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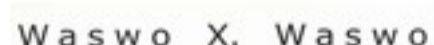
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A PILGRIMAGE IN SEARCH OF ROBERT FRANK'S AMERICANS



Jonathan Day, Hollywood Premiere, 'Postcards from the Road', Lumevisum, Hong Kong, 2015.

Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015

by Jonathan Day

The extensive contemporary discussions around online platforms have revolutionised our understanding of photographic destinations. In its great variety—between semi professional showcase platforms such as Flickr, through social media sharing ostensibly for fun, to personally tailored and curtailed sharing sites such as Snapchat, photography has been radicalised by these technological developments. One of the predilections of the internet is the anonymising and occluding of authorship. Anonymous photography is in itself hugely interesting, but for now let's restrict ourselves and assume that we still have an interest

in the notion of authorship. Is there a place for the notion of the 'artist' in online sharing and photography? If the internet is a mass of neo-anonymous output, structured and re-structured constantly by algorithmic operations, as the gallery and archive retrench and become increasingly defensive and exclusive in increasingly desperate attempts at life-boating themselves, is there now a place for the power of the artist? It seems to me that such a place has existed since the early 20th century and is experiencing an enormous resurgence at the moment, exactly because of digital technology and the internet. It is not without problems of its own, certainly, but it offers the possibility of independence, of longevity, a curated statement and of being signally identified as the author of the works contained, with all the notions of 'career' that accompanies. It is the book.

In the last several years a wealth of photographers' books have been released—many self published, many released by specialist houses. Themes are heterogeneous—from fantasies around space programmes that never actually existed<sup>1</sup> to philosophical travelogue<sup>2</sup>. What are common to all of these are a renewed confidence in, passion for and commitment to the form of the photographic book. I share that interest deeply and this led me to conceive and develop for publication my book *The American Road*<sup>3</sup>. I wanted to base my book on perhaps the most influential photographic book ever—the book that set the stage for almost everything that followed—Robert Frank's *The Americans*<sup>4</sup>.

I have for a long time been fascinated by the photographs in Robert's work. They shine a searchlight back onto a time that is lost to us now, staring mutely out of his pages. The book was published in the year I was born: it helps explain my world. No surprise, then, that I should set out to search for the remnants of the America he pictured, to see how 50 years have changed it—what has gone and what remains.

Frank's friend and co-worker, the writer Jack Kerouac, has also been important for me. His *On the Road*<sup>5</sup> was a life-affirming text for me as someone already travelling, already on my own road, when I encountered his. Through him I noticed others among the 'Beats'<sup>6</sup>, and their worldview seemed to chime with mine—sharing an interest in Zen and an appreciation of music and painting. I wanted to see what lasting effect their freewheeling rhetoric and often radical lives had on America. Was there any real trace of them left in its warp and weft? Or are they consigned to the footnotes of history—like the quirky San Fran Beat Museum, an occasional TV documentary and the less-than-spectacular 2012 *On the Road*<sup>7</sup> cinema release.

Frank and Kerouac travelled together—one taking pictures, the other writing. Some of my favourite of Frank's images came out of their travels. As they drove down the American East Coast, Kerouac observed wryly, "that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand"<sup>8</sup>. Some of Robert's key *Americans* images were taken on this trip.

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So, lacking such a friend, I wanted to make a book that melted photographs and writing together, emulsified these oil-and-water elements and pasted them *impasto* onto paper. Pictures and words, even handed—not illustrations serving text, or captions serving images—hand in hand the two, instead, in hierarchical equality.

My photographs, like Frank's, were taken in America, over a period of a couple years, and perhaps 20,000 miles of road. They are reactions to his originals, sometimes taken in the same place, but mostly not. I realised after a little while that he was searching for moments, things which caught his eye, ways of talking with the world. I knew I was not going to find them in the same places—they are as much about time as place—although I did, actually, once or twice. I thought about his messages, glass bottled and arcane, and how time has changed things—looked for the impressions he and the Beats made, or at their absence, the 'negative' American space they used to inhabit.

