# THE ALCHEMY OF METH

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## A DECOMPOSITION

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For Guy

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book tells the stories of people in rural Missouri who cook and use methamphetamine. More than a few of them said they had agreed to talk to me because they wanted to help me help others from ending up like them. I had to take their hopes seriously. But what can a book do? I have struggled with this question for years. What follows is my response.

# PREFACE

I began this project in 2005, just months after finishing my PhD and starting my first teaching job, a one-year visiting professorship at the University of Missouri–Columbia. The pay was low, the teaching load high, and I already had the enormous task of turning my dissertation, a decade of research on an entirely different subject (musicians who work in the margins of organized crime in Naples) into a book. Additionally, coming from the East Coast, I found myself alone in a part of the United States that was foreign to me. Whenever things got rough, I reminded myself that the job would come to an end, but I was worried that the tight job market might not offer me another opportunity to pursue my vocation. I had worked so hard but it hadn't been enough, which made me anxious and depressed, which in turn interfered with my work. So I worked harder still. This cycle might be familiar to some readers.

I had no business beginning a new project, but I felt compelled by this one, and without fully understanding why. While following the local news and chatting with students and people in town, one subject constantly circulated: home methlabs. There was talk of strange hoarding activity, peculiar shopping behaviors at Walmart and Walgreens, and suspicious gatherings and trash piles in the woods. There were reports of homes colonized by meth cooks while the owners were on vacation, bizarre property crimes, exploding trailers, and the horrid discovery of what had been hidden inside: emaciated, toothless tweakers, stockpiled guns and ammunition, and abused children. There were many concerns among these rumors and truths that drew

my attention, but what unsettled me most was the fact that so many people were *making* meth. Unnumbered cooks were transmuting ordinary household products into an elixir that radically transformed the ways people lived, worked, and died.

When I mentioned my project in class, a graduate student approached me. His mother (I call her Camille in the stories that follow) was caring for a meth cook dying of cancer. She said she would introduce me to him and his friends, and that I could help with his hospice care. They lived in St. Jude (a pseudonym), the county that annually ranked first in the state for methlab busts. I spent a year there with Camille, with other nonusing residents (Debra), including people whose professions have been shaped by meth (narcotics agents, a pharmaceutical executive, a church pastor), and finally with people who cooked meth as their vocation proper (Christian, Ray, Joseph). What I encountered haunted me for many years. A kind of life was actively decomposing and something else was taking shape, but what? Seven years later, in 2013, I returned for a four-month follow-up visit to make better sense of it.

During these two stays in St. Jude, I spent time with some ninety people, but too few of their voices have made their way into this book. These voices are now a collection of interleaved stories of seven main protagonists and twice as many supporting characters. Reluctantly, I included my own story. I had suppressed the reasons I felt compelled to write this book, but in draft after draft it became increasingly clear that I couldn't hide as author, from readers or from myself, when all the other protagonists in this book had vulnerably entrusted their stories to me. What follows is my rendering of these stories, mine included.

# INTRODUCTION

This is a work of nonfiction. The stories I recount take place in a northeastern Missouri county I call St. Jude. I have changed proper names and other identifying details in order to respect people's privacy. St. Jude held the national record for methlab busts for most of two decades, but these statistics do not necessarily justify the county's identity as the meth capital of the United States. The statistics gloss over the complexities of the political and economic geography that makes measuring methlab incidents possible or desirable in any given county or state. Rather than revealing the extraordinariness of one area of the United States, the statistics obscure the intricacies of narcocapitalism, how drugs are entangled with broader economic interests, and of narcopolitics, how concerns about drugs are woven into forms of governance, particularly policing.[1] Moreover, there is much more to St. Jude than its association with methlabs. Although its presence is sensed in many forms, meth cooking does not dominate public and private life. More significant are the number of churches, secular nonprofits, municipal institutions, local businesses, and ordinary residents regularly engaged in charitable giving in this geographic area with a population of only about two hundred thousand. And then there are the rivers, prairies, coneflowers, cardinals, and limestone bluffs.

