

Design inspiration from around the world.

FF formfiftyfive.com/2016/08/nytmag-fractured-lands/

By Luke Tonge

We're big fans of top quality editorial design here at FFF, and one of the finest practitioners of our era is [Matt Willey](#), who's work we've covered numerous times. Now resident Art Director on arguably the biggest stage of all, [The New York Times Magazine](#), we took the opportunity to chat with him about a recent very special issue – [Fractured Lands](#).



Editor-In-Chief [Jake Silverstein](#) introduces the issue:

This is a story unlike any we have previously published. It is much longer than the typical New York Times Magazine feature story; in print, it occupies an entire issue. The product of some 18 months of reporting, it tells the story of the catastrophe that has fractured the Arab world since the invasion of Iraq 13 years ago, leading to the rise of ISIS and the global refugee crisis. The geography of this catastrophe is broad and its causes are many, but its consequences — war and uncertainty throughout the world — are familiar to us all. Scott Anderson's story gives the reader a visceral sense of how it all unfolded, through the eyes of six characters in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Accompanying Anderson's text are 10 portfolios by the photographer Paolo Pellegrin, drawn from his extensive travels across the region over the last 14 years, as well as a landmark virtual-reality experience that embeds the viewer with the Iraqi fighting forces during the battle to retake Fallujah.

It is unprecedented for us to focus so much energy and attention on a single story, and to ask our readers to do the same. We would not do so were we not convinced that what follows is one of the most clear-eyed, powerful and human explanations of what has gone wrong in this region that you will ever read.



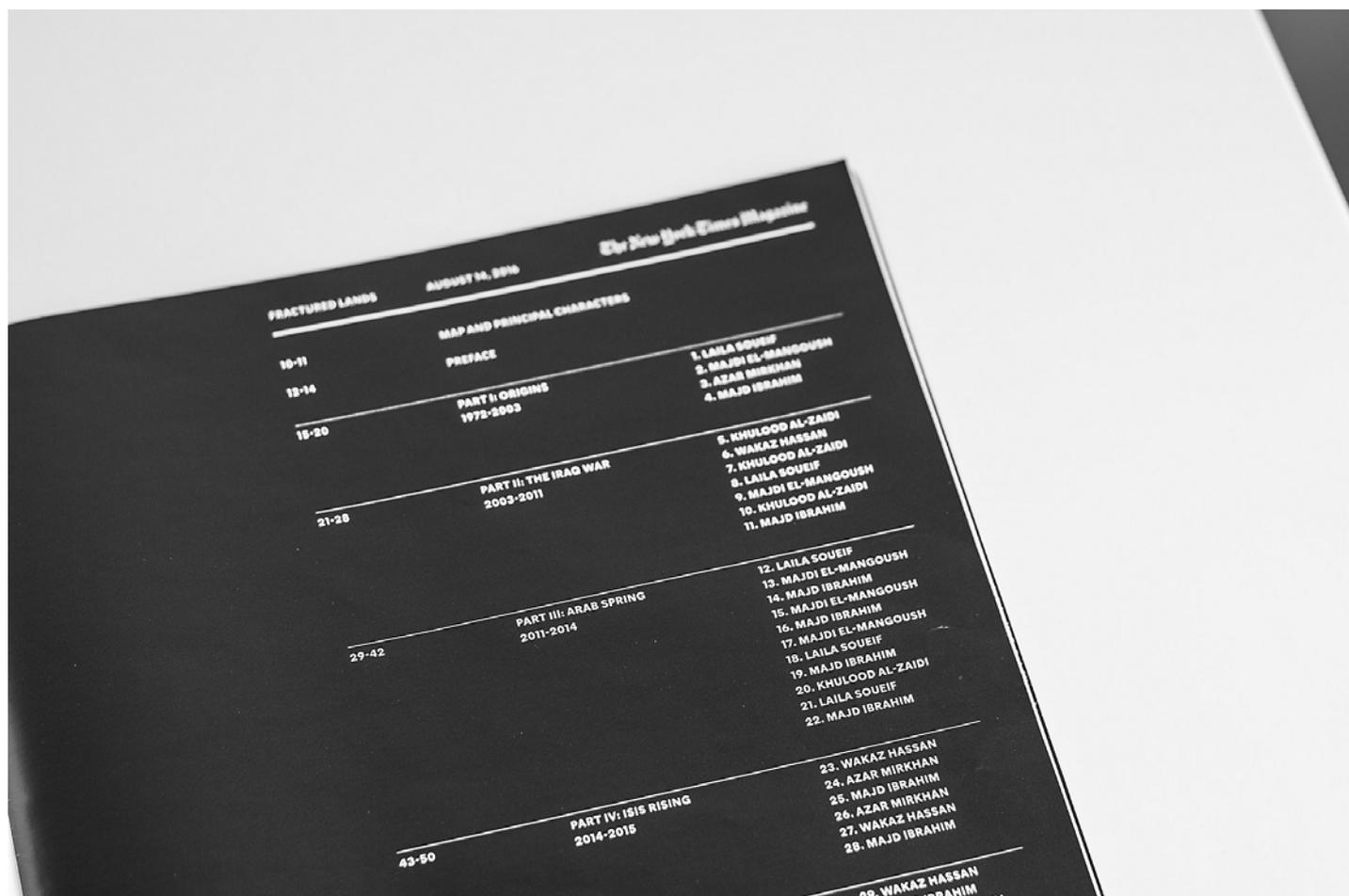
FFF: This issue is clearly a piece of 'serious' journalism, how did the subject matter influence your approach to designing it?