My book will be a result of my musings, and here is a small selection of moments: strung like pearls on a string, translucent milk-white things, rainbow chased, their pitted surfaces scarred by heavy wear and the worrying of fingers.

•

The Vesuvio Café, San Francisco, is old, like the district. During the Gold Rush, when Chinatown was threatened by the authorities, the shop owners shot at the council until they desisted. The ghost of that defiance lingers here still, seeping up through drain covers and pooling in gutters. Stained glass windows canonise bottles of Sierra Nevada: an amber shining amidst Titian blue skies, colouring the howling night, brightening the darkness in Kerouac Alley outside. The air is stained with bleach, vomit and alcohol, all melding together like washed out watercolour paint. A mirror in the bathroom is scratched with the names of pilgrims. I drink in the gallery, between a photograph of 1950s women and a Gold Rush era nude. One is a record of real women, who maybe Kerouac and Cassady wooed on these very stools. Certainly they are gift-wrap layered like their lovers: powder, eyeliner, 'Victory' red lipstick, corsets, nylons and 'New Look' chiffon. The painting is a naked promise, soft as marshmallow, smooth as rose petals, the ancient pigment pert and willing. It is cracked now, as the oils (like skin) have dried, revealing the lie; nonetheless charming, nonetheless comforting for me. I feel I am at sea in a wide, wild ocean, far from home, far from land. Content though, carried on these stormy gusts. It's a relief, a need I've spent a lifetime knowing, hungering deeply within for something, still unsatisfied yet. Something I know is out there, something I know Kerouac found, even if he couldn't hold it long, even if (in the end) it let him down.

•

How long does it take to fall in love? A minute, an hour, a day? The bright, strange Carolina night is high and brilliant, as I knew it would be on those long miles down from the mountains. Fireflies are dancing with the stars—only the scent of Mimosa stops them flying away for ever. The sound of wind and waves outside my door, sunrise over the water, intense light filling the air and turning it the quietest kind of golden. Tiny seabirds are dancery, scurrying along the bite marks of the breakers.



Jonathan Day, *Chesapeake Virginia*, 'Postcards from the Road',

Lumevisum,

Hong Kong, 2015. Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015



Jonathan Day, *Art Institute—San Francisco*,

'Postcards from the Road', Lumevisum, Hong Kong, 2015.

Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015

I breakfast from a shack selling quesadillas and an old man passionately hawking fruit. South, afterwards, to Hatteras and the North Carolina ferry (toll free) squatting on the ocean like a water boatman bug. The ferry captain weaves between shoals, as the pirates did, sailing to the haunt of Blackbeard. Sitting on the porch of Ocracoke Coffee, heavy with the scent of Carolina Jasmine, I am shaded by lonesome pines as a warm breeze rustles the leaves, brilliant green against the light. It is everything I had almost forgotten about summer. Sunlight on the dusty streets hangs in the air between low wooden buildings hiding in the bushes.

Out along the brilliant beach, scattered with more of the darting waders, legs-a-blur as they trot up and down the sand, choreographed by waves and tide. Phalaropes, turnstones and dunlin: they seem happy with their lives. Dead creatures lie on the strand line: their dance is done and their broken remains feed again the land from which their fiery incredible beings were born. Somewhere among the sands and pools I saw an osprey casually fly over with a fish in its talons. Just as if this was everyday and not at all spectacular—which I guess for an osprey it is. The evening sucked the colour from the russet bill of a cormorant and the brilliant crimson of a blackbird's red wing. Sunrise and sunset over the Atlantic, from this debatable land, lost out there somewhere in the waves.

•

San Francisco—city of dreams for me, as a child in Africa. Walking the streets of Johannesburg, I longed for the flowers in your hair. Nine years old, I was eye level with the hemlines of mini dresses. I still recall the perfectly tanned thighs and paisley clad bottoms of two girls walking in Berea. I knew their liberation was thanks to you and, though having no clear understanding yet of the deep joy those swinging hips would bring, was grateful.