Most of the methlabs police identified during the years of my research were small scale, yielding only enough meth for personal use. A readily available way of making sense of their high incidence in Missouri, and more generally in the rural U.S. Midwest, is deindustrial-

ization. The shift from large-scale, single-location factory production to globally dispersed nodes of production, and from material production to knowledge production and service work, combined with uneven geographic development, has left many people of once-thriving industrial centers, such as St. Louis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and their surrounds, without jobs that can provide a living wage. People move away for opportunities elsewhere while new talent (teachers, doctors) and new businesses are difficult to attract. In Missouri, the monolith Walmart has snuffed out other retailers (and even some manufacturers), while providing cheap goods and low-wage jobs with limited possibilities for advancement. Those who remain in these areas are dispossessed of the means to live decently and opportunities to make changes to their material conditions. They feel ineffectual and irrelevant. I found many people who turned to the informal economy of meth cooking. Suddenly they no longer felt dispossessed, but possessed—some by good spirits and some by evil.

The term "postindustrialism" has long been used to characterize the so-called new economy, but it generally refers not to these geographic areas but to places that have enjoyed job growth and greater circulation of information, goods, and services, as well as increases in a different kind of poverty, that is, precarious noncontractual or limited-contract flexible labor. In areas like Missouri, home of the Old Lead Belt and many of the first and latest Walmarts—and where nearly 10 percent of the population performs manufacturing labor—late industrialism is a more appropriate term. Late industrial refers to a late stage in a long industrial era that overlaps with postindustrial novelty elsewhere. I borrow this term from the anthropologist Kim Fortun, for whom it means deteriorating infrastructures, wasted landscapes, climate change, knowledge production, and governance laced with commercial interests, and the persistent desire for toxic consumer goods that continues to motivate their mass manufacture.[2]

But dispossession and a limited future are not enough to explain the radical decision to take on the risks associated with the DIY manufacture and use of a powerfully addictive, illegal narcotic. I have understood more by looking carefully at the material life of

this late-industrial region, which includes decomposing everyday consumer products to concoct meth.

Making meth is easy and the precursor ingredients and equipment needed to combine them are wholly accessible. You can cook meth from ordinary domestic consumer products. Energizer lithium batteries and muriatic acid, commonly used to clean brick patios or unclog drains, are available at big-box stores like Home Depot, Lowe's, and Walmart, which have long dominated local retail markets across the Midwest. In the same stores you can find acetone, or paint thinner, and Coleman camping fuel, the brand that cooks prefer. Pyrex, Teflon, Pace Salsa jars, and plastic spoons—these are cooking materials you can buy in stores almost anywhere in the United States, including the little-box chain stores Dollar Tree and Dollar General, which are ubiquitous across much of Missouri and beyond. And in pharmacies you can easily acquire instant cold packs and pseudoephedrine-based cold medicine, meth's key ingredient, thanks to lobbyists in the employ of the pharmaceutical industry who fight proposed regulations.[3]

And meth is easy to make in small-town Missouri, where there are wooded, rocky ridges and ample distances between homes. People are very neighborly, but they mark, and often police, the borders of their property with dogs, fences, purple blazes, guns, and NO TRESPASSING signs (some of them hyperbolically threatening). Minding one's own business often goes with the territory.

Geography and topography were important until around 2008, when the Shake and Bake recipe emerged. This method doesn't require anhydrous ammonia, the dangerously volatile farm fertilizer whose sale is regulated, although meth cooks nonetheless managed to steal it, or even buy it, from farmers.[4] The anhydrous ammonia two-pot recipe produces a powerful smell and, when things go wrong, a powerful explosion. The Shake and Bake one-pot recipe produces far less of a smell and, although small, it can be just as dangerous—even more so. To make meth with this recipe, you combine all the ingredients in a single plastic soda or Gatorade bottle. You then hold the bottle in your hands and periodically shake it to speed the reaction. Pressure builds up inside and you have to burp the bottle by slowly

opening the lid and closing it again, repeating these steps for another couple of hours. But if the pressure gets too high or if moisture ignites the lithium strip, which burns a hole in the bottle and first turns it into a blowtorch, the bottle explodes. The injury is close-range and catastrophic.