MW: *Well I guess you aim at making something appropriate, or relevant, something that works.*

FFF: Can you talk us through any of your decision making or thinking?

MW: *From early on in the process this was being described as a book, of sorts. It ended up being a single 42,000-word piece. But of course it is a magazine and I was interested in how that balance might work. It was an opportunity to rethink the magazine in the context of a one-off issue that could – and had – to behave differently, something that was able to accommodate such a long uninterrupted piece of writing. Jake (Silverstein, the Editor in Chief) made the (brilliant and brave) decision to go ad-free (the issue was sponsored by the Pulitzer Center) and that had a huge impact on the way the issue ended up looking. The first spread for example, always home to an advert, is a very sparse text-only intro on the left, which feels a little like the blurb you might find on the inside of a book jacket, opposite an editors note. It is, for us, if nothing else, a very unusual introduction to the magazine. The last spread features the only vertical image (a stunning photo of a girl running across a dusty street in Tikrit, Iraq) on the left next to a solid black page, it feels like an endpaper. I like how that works as an ending. I suppose it was a process of removing anything that felt superfluous, being quite severe about what was necessary. It's very rigidly structured: the photographs (with the exception of that end page and one big double-page image upfront) appear in the same position and at the same size on each spread, there are no pull-quotes and instead the text is broken up by numbered chapters featuring an illustrated portrait of whichever of the six characters stories is being told. The issue is entirely black and white. I'm interested in applying these sorts of restrictions, stripping everything back, and then seeing what works.*

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FFF: Did you design it on your own?