Now a chill potato patch fog grips the morning, chill and damp. The Golden Gate is a hollow maw, growling deepest grey. Last night a jazz trumpeter played as the homeless howled a nightlong litany outside my boutique hotel window. Take a trolley bus to North Point and Chinatown; I am in the dark thick dream of it now. Found a strange and jarring place—the Beat Museum, made of tin-tack typewriters and ratty couches facing dead faces, talking from the grave. Old and obscure paperbacks are around, and an over-zealous assistant, his hard sell inadequately obscured by excessive obsequiousness. Fun though, in a way, to browse the fake and barely believable ephemera. Something of a sense of how these streets might have been before they were (in)famous. Funnily, amongst the tat, a book called *Jesus was a Beatnik*. And there it is, the soul-question and definition-heart of Frank. Robert said he was, “pursuing, sometimes catching the essence of the black and white, the knowledge of where God is”<sup>9</sup> and Jack Kerouac called him out with a line or two:

“I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything. Somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me”<sup>10</sup>.

Understanding, I think, is what they were seeking, something standing strong against the blizzard of bewilderment. Dharma bums, *saddhus* of the American streets. That makes them saints then, certainly—but not ones any church I know would canonise.

•

It is an almost token gesture, the LA subway—perfunctory and vestigial, with just a couple of lines. It has underground stations, escalators and ticket machines—all the stuff you would expect—paternosters, airflow towers and advertising. At each platform's end the dark hollow maws are appropriately full of dread and promise, symbolic wormholes drilling the city's roots. The issue is its scope: there just isn't enough of it to be taken seriously. The Chicago 'L' or the New York subway, now those are places with definite cultures, deeply cinematic—think *Underworld* or *Spiderman*. But LA? Somehow it doesn't cut it.



Jonathan Day, *Men's Room*, 18 x 12 inches,  
'Postcards from the Road', Lumevisum, Hong Kong, 2015.  
Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015

Travelling to see a musician friend, marooned out in the Valley, I entered the hissing doors with a gaggle of others, San Fernando bound. A girl there caught my attention. I have wondered if it was that she seemed so young to be in clothes so skimpy on this workaday train. But I don't think so—there were others also minimally dressed. It was something else, ineffable almost, like a shifting veil or a change in atmosphere that can bring far-off vistas close. She carried some condition, seeping somehow out of her pores. I took the photo on instinct, and forgot about the moment. Later I came across it again and for the first time I noticed, like a sigil, her Playboy tattoo. The

Valley is the Hollywood of porn, the biggest manufacturer of sex films in the world. So young, trying so hard to be sexy—I don't know if my math is good; I'll leave the decision to you.

•

Deep in the belly of a railway station, the enormous kind that only cities spawn, I needed a toilet. Signs led me around corner after corner, up and down entirely purposeless seeming steps. Eventually, as if hidden away like a treasure, there was a men's room, wrapped in a concrete and strip light womb. Stuck with little mosaic tiles, of a dirty terracotta tone—burnt umber perhaps, or something other—designed to complement the colour of piss. The tungsten light stained it yellow on yellow, a place to forget about, to ignore. In the corner,

an old man was impish faced in a white overall jacket—standing by a table arranged with toilet paper and a mug for tips. I asked if I could photograph him, here in this netherworld—a kind of purgatory it seemed to me, not hellish, quite, neither rattling heaven's door.

My camera decided to mix him up with the street outside on this snowy night, bringing some kind of air and light to the eternal buzz of filaments and the distant rumble of tunnelled diesels. Somehow this image has become a thing for me of beauty, capturing better than anything that frozen winter town. The biting air, the bitter sky and the incalculable masses, marooned there with little option—land of the free, home of the brave.