I have found it useful to bracket the singular, and sometimes spectacular, qualities of meth cooking and its informal/illicit economy in order to consider it as one craft within a repertoire of local material cultural practices. Approaching it in this way accentuates the do-it-yourself quality it shares with more common activities, like fixing your car, home improvement, homesteading, hunting and fishing, and dressing your catch. These activities require a material familiarity and manual dexterity that can contribute to the perception that it's reasonable to tinker with potentially harmful chemicals extracted from household products in order to produce a substance of great value.

In fact, this perception explains, in part, why people who make meth invoke the metaphor of cooking. Meth is a homey domestic product. Cooks covet some recipes like precious secrets and share them only with privileged intimates, sometimes across multiple family generations. Secrecy is a form of intimacy. The metaphor is so powerful that, although methlabs are found anywhere in a house (just as the precursors are found in any ordinary home), people always call meth manufacture cooking. A methlab mixes fundamental human vitalities—domesticity, intimacy, commensality, and cultivation—in a chemical cottage industry.

Meth is almost always within reach. And when it's ingested, it can make anything else feel within reach. Meth increases energy and alertness. More importantly, it generates anticipatory pleasure. That is, rather than giving the sense of satiation derived from having consumed something good (consummatory pleasure), meth activates the "seeking system," creating excitement about good rewards to come.[5] This felt sense of futurity is like hope.

This book begins somewhere in the exploded life of a man I call Howard Lee.[6] I've never met Howard. Instead I sifted through the bits and pieces I found in his trailer home after he was busted for cooking meth and carted off to prison. Among the things that were left, I found a plastic grocery bag filled with papers. Some of those documents (court papers, correspondence, and invoices and mathematical formulas he scribbled for his work as a general contractor) appear in the pages that follow, with only identifying details replaced. This archive of documents and objects indicates Howard Lee's vocations, his attempts at making do, his desires, his despair, and his faith. They are parts of a life, but they do not make up a subject. If there is a subject called Howard Lee, he is dispersed across the many other lives and nonlives that, in fragmentary form, find expression in this book. This book is about subjects in decomposition and their recombination with other objects in their midst.

I decided to learn about Howard Lee only through his after-effects because I wanted to see what would happen if I critically interpreted only the matter of his life, a process Walter Benjamin likened to alchemy.[7] Alchemy invites allegorical thinking. That is, thinking through material objects and the multiple, and ultimately unstable, compositions they can yield. The result of my alchemical work is an allegory about a man who, enchanted by a toxic American Dream, makes and takes meth to enhance his labor and speeds toward his own undoing. This allegory is literally composed of the material life of St. Jude, but it also composes similar stories unfolding anywhere in the United States. The similarities are not all obvious. You have to create the correspondences through your own alchemical work as reader.

The address of Howard Lee's former trailer home and the one neighboring it are listed on the sheriff's website. They refer to two of the 336 methlab incidents county law enforcement recorded in 2012. The motley materials I found in Howard Lee's home led me to still more wildly disparate objects. Many of the objects populate the two hundred other former methlabs I explored in St. Jude, and really, they populate any ordinary home in the United States. Some of the objects—industries, infrastructures, institutions, landscapes,

affects, concepts—are likewise ubiquitous but in their own diffuse ways. They are too large, too articulated, or too elusive to be sensed in any ordinary way. But their impacts are felt.[8]

Rather than presume to reconstruct lives gone bust, like that of Howard Lee, this book lingers in the decomposing matter, the matter of life. Ordinary things, like household products or a home or a life, have latent potentials. It takes so little for things to take a turn.