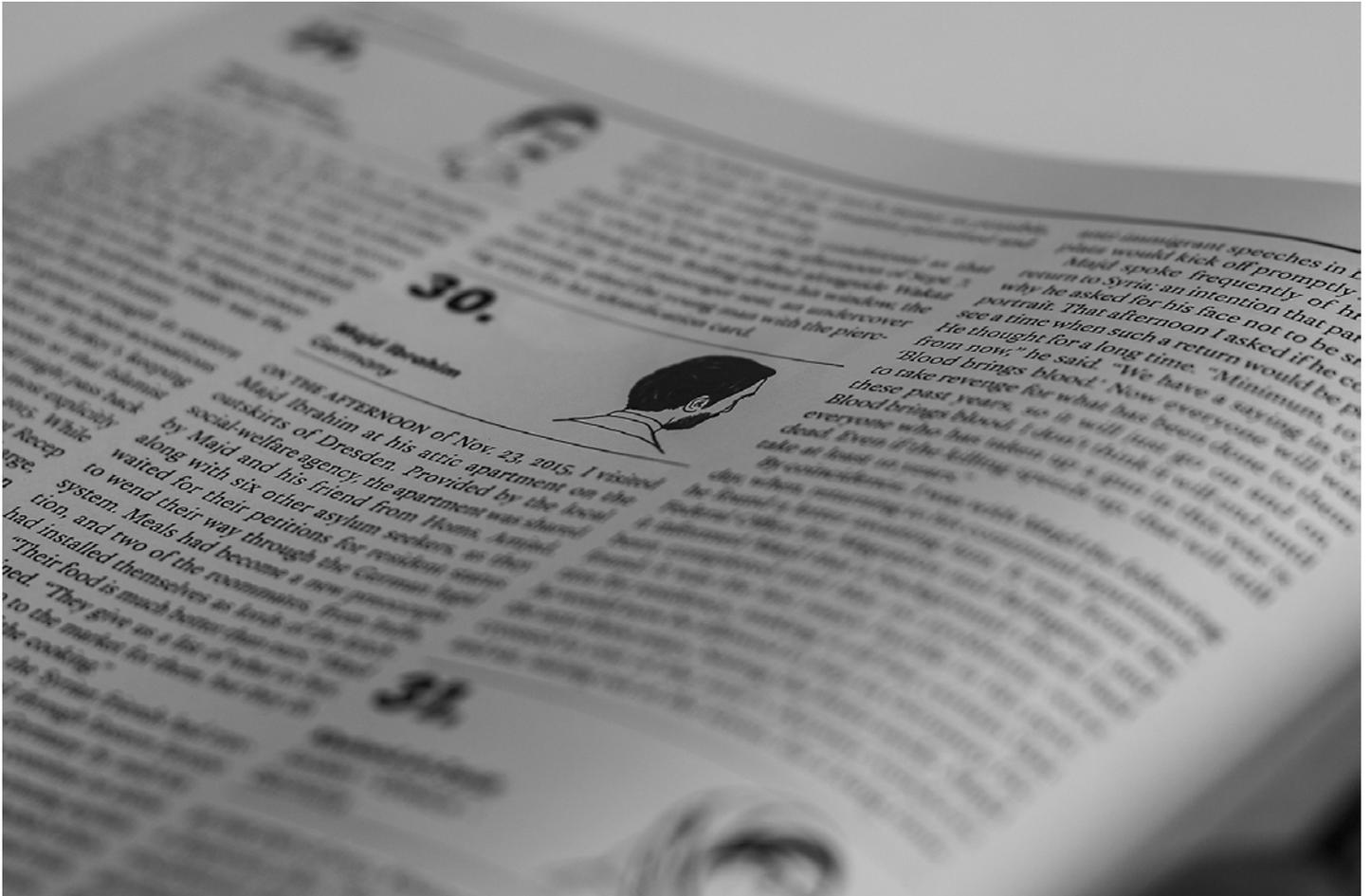
MW: I designed this issue but [Gail](#) and I were looking through layouts and discussing everything, as we do every

