographic plate.

The nebula in its enigmatic entirety never, in fact, reached the retina–optic nerve–brain of the photographer, i.e. the astronomer, Williamina Fleming. But Fleming nonetheless came away with a rectangular patch of firmament in the preserved form of a glass-plate negative. Along with the hundreds of thousands of other celestial negatives being produced during the period, the Harvard plate could be slotted into the shared map of the night sky then being photographed and gridded by astronomers in every hemisphere.

Around the same time, bookbinders bound *The Wonders of the Heavens*, a delightful, galaxy-hopping volume of popular-science astronomy by the French astronomer, prolific author (including of proto-sci-fi escapades), and pioneer of the photographic medium Camille Flammarion. An unfailingly enthusiastic guide to the cosmos throughout *Wonders*, Flammarion still lamented in his conclusion that the general public, even in that era predating casino neon, had begun to lose touch with the primal pull of fascination exerted by the stellar sky on humans Prehistoric and Ancient.

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Artist Johan Österholm's *Antique Skies* process begins with the unsheathing of an X-Acto knife. To the horror of librarians everywhere, he carefully slits out blank or nearly blank sheets of yellowing paper (endpapers, for example) from nineteenth-century astronomy tomes such as the Flammarion, which he unearths in antiquarian bookshops across Europe and later carefully dissects in his Stockholm studio.

What might initially seem like an act of vandalism is not without its conservational claim. For more than a century, these wordless, imageless pieces of paper have been, if not wasted per se, then certainly *not used* between the covers of their respective titles. Via a process that incorporates the spangled contents of celestial glass-plate negatives, a spray gun loaded with liquid silver gelatin, and a repurposed street lamp, Österholm has a grand use for them: to serve as canvases for the re-emergence of stars long shrouded by terrestrial light pollution.

After obtaining contact copies of archived glass-plate negatives, Österholm proceeds to sensitize the book pages he excised with his knife, applying layer upon layer of silver gelatin with a spray gun. The now photosensitive pieces of paper and the archival contact negatives are pressed together between panels of glass, where they await exposure. The head of a decapitated street light is employed for this purpose. Retrofitted by the artist so that he can plug it into a socket, it is rekindled with an interwar bulb the size of an ostrich egg.

And so in the end, it is paradoxically by the light of a metropolitan street lamp—that most egregious blotter-outer of the stars—that Österholm’s spectroscopic swirls of fossilized starlight materialize, like commissions from the future, to illustrate the rapt reflections of Flammarion, tessering through time from the astronomer’s observatory on the outskirts of Paris: “In this immense passage of sight, thought with rapid wings accompanies the forerunning visual ray, carried away by its flight and wonderingly contemplating these distant splendors.”<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, outside, beyond the lamplit room, it is midsummer in Sweden, and the sun over the Stockholm Observatory is high in the sky.

—Stefan Lorenzutti

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<sup>1</sup> Camille Flammarion, *The Wonders of the Heavens*, trans. from the French by Winifred James Lockyer (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1874), 4.