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WEST BY MIDWEST: ROBERT J. TURNEY'S AMERICA

To live in the Midwest is, paradoxically, to live in the middle of everything and nothing, to be central and peripheral as the same time. If the part of the Midwest you live in doesn't happen to be Chicago, you are constantly made aware that the nation's eyes and ears are located on the coasts and they gaze and attune themselves inwardly upon those in the middle with curiosity and fear, the way a formerly trim person gazes upon his or her growing midsection. In college towns one can be left to one's own devices—one usually is—but that only suffices for a while. Travel is the only antidote to the cultural isolation of geographic centrality, to living long stretches in East Lansing, Michigan. A change of scenery for its own sake offers a much needed contrast, allowing one to see more change within the scenery, to enjoy a greater share of sunshine, hot, dry sunshine, and move up and down steep and varied landscapes. For eight summers, the photographer, Robert J. Turney and the poet Diane Wakoski (his wife), would join their friend, novelist Wilton Barnhardt, on trips to the American West, to Las Vegas, to the vistas and deserts of California, Nevada, and New Mexico. They traveled in a four-wheel-drive Chevy Blazer as friends, companions, and artists.

While Diane was off at the casino tables, Robert, with his cameras in tow and Wilton as his guide, ranged through the ghost towns and old mining hamlets of the Nevada desert, climbing the Sierra slopes, Yosemite Valley, and the mesas and arroyos of New Mexico. Over many years, these trips produced several series of silence-haunted photographs. In one of these series, comprised of twelve pictures, Turney's eye is turned upon (as it is wont to be) older, solitary objects in desolate places, a tarnished world eroded by time, chafed by mythology. "Travel is a fool's paradise," wrote Emerson. "My giant goes with me wherever I go." But the Emersonian delusion of travel presumes a desire to escape the self. Turney's giant eye for isolation may travel with him but his wanderlust carries no such longing be anyone else; he happily brings his isolation with him. As he put it in a note appended to the photographic series, he has recorded the beauty of, "the high deserts" and "washed-out two tracks."

The twelve photographs in this Western series are taken primarily in out-of-the-way towns like Austin, Midas, Goldfield, Tuscarora (Nevada), or Bodie, Lee Vining (California) or Chimayó (New Mexico). They depict, in order, a church roof, an old shack, a piece of tar paper, the fender of a superannuated R.E.O. truck, a shack with a seatless chair, a shack with a broken screen, a letter box, a deserted street, and a sacred place of Catholic sanctuary. The private history of objects is made visible by the photographer as his process records the way it is etched into the surface of everything. The quiet of these images, like the quiet of the places from which they were taken invites the contemplation not so much of the past or but how the past continues to exist in the present. It comes as a surprise in these pictures to happen upon a famous view of Yosemite, such as Turney's photograph of Half Dome (Figure 1), for it reminds us that for a photographer to go West is to enter into photographically colonized territory, overpopulated with the iconic images of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Timothy O'Sullivan. The icons of Adams' Yosemite, El Capitan, the upper falls, and, above all, Half Dome, have been snapped so much that one wonders how many times can the soul of something be captured before its image grows soulless? It is not so much the soul of the photographed object that concerns Turney but the soul of the photographer. Turney is clearly on the trail of photography's past but he does not merely wish to imitate these masters so much as to stand where they once stood. With texts one can sit in any old coffee shop and copy or diverge from another's style as one pleases. With digital photography, a perfect pastiche of a classic photograph is just a click away. With analog photographs, one must position the camera in a similar place, from a similar vantage at a similar time of day in order to produce anything remotely like another's image.