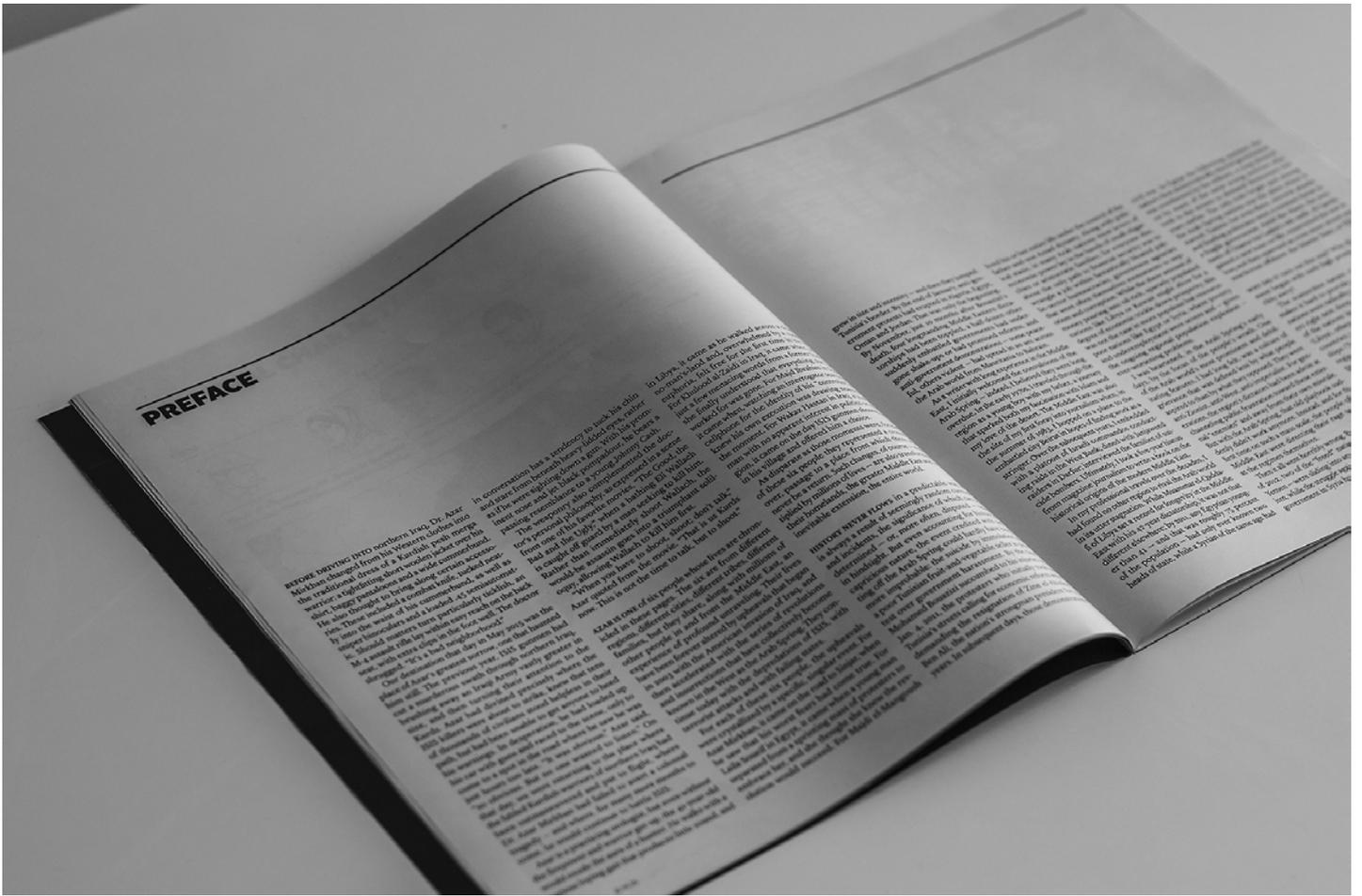
week. One of the great privileges of working at this place is being surrounded by such an extraordinary team.

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FFF: I know Scott Anderson spent 18 months on the words – how long did you get on the design?

MW: I worked on it on-and-off for about 3 weeks but things developed very rapidly in the final week of production, a lot of things changed and got decided in that week.