Instead, this book is a decomposition. I call it this because it follows how things, people, and lives have come to decompose and bust apart, leading the way toward how they are composed in the first place, and how they are recombining again and again in unforeseen ways.

I find it impossible to theorize this scene of decomposition as if my scholarly tools and I could evade the phenomenon unscathed. Theories, like ordinary things and people, are roughhewn compositions. They appear in this book in unfamiliar registers because they are half-baked concoctions of my never properly academic analyses, the objects I sifted through, the great industrial chemical apparatus they issue from, and meth cooks' assays of the matter of life. This is not theory as usual.

To write this book, I spent time with many people, not just those whose voices made it onto these pages. I interacted with nonusing residents, owners and renters of properties that once housed meth-labs, drug-treatment professionals, farmers, public school teachers, dentists, chemists, pharmacists, pharmaceutical business reps, public defenders, judges, bail bondsmen, and many law enforcement professionals, including narcotics agents. In addition to hanging out in local bars and restaurants, I participated in open Narcotics Anonymous meetings, fundraisers for veterans and for residents suffering from chronic illness, social events at a Lions Club, a concealed-carry gun-training course, meat shoots at an Amvets post, Paranormal Society and Photography Club meetings at a local library, and for several months, Sunday service at a small Presbyterian church.

I also spent a lot of time among objects and materials wherever they were or went within the county: garage sales, flea markets, sec-

ondhand stores, pawnshops, gun shows, gun shops, auctions, food pantries, storage units, dumpsters, trash dumps, junkyards, big-box stores, dollar stores, pharmacies, seized methlab equipment facilities, and hundreds of home methlabs, busted and active.

As a result, I gathered a constellation of marginalia, ephemera, and minor literature that now appear as some of the pages in this book: advertisements, shareholder meeting minutes, Environmental Protection Agency documents, addiction recovery texts, poems composed by meth cooks, church sermons, psalms, and marquee messages, and natural events observed by the Missouri Department of Conservation.[9] I include these latter bits to remind readers, and myself, that there's an ordinary seasonal world just outside the often claustrophobic worlds of meth making, if you just look up.[10]

Finally, I have included the words of medieval and Renaissance alchemists. Alchemy is the ancient artscience of locating and harnessing the power of the Philosopher's Stone, an ordinary, ubiquitous substance that promises to transmute base matter like lead into gold or to yield the elixir of life. This artscience is now the work of late-industrial alchemists. These new alchemists transmute banal industrial chemicals into a crystalline substance they can sell for a profit or into a pharmakon they can consume. Either way, they get more life.

But the primary substance of this book comes from the voices of people in St. Jude. I offer them as faithful transcriptions of our conversations and as storied accounts of their lives. I storied these accounts using my sense of the material culture and landscapes that make them. They appear in the pages that follow as interleaved fragments that hold together, both individually and as a storybook, by virtue of their place in a late-industrial eastern Missouri geography.

Among them is also my own fragmented story, which comes from another place, New York City and academia. I put myself in an uneasy juxtaposition with the people I've written about, in what Isabelle Stengers calls an ecology of practices.[11] Rather than allow my voice to float above theirs like a transcendent narrator, I offer thoughts never unburdened of the matter that composes them. My refusal to

sublimate this material, but rather to work through it, expresses how writing is also part of the matter of life.

This decomposition happens not only structurally but also on the level of voice. Free indirect discourse, the style that often shapes the stories, blurs protagonist, narrator, and writer so that all these so-called subjects flicker in and out of an ecology and often overwhelm one another, their integrity always at risk.[12] Lack and excess of the human subject dramatize the inadequacy of human existence ultimately impersonated in the ghostly figure (and figures) of Howard Lee.[13]

My story is also in the third person, as Jason. I asked friends and family to interview me and then I storied the transcripts. Putting myself in the third person creates a small opening for readers to approach me as someone who is not wholly the author and partly a vulnerable protagonist. It also creates a small opening for me to recount things about my life that are difficult to share.