In some measure this enterprise might be construed as a kind of do-it-yourself fantasy

photography camp but Turney is after more than mere fantasia of photographic replicas. He explained to me that there is “no point in trying to ‘top’ Adams, after all he lived in the valley, it was his home.” So when you are standing looking out at a vista that Adams made famous and millions of people have photographed you are perfectly aware that the world does not “need” another photo of Half Dome in the sense that any image of Half Dome however gorgeous or original can never again be “news.” “Still, when you are standing there,” he continued, “and you are a photographer, how can you not take it? No, no, no. You wait for the best light and take your best shot.” Turney has spent a good portion of his artistic life working in Adams’s and Weston’s traditions, adhering to their strict protocols of clarity and precision. He has more than earned the right to inhabit their landscapes. Yet, these Western photos are not really about imitating or not imitating. They are about an artist confronting the abiding power of a place, any place, be it famous or remote. There may have been nothing new to say or show about Yosemite Valley for fifty years but that in no way diminishes the power of the place to inspire art-making or picture-taking. Why allow the prospect of imitation to deny one the opportunity that others have not denied themselves? Storied places generate more stories; photographed places generate more photographs. Rather than a question of imitation, Turney’s homage becomes a form of photographic comprehension: what would it mean to stand with camera in hand in Adams or Weston’s place?

The answer Turney provides can be seen in the individual photographs and in the series as a whole. Turney’s Half Dome is no longer a monumental reference point. It becomes, in this sequence, part of the desolate West, another one of his haunted isolates, at once an article of faith in the beauty that abides in weathered things and a product of geological cataclysm, glacial exfoliation softened by eons of erosion and the lenses, both gaping and reverent, of human technology. It is as if Walker Evans had photographed Half Dome for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Wear and weather cannot help but leave their impress on its earthly inhabitants and this is as true of geological survivors like Half Dome as it is for human subjects. An Evans-like quality pervades these shacks and tarpaper without being surrounded by the discourses of poverty and sharecropping. Some other discourse has taken its place where the economic urgencies of the Great Depression have been supplanted by longer-term perspectives on booms and busts and the vicissitudes of migrant populations. In Turney’s photographs, a letterbox is conferred the same natural dignity as Half Dome.

The visual iconography of the American West offers four basic types of isolation. The vastness of open spaces; solitary figures; rootless entities; and artifacts of weathered desolation. The first is conveyed by Rocky Mountain vistas, Death Valley deserts, and the wide open spaces seen on long stretches of highway, empty as the horizon itself. The second, is conveyed by lonely verticals of saguaro cacti and the sandstone formations of Monument valley, bighorn sheep, a mesa rising up in the middle of nowhere, and the sun itself setting in the infinite West. The third is conveyed by, high plains drifters, tumbling tumbleweeds, and the Western wind kicking up dust. The fourth can be found in the aridity of deserted main streets and the abandoned mineshafts of ghost towns. These depopulated communities are not ghostly because of the haunting that sometimes gets written up in tourist brochures but because they seem to haunt our modern world as existential reminders of overly optimistic mineral extraction enterprises and the general indifference of the natural world toward all municipal ambition. And there is also, as Wilton suggested to me, a fifth form, a more majestic form of decay which might be called grandiose or splendid isolation which expresses itself in a particular form of European cultural ostentation in a barren wasteland: a Florentine folly or a replica of the Parthenon in the desert.

Like Walker Evans’ aesthetic, Turney’s images have a direct address of ordinary things, “the anonymity,” that can be seen in Evans’ American Photographs. For Turney’s camera these towns appear in semi-petrified states, half-turned to stone. The dust in them has settled into a fine, bone-white powder, as parched as dried spittle at the corner of miner’s mouth, If they appear to have come out of the 1930s or out of the land that time forgot then that is apt for they are about what we have forgotten, even if the forces that brought these places into being are the same greedy and get-rich-quick schemes that drive the irrigated enterprises of Las Vegas. Everything has turned to silver and salt. There is an alliance between the photographer and the novelist in this attraction to the depopulated West. Turney and Barnhardt share an interest in this landscape not so much for its ghosts but for its ghostliness, its capacity to haunt the contemporary