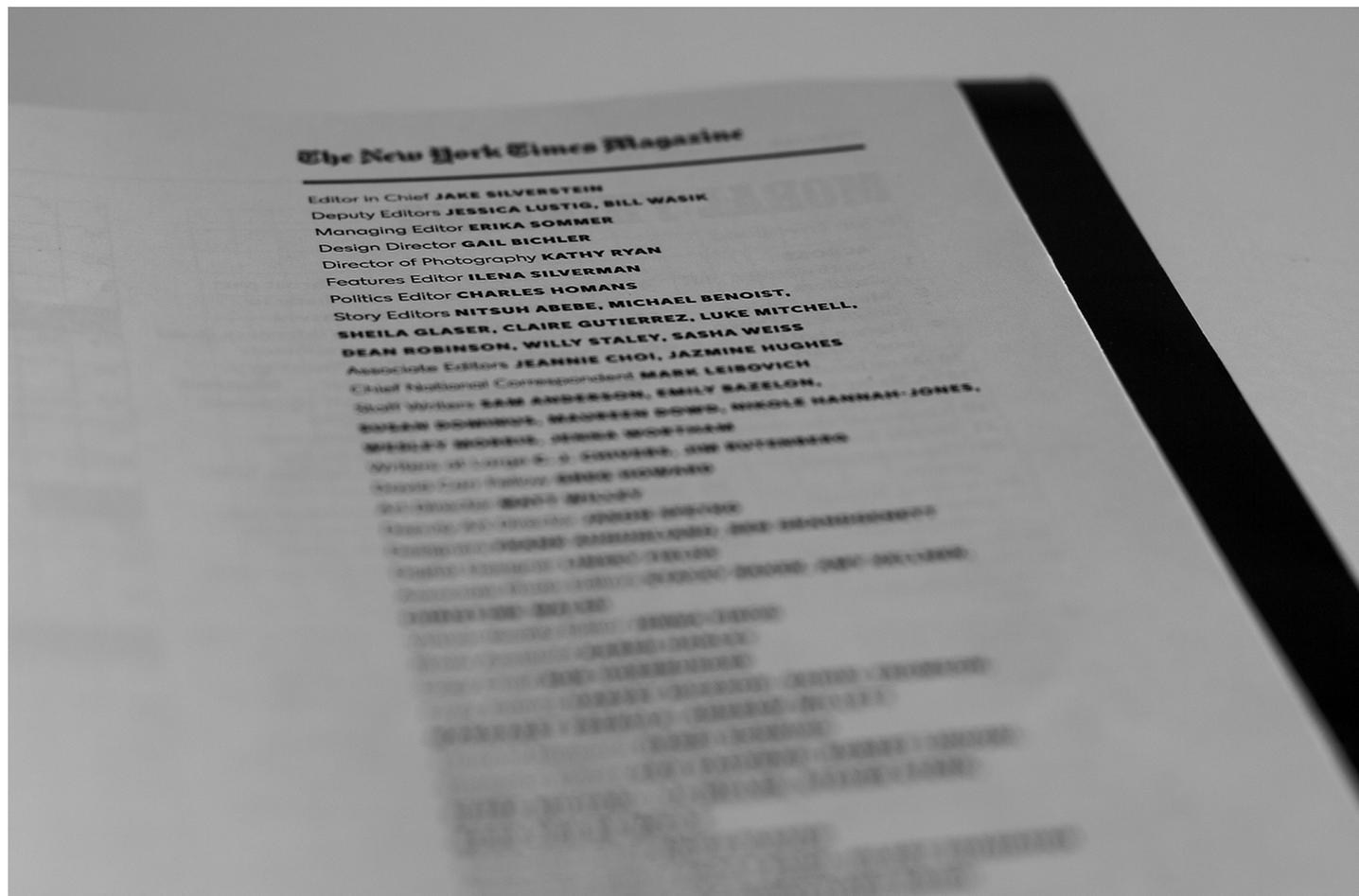




FFF: It feels like this issue is a lot of 'firsts' – first time without adverts, first issue devoted to a single story, first

fully black and white issue etc.. – is there anything else you'd like to have done with it?

MW: Not really, I think we pushed through most of the things that we wanted to do with this issue. I was pleased that we were able to do the wrap-around cover (I think that might be a first too?), and that we had an image that felt like it justified doing it.





FFF: The layout and typesetting feels very considered, respectful and restrained, did you explore any other

styles or approaches that were a bit more dramatic or 'Willey-esque', or was it a relatively straightforward design job with such fantastic content?