I made painful decisions about whose voices to include, how to give them a writerly shape, and how they would affect the people who give them life, as well as readers. I also decided to emphasize, at the expense of many other vital forces, how individual stories, including the stories of things, resonate with one another under the pressure of colossal worldmaking work of institutions like the Drug Enforcement Agency and the Food and Drug Administration, and across the apparatuses of chemical manufacture and its supporting financial infrastructure, within broader ecologies of life and nonlife, which include the chemical species that animate homes and methlabs.[14]

Finally, I made the decision to close this book in a way that respects and mourns that these stories never adequately cohere or fully conclude. This decomposition honors a bigger story about how, through industry and ruination, humans and a landscape compose a life tenuously holding together.

# THE ALCHEMY OF METH

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Howard Lee**. We never meet Lee, but we learn about him through the objects and documents left in the wake of his incarceration: He struggled to get a building contractor business off the ground. He defaulted on a payday loan. He was twice denied credit. These fragments appear periodically throughout the book.

**Christian** is a sensitive man in his mid-twenties in prison for manufacture. He leads us through scenes of his childhood, when he used meth with his mother. We also learn of the relationship he develops, through books and letters, with the author.

**Ray** is an ailing, middle-aged meth cook awaiting trial. He describes growing up with family drug use and his adult life as a successful meth cook. When he elaborates on his recent operations at a local hotel, the author realizes their stories are entangled.

**Joseph** is clean now. He was a successful meth cook but he quit when he learned the DEA was on to him. His descriptions of cooking, like Ray's, reveal the uncanny potencies of everyday consumer products. Although he wasn't incarcerated and remains clean, he's struck by another misfortune, this time connected to heroin.

**Camille** is an ordinary resident of St. Jude—neither a cook nor a user. Her little home sits in the shadow of Meth Mountain, which saddens and worries her. But toxicity doesn't only come from the outside. Her difficult family memories also poison her home from within, and she wants to sell and get out.

**Lori** is an analyst who works on the drug task force in local law enforcement. She tracks consumer purchases of pseudoephedrine-based cold medicine, looking for suspicious spikes in sales. She's pregnant and preparing for a quiet suburban life with her husband, a cop, but they discover there's also work to be done at home.

**Three narcotics agents** describe pitiful drug bust scenes, where bewildered, frightened cooks behave like puppies beaten senseless. They also describe how cooks ingeniously camouflage their equipment and how peripheral participants, like soccer moms, sell meth cooks their pseudoephedrine-based cold medicine, a new currency, at a premium.

**Debra** is a single mother with a teenage son. She's laid off from Chrysler and her son is dabbling in meth. Serendipitously, he's recruited for the army and manages to steer clear of the drug, but his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan turn out to be just as toxic.

**Pharmaceutical executives,** from the giant Shire Pharmaceuticals and from a small startup, explain their business strategies. The Shire executive gives a presentation to investors, describing with parodic honesty his company's "infrastructure of shadow experts" who "trump the findings of dissenting professionals" and "medicalize everyday moods and emotions." The anxiously hopeful startup executive describes his company's design of a meth-cook-resistant pseudoephedrine-based cold medicine (the key precursor ingredient of meth) that they've applied for a license to sell without restrictions (so that consumers don't have to show ID to the pharmacist). If they get the license, they beat the behind-the-counter competition, eliminate non-meth-cook-resistant cold medicine from the market, and kill the methlab problem. If they don't get the license, the company goes under.

**Jason** (the author in third person) brings his own chemical history to the scene. We learn that his mother is a meth user and that he himself struggles with legalized amphetamine (ADHD medication), which both shapes and undermines his work as a writer.