imagination. Barnhardt emphasizes the contrast between the values that are reflected in Las Vegas and Los Angeles and the small byways in between those two nodes of postmodernity, the connective tissue of the American West that forgotten world conjures up. In *Show World*, a novel written in the era of these summer trips, the protagonist, Samantha Flint, charts her own ruin through the corridor running from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. Stuck in a Sunday evening traffic jam in the Mojave Desert on Interstate 15, Samantha leaves “the highway for the untravelled two-lane roads most non-Californians would never consider taking without survival supplies and a guide.” It is in this desolate landscape in which coyotes and desert fauna emerge that the vestiges of her faint and forgotten moral impulses can be momentarily contemplated. She arrives in Amboy, California, at the junction of the old U.S. Route 66.

Eerie in the moonlight, seemingly two-dimensional like a painted back-drop, a town with every building painted white. Population ten, tops. No lights on anywhere. The pumps at one gas station had been removed; there was a boarded up motel, a weathered white curtain barely stirring in a glassless window. Sam rolled the car to a stop and then flipped off the headlights, turned off the motor. Utter silence.

Her traveling companion asks if anyone lives in the town. “Not anymore.’ She paused. ‘Maybe a few ghosts.’” Perhaps in crafting this scene, Barnhardt already knew what he records about the West, but I feel that this must be what he was taking from the Western trips with Turney and Wakoski for the purposes of his art. The landscape serves as counterpoint and foreshadowing into the slide and downfall of Samantha Flint. Instead of the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg and the Valley of Ashes that Nick Carraway travels through, the Amboys of the world speak their ghostly whispers to all those wayward wayfarers yo-yoing between the clamor of the MGM Grand in Vegas and the chrysanthemum palaces of Hollywood.

In other images one finds Turney following after of Sally Mann, not only the wrenching family portraits but also her work with nineteenth-century wetplate technology that conjures up ghostly, opaque Southern landscapes. In many of these Western images, Turney evokes the sensibility of Mann through the idiom of Evans. To offer these photographic points of reference reminds us that the first crucial choice in these images is the use of analog black and white photography. Like Mann, Turney makes us aware of working through an older technology; he shot with a Hasselblad or a twin lens Rollieflex camera with a fine grain Kodak Tri-X Pan film for, as the manufacturer will inform you, “excellent tone gradation and brilliant highlights.” Though the choice of medium was not a departure, for Turney always works in analog black and white, these images reflect any number of discrete technological and artistic choices: processed in HC-110 (DilB) developing solution, enlarged and printed on selenium-toned Fine Art fiber-based paper, and air dried. As we look at these images we are reminded that analog black and white photography, like the often obsolete objects depicted, has become a retronym in the digital age, like the acoustic guitar and the rotary phone, we indicate the supersedure of one technology by another. There was a time, a time, as it happens, that coincides with the rise and fall of the Old West—a period from the 1840s to the 1930s—in which all photography was more or less analog and all photographic emulsions expressed their luminance in black, white and shades of gray. But in these images taken in the first blush of the digital photographic revolution, Turney urges the viewer to see retronymically, to see through a still powerful, if outmoded technology.

Why this is crucial becomes immediately evident in the first image in the series, “#1 Church Steeple Austin, Nevada, 1995” (Figure 2). In the vocabulary of non-color photography, the perfect lazy azure of the near cloudless Western sky above the gulches of the ghost-ridden mining towns of Nevada is a pure glossy black. The subtly surreal effect of a church in bright sunshine gleaming up into the abyss of heaven evokes the paradoxes found the quiet images of Rene Magritte but one hardly expects to encounter in realist photography. As with Magritte’s “L’Empire des Lumieres,” in which we see a house at evening eerily sitting below a casually blue afternoon sky, Turney’s photograph conveys the static combat between light and dark, generating a pathos derived from traces of human effort barely perceived in an under-populated landscape. Indeed, the glaring sun must be inferred through the Church’s corrugated metal roof, the scuffed and shiny hexagonal steeple, the ghostly wisps of a cloud hiding behind the steeple’s body like an