Along a way from grand isle, in among the dendritic turns of water and silt, I found a man called Ray. Raymond, in the *Monde Creole* Arcadian French, like my kids' favourite firefly in *The Princess and the Frog*<sup>11</sup>. What a man he was, sitting immovable, as if the strength of ages held him by rights to this place. Fastened to this soil with the roots of trees, chained to the Bayou by birth, need and predilection. He sat outside a shack selling live bait—minnows at 20 cents, live shrimps at 15. Knocked together out of bits of plank, impermanent as the shifting land. Behind him was his 'house' of sorts. It is a trailer home, not too unusual, that. But hanging 5 metres above the ground, held by a rickety looking rank of hand built timber hangers. Ray has hoisted his world above the worst of the hurricanes' force. I am guessing he is one of those who stays. I am fine to take his photograph, he says, but endures it like a kid getting a haircut or having his face cleaned with an aunty's spit-moistened handkerchief. "Caught me 12 redfish last night, right here in the creek," he exclaims, sure that will leave me amazed. If I could properly describe how I saw those imagined monsters, as red as tandoori powder, lit from within, electrical down there in the murk and the muddiness, woven into swamp grass, eating monstrous many-legged things.

It is a little awkward between he and I—he is a man of few words I can see, more used to boats and bait than conversation. But I linger, nonetheless, next to his cigarettes and root beer, just to wonder how it would be to live here and be him, in this mermaid land of water. I can feel the treacle-dense darkness, covering everything in its quiet flood, hear the water plop of giant redfish taunting me with every swallowed fly, taste the half-salt, half-silt fillets which, after an excess of eating, leave him almost as much fish as they. I pull on another cheap Pall Mall cigarette, take a slug of Barg's root beer and wake up from my afternoon drowsiness, bid Ray farewell and get out of there.



Jonathan Day, *Prairie*, 'Postcards from the Road',  
Lumevisum, Hong Kong, 2015.

Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015

Driving ever onward into darkness, and the realisation that Nebraska was bigger than I could have imagined. I pulled into a truck stop, beyond North Platte, near Cozad. After the pre-sleep rituals in the final minutes of consciousness, I read a typical rest-stop plaque, telling the story of the place. Battles everywhere around, apparently, in this solemn, hot and quiet land. Fights between Cheyenne and Lakota, US Cavalry and indigenes, and the slaughter of wagon trains, tattered canvas blowing cloud-white beneath the endless sky. A fellowship of some kind came between me and these unquiet dead. Irish and Scottish farmers and families looking for a life—only to find it horribly ended on the end of a knife in the half-light of Nebraska. And with the red men on their warm beasts dressed in Buckskin, caught on a lance, or an arrow tip. How, I wondered, would it be to wander forever lost in this featureless land. I felt for a long time after that, some part of me was left there, that night, wandering forever those endless plains. Crying out to the human beings, searching for other spirits beneath the stars, eyes ghostly wide and appealing for comfort, never again able to hold the small hands of home. I feel a shiver now as I write, and the reality of dying there, never making it back, is real still for me, as my children sleep quietly upstairs and the English night rocks me softly in its arms. There is a strange sky too, outside, full of far off fires I will never clearly see—but I am habituated to it, and this is as near as I will get to home.

Sitting in the town of speculator, in the Adirondack Mountains. Winding narrow roads, pristine and spruced holiday cabins next to dilapidated and collapsing mountain homes, yards filled with rusting eight litre pickup trucks. One of these, still drawing breath, had 'Girls Love Muddy Rubber' stuck to its door. The fat driver bore testament to his bumper sticker: a svelte blonde was riding alongside.

I'm sitting in a small park, hard by a lake. A little family with a couple of kids are quietly fishing a way off. A wonderful wind is coming from the west; more than a breeze, less than a hurricane, maybe the remnants of the rain storm that plink plunked all night on my truck in Wisconsin, or a balance perhaps to the Beryl storm that pounds the Carolina shores to the south and evacuates the islanders as I write. Fresh and cooling after a hot day, birthing lines of waves broken and uneven but, like all the Universe, with a rightness to the jumble, a reassurance, a sense of home.

