

THESIS

THE NEXT WEST

Submitted by

Dirk Hobman

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Master's Committee:

Department Chair: LeRoy Poff

Advisor: Rick Knight

Dan Binkley

Mark Fiege

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ABSTRACT

THE NEXT WEST

The “New West” is a term with a history that spans almost two centuries. The following collection of photographs and text questions the longevity of this term while asking what lies ahead in the Next West. As viewers peruse these pages, the photographer asks that they keep in mind that the work presented herein complies with formatting rules set forth by Colorado State University. It unfortunately does not reflect the manner in which the work is intended to be seen. For further information, please contact the photographer at dh@dirkhobman.com.

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The Next West

“I’m looking for the New West,” you say to the nurse at the front desk.

“Third floor. Left out of the elevator. Fifth door on the right past the soda machine. The room with hospice,” she replies without so much as looking up from the book she’s reading. *The Sound of Mountain Water* sneaks a glance at you from behind pudgy fingers.

A gold Rolex dangles from a skinny wrist hanging over the side of the bed. Various instruments beep to the beat of a drummer whose days with the band are numbered. The watch conspires with the wrinkles to reveal the age of the owner.

“Who wears watches anymore?” you think to yourself. The cell phone manufacturers digested that market years ago.

The figure before you lies unmoving and barely breathing. You pull up the chart at the end of the bed. The history of the patient unfolds before your eyes, page after detailed page. An entry from Samuel Bowles in 1869 titled *Our New West* coincides with the completion of the transcontinental railroad. William Thayer’s *Marvels of the New West* from 1887 includes a medical prediction that, “The nation will rise or fall with the New West.”¹ Dr. Frederick Jackson Turner, still famous after all these years for his 1893 essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, appears under *The Rise of the New West: 1819-1829*.

You flip forward several pages to discover the notes of a visual therapist from 1974. Highlighting images from the Colorado Front Range, Robert Adams titled his seminal history and physical after the body that lies before you, *The New West*. A 1992 radiology exam originates from Charles Wilkinson’s *The Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West*. You see detailed and thoughtful

¹ William M. Thayer, *Marvels of the New West* (Norwich: The Henry Bill Publishing Company, 1887), xxxiii.

entries from a team of doctors in 1997 under the heading *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*. Timothy Egan lists *Lasso the Wind: Away to the New West* in 1998.

The insightful commentary, *Something In The Soil: Legacies And Reckonings In The New West*, from specialist Dr. Patricia Nelson Limerick in 2000 leads you to a new appreciation of the depth and character of the patient. You discover that the dismal science certainly didn't derive its moniker from the diagnoses of Thomas Michael Power and Richard Barrett in their 2001 *Post Cowboy Economics: Pay and Prosperity in the New American West*. In 2005 David Chicoine offers ER insights in *Guns of the New West*. Chase Reynolds Ewald proffers the view of a nutritionist in 2008 with dietary details in *New West Cuisine: Fresh Recipes from the Rocky Mountains*. You note a recent prescription from 2009 under *Remedies for a New West: Healing Landscapes, Histories, and Cultures* edited by Patricia Nelson Limerick, Andrew Cowell, and Sharon K. Collinge.

"This is a patient with a pedigree," you mumble aloud to no one in particular. You wonder what will happen when the instruments in the room finally stop beeping. Who will fill these shoes?

The sheets rustle like tumble weed traversing a dusty Nevada desert.

"What does it look like, this Next West?" whispers a tired old New West.

“You have unreasonable expectations,” she said as she walked away.

“Is it a consequence of living in the American West?” I asked myself. Surely others had maintained at least as many unreasonable expectations at any given time. What about Wallace Stegner? Hadn’t his commentary about “a society to match the scenery” in the West ranked near the top of the unreasonable expectation hit list?

“The problem of the West is nothing less than the problem of American development... What is the West? What has it been in American life? To have the answers to these questions is to understand the most significant features of the United States today.”²

Frederick Jackson Turner, 1920

² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1920), 205.

To begin to understand the landscapes of the American West, much less the nation as a whole, answer the following riddle:

You're standing in the door of your house at Point A.
You walk one mile due south to Point B.
Then you turn right and walk another mile due west to Point C.
And then, suddenly, you see a WILD BEAR!
So you turn right and race one mile due north, where you arrive safely back home.

WHAT COLOR WAS THE BEAR?³