aura, and the bleached out highlighting on the steeple's cross. Through these details the eye is slowly convinced that it is indeed looking at fossilized daylight. It is a positive print that looks so utterly negative that one can see one's own reflection in its dark surface—what filmmakers call “shooting day for night.” The longer one contemplates it, the longer one realizes what a weird photographic truth it contains. The black beauty of the blue skies of Nevada speak to us as an existential truth that stands for all the ghost towns of the West, of every vein of ore, however rich that must someday be bled dry, of every boom that must eventually go bust, of every perfect day that turns to night. “So dawn goes down to day,” as Robert Frost put it, “nothing gold can stay.” And yet the image in the dark top two-thirds cries out as an article of faith. An illuminated cross reaches up into the black daylight. The bottom third of the image, divided as it is by the church's gable, is caught up in the corrugations of material reality. It is dominated by parallel lines or lines striving for parallelism but interrupted by ripples in the sheets of metal which appear like neat squiggles of cursive, a child's drawing of ocean waves. The slats in the belfry once were parallel but they have fallen in disrepair. Turney's picture seems to show what faith might look like after the laity has departed, shining through the empty noon darkness with all the paradoxically peripheral centrality of the Midwest.

The building depicted, St. Augustine's was constructed in the 1860s, and is one of the first Catholic churches in Nevada. Tickets were sold for seating at the Midnight Mass service on Christmas Eve 1866 to pay for the its roof, glinting like the silver extracted from the Reese River Valley. Fundraising seems to have been at the heart of the community's identity. Austin was an up-and-coming town when the roof revenue of St. Augustine's was raised. Mark Twain mentions it in *Roughing It* in connection with a fundraising campaign for the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War. The people of Austin raised eight thousand dollars in an afternoon, a sum that would goad the larger and wealthier mining towns, like Virginia City, into topping their efforts. “Money was wonderfully plenty,” Twain wrote of that era. “The trouble was, not how to get it,—but how to spend it, how to lavish it, get rid of it, squander it.” The squandered jackpots of one century become the haunted reliquaries of the succeeding ones. Today, with a population of two hundred souls and a number of abandoned silver mines that no longer pay off, the shiny roof of the church glimmers optimistically all through the livelong night that is the day in Austin, Nevada. Turney's photograph slyly establishes a connection between the hard metallic faith (or the faith of hard currency that reads “In God We Trust”) embodied in St. Augustine's roof and steeple, and the large question of faith involved in striking it rich. Turney's picture shows in Austin's Catholic church a visual restatement of the connection between Vegas and the ghostly mining towns in its desert environs in the aspiration for absolution, against increasingly long odds and dark skies.

The second image in the series introduces a counter-theme (Figure 3). It had been hinted at in the corrugations of St. Augustine's with its not quite parallel lines and its weathered geometry. It evidently runs through all of the old mining towns that Turney visited; a house in Bodie also reveals the same inexact attempts at parallelism through corrugated metal and weathered clapboards, and the pattern is repeated in the contrast between the grill of a vintage truck and its buxom fender. The theme emerges in the contrast between the rectilinear marks of the manmade world and the curvilinear contours of the land. These photographs take up the old question of the imposition of order on the natural world, overlaying the curvaceous world with the grid of perspective. If it is said that nature seldom shows us a truly straight line, then Turney's West interrogates the ways that the natural world thwarts and accommodates our desires for rectilinear order. In this photograph he focuses on a shack, which, at first blush, evokes Walker Evans studies of the Gudger's mantelpiece in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with its orderliness in the face of their poverty. Turney's shack in Austin is also tidy, though weathered. It departs from Evans and other photographic investigations of this kind in the framing of the shack with the gray mass of a hill in the background and the comparison it suggests. In this image, the slightly dented corrugations shutter a square and seemingly slightly askew window. They appear as a wavy almost sinusoidal line along the roof edge and are echoed in the orderly but sagging fence wire extending to the wings. On the viewer's right it is square and the squares bow like an old tennis net; on the left finer hexagonal chicken wire. Through the wire, scrub seems to grow over a cap for a pickup truck. Caret-like tracks from the tread of a tire sit quietly in the foreground, and in the middle distance, across the bare mole-colored mass of the hill. Like the spiny hitching post in front of the shack that tethers the viewer's eye (casting a sundial like shadow at two