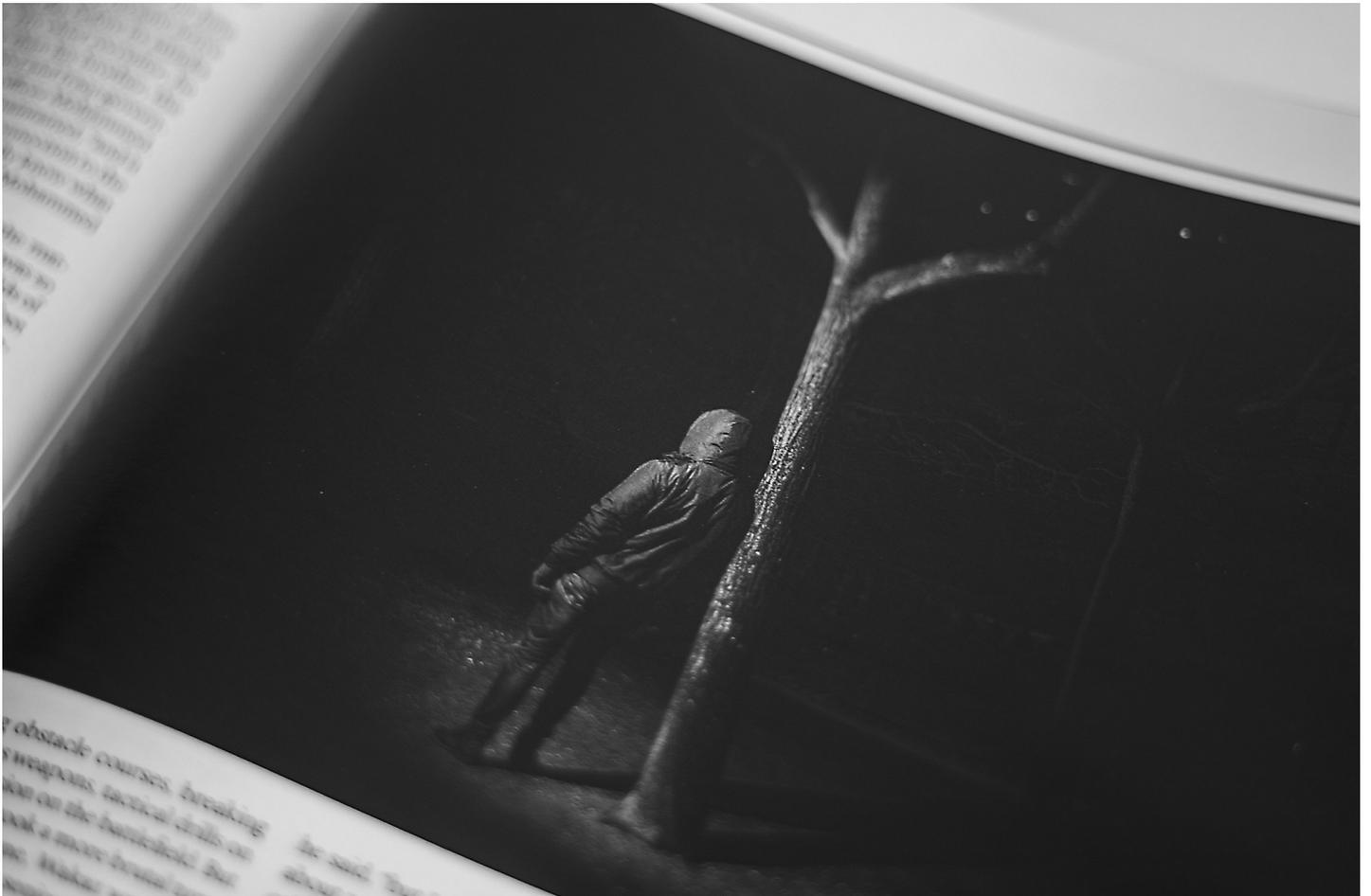
MW: This approach felt appropriate to me. I tried various typographic treatments for those chapter openers, for example, but it didn't feel necessary to do anything more 'dramatic' or flamboyant with the type. Bold decisions can include decisions to not do something... if you know what I mean. I would argue that this this issue is just as 'designed' as many other issues, it's just done with a lot more restraint. As a piece of design I'm as proud of this issue as I am the 800ft issue. They're just different. It was extraordinary content to be working with but it certainly wasn't straightforward to do, it was a tough issue to put together.

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FFF: The amazing Paolo Pellegrin shot images are all B&W, is this how you received them? – and did this influence the decision to keep the whole issue mono?

MW: Yes they came in as black and white photographs and I guess that influenced the decision to keep the issue monochromatic. At one stage I had little hits of color for certain bits, but it wasn't necessary. It just worked better in black and white.





FFF: It feels like 'single issue' or even 'single story' mags are now a viable thing, do you expect to be working on more of them at the day job?, and do you think other mags could learn anything from the holistic approach?

MW: I don't know if single story issues are somehow more viable now than at any other time. This issue is an extraordinary achievement editorially and I don't think there are many magazines that would have, or could have, done it. But this story is such an important one. The gravitas of this subject means that dedicating the issue in this way, so completely, makes sense. I think it was a great decision by Jake to do this particular issue in this particular way. We do a lot of special issues each year, single theme issues (food, the Olympics, New York, money, education... and so on) but this issue is, as Jake says in his editors note, unlike any we have previously published. I don't know if he's planning anything else along these lines. It feels like a distinct one-off to me, but who knows.

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