It's a wide country, drawing away from these quiet and civilised mountains—rising in the twirling blarney of the Blue Ridge, banjo picked and stilled in Great Smoky black forests, to the high white Rockies, South Parked and Arapaho. My journey is like a string, a thousand beads strung on it, burned in memory, assimilating even

as I write. Maybe Wordsworth was wrong to lionise “emotion recollected in tranquillity”<sup>12</sup>; maybe all tranquillity does is ameliorate the rawness.



Jonathan Day, *North Dakota*, 'Postcards from the Road',

Lumevisum, Hong Kong, 2015.

Image courtesy: © Jonathan Day 2015

The journey has been characterised by speed, often the need to move on detracting, it has seemed, from a deeper engagement. Inevitable of course, but what has been gained, as I see now, is a sense of the scope, range and size of the country, from the steamy South to this quiet Northern place. The evening is deepening; I am spruce from parasitising a busy campsite's afternoon shower-block, but have nowhere yet to sleep.

The smell of pine, the call of the mockingbird in a black night, an orange spike of eclipsed sun setting over the Rio Grande, airless, open, wooded mountain valleys—the roof of the

world. Wide, slow rivers, a brilliant smile in the brownest of faces, the glow of a European girl's eyes behind an American voice in a Wilmington, North Carolina cafe. The whirl and twirl of New Orleans busy and polychrome, hookered and harlot, horns in the evening, baritone rumble to the tune of tubas, out to its hinterland, through water and land, where people live in the air and park their fishing boats outside their houses, on a watery street. The strength, almost frightening, of the Rocky Mountain rocks, the scoured canyon of the Big Thompson, carved into the granite as if it was caramel, thrown and rowing its cascade. The churned and extruded high plains between Ten Sleep and Cody. A wonderful place: yellow, black and red songbirds into endless seeming farmlands of the Mid West, friends hunkered deep in their black lake soil. Wonder if I will see them again. Music beneath and around it all, swirling notes of potentiality, building from the softest, most unbearable beginnings until at some point I know they will break the surface of song and realise themselves in the white blur of a moment. I can feel them now, rising almost infinitely slowly from the depths, *de profundis*... Maybe an hour of light, enough for me to get lost again in the wildness of the American night.

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**Prof. Jonathan Day** works as a writer, musician and image-maker. His publications include *Postcards from the Road* (University of Chicago Press), *Atlantic Drifter* (Proper Records), *The Politics of Navigation* (Verlag DM), *Carved in Bone* (Proper Records) and *The Stain of Time* (Aalto University Press).

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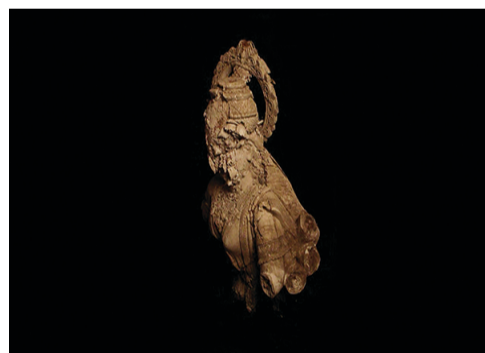
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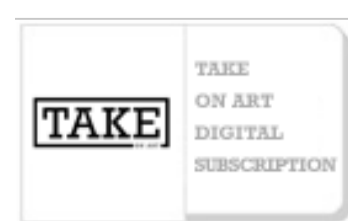
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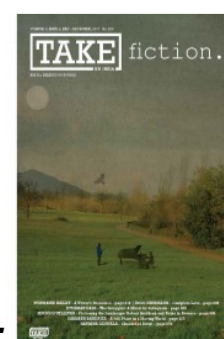
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