o'clock), the rough-hewn marks of the imposition of order on the land quietly express a pervasive tension. Everywhere Turney reveals the beauty found in the straight lines of order warping under the rounding pressures of erosion and wear. The shack's straight weathered boards contain knots and whorls beyond all straightening.

If the church steeple of St. Augustine's presents us with the burden of a blue-black sky in which blackness symbolizes a photo-social issue—a truth that emerges only through the vocabulary of black and white photography—then in this picture the gray hills and the gray sky above them signify a different burden. A shack does not possess the same religious aspiration of a church; rather the stark symbolism of the opening image modulates into a gray anonymity. Churches, however desolate, remain public and communal, whereas shacks offer a nameless privacy and a host of gray relations. Therefore, the eye does not know where to rest in Turney's image. Are we looking from the front or back of the property? Is it a humble residence or an outbuilding? Is a more substantial structure behind it might be the main building? While the picture captures a moment of stillness and quiet it has a busy peripheral quality, as if seen from the window of a passing car. Turney's shutter maybe open but the world he records is mostly shuttered. Turney's West presents us with problems of time and memory, issues central to the nature of photography itself. Individual photographs seem to be about what has been forgotten; they stand as emblems of the problem of memory in an age of cultural Alzheimer's. Given that the whole series was culled from years of trips over the same terrain it raises the question of how memory organizes in photography. One image presents memory as linear, another as radial. The church in Austin is tethered to the factual, but the shack from the same community evokes memory as an associative process.

From black to gray, from church to shack, Turney establishes the themes of his Western series, a peripheral, desolate beauty that must speak without words. In these photographs the history of photography meets history itself (not epic history but the visual equivalent of oral history or the history of everyday life); lines of wear etched into the surface of all things meet us on the road and merge with the itineraries of travelers in the process of making their own lines of flight and return. And so when, in the next two images, we happen upon Yosemite, one of the most famous valleys on Earth, following closely in the footsteps of Adams and Weston we are surprised to see Half Dome as a cousin to the gray hill behind the anonymous shack in Austin, or the division of black and gray in the shoreline of Lake Tenaya as an echo of the tension between faith and anonymity.

As I suggested above, Half Dome takes its place among the sacred remnants of the West. Viewed from Glacier Point but framed to afford as much intimacy as possible with such a forbidding formation, we see nothing of the busy valley below only the striations in the rocks and not much of the romance of Adams. On the shore of Lake Tenaya, where Weston and Adams both stood with their cameras, Turney also situates himself and his picture might be construed as homage, but where Weston's 1937 view is all about reflections in the crystalline water, Turney's image makes the shoreline appear like a road (Figure 4). Adams' pictures of Tenaya also emphasize its reflective surface. Weston invited the viewer to see the sensual macroscopic forms in the Western landscape; to find curving patterns and visual equivalencies between the curves of nudes and landscapes. Weston did this not exactly in the way that the old French voyageurs named the Grand Tetons as if they had discovered the breasts of Mother Earth but with the same willingness to make a general connection. His Lake Tenaya places the glacial valley in the reflected surface. Turney's image plays down the reflective surface, much of the reflection is absorbed in darkness, closer to the sky above St. Augustine's Church; he wants to call attention to the irregular white meridians that indicate high water marks, like the striations in the stone around Half Dome and the planks of the ghost town shacks. Shot from a low vantage, Turney's lake is not so much a destination to be arrived at or vista to be admired but a liquid valley to be traversed, a road to be traveled.

We see this motif again in the next image of a scrubby landscape at a muddy bend in the Rio Chama in Northern New Mexico (Figure 5). A color photograph of this same overlook, about mile and a half downstream from the Abiquiu Dam, might reveal the relative verdure of the scene. A few deciduous trees line the riverbend that might suggest a lighter, brighter greenery, but in black and white the dominant idea conveyed is that of shard-strewn fluvial geomorphology moving off into mesas in the middle distance and mirrored in the sky's broken patterns of clouds.

In both shots, Turney has photographed the lakeshore and the river as if it were a lonely highway.

With these themes established in the viewer's mind, Turney turns his attention to the smaller artifacts scattered across this terrain, the found objects of spectral mining towns. These include a piece of tarpaper from Midas that looks like a lost, torn player piano roll, a ruptured screen in Tuscarora, and a mummified letter box in Bodie, California (Figure 6). The weathered fender of a vintage Diamond T R.E.O. truck from Lee Vining (that might have been new when Evans was working for the W.P.A.) slyly reflects back the world in the convex curve of a chrome strip encircling a globular head lamp. Turney's West finds compositional order and beauty in the strewn and dented objects of an underpopulated world.

After traveling through this landscape the viewer arrives at the open gates of the Chimayó sanctuary in New Mexico (Figure 7). Here, the photographer shows us, one may enjoy respite from the trials of faith found in the old mining towns, Wakoski's casinos, or Samantha's show world. Here, the warping and erosion of the rectilinear sits in harmony with the curves of adobe architecture. As if Half Dome in miniature had been fitted with gates for entry into a house of worship, the sanctuary invites you into its quiet precincts. Here the quiet is not a form of desolation for the gates maybe worn and slats may be missing but they are unshuttered and open, and the light and shadow that suffuses the image dances in the free play of shades of gray.

In her Las Vegas book, Wakoski contemplates, among other things, money and photography, Turney's art, and her own art. She ponders the materiality of specie, the vagaries of collecting coins, their physical properties and their relations to the metals that they are made out of, as if the materiality of coins is connected to the metals of photography and the inevitable quiddity of camera work. She quotes Edward Weston in his excitement to photograph vegetables after making so many studies of shells. This vegetal turn in Weston's work would of course lead to, as he says, "many fresh discoveries," especially his famous pepper pictures. She titles one poem "From Shells to Radishes," signaling the turn in Weston's work, and perhaps her own, but it is more a question than an answer. "What does it mean," she asks, "to control the images in your life?" She contemplates the implicit redundancy in the concept of "The camera's eye." Dismissing it, she suggests that it is "nonsense all eyes are cameras." Indeed, but not all images are photographs. Not all images are prisoners of light and luminance they way black and white photographs are and eyes whether photographic or retinal are subject to literal and conceptual forms of blindness. The three travelers take up the materialism of the West from their own purviews. Wakoski is interested in the quiddity of coins and the faith they might inspire; Barnhardt is interested in materialism's erosion of integrity; Turney is interested in the quiddity of objects and the way that photography brings its own emulsified surfaces to bear on the weathered world.

If we grow blind to the ways in which our tools of perception shape our vision it is the task of the artist to restore to our sight the powers and limits of the medium. Turney activates the process of seeing anew through a convergence of geographical, historical, and photographic themes found in the worn surfaces of desolate things. If there is a deep spatio-temporal connection between the Western objects he photographs and the photographic processes he uses to capture them it resides in photography's literal and metaphoric blind spot, the concept of emulsion. Not only are emulsions thin surface layers that paradoxically make the illusion of photographic depth possible, they make it possible to laminate an image to another surface. Derived from that essential colloidal fluid—milk—photographic emulsions consist of silver salts held in suspension, one substance held within another yet distinct from it, awaiting an actinic or photochemical event. So the poet's interest in the material power of coins is not so far from the passion of the photographer. Photography seems to be like the old mining towns of the Western deserts in the sense that they both find their power in precious metals suspended in solutions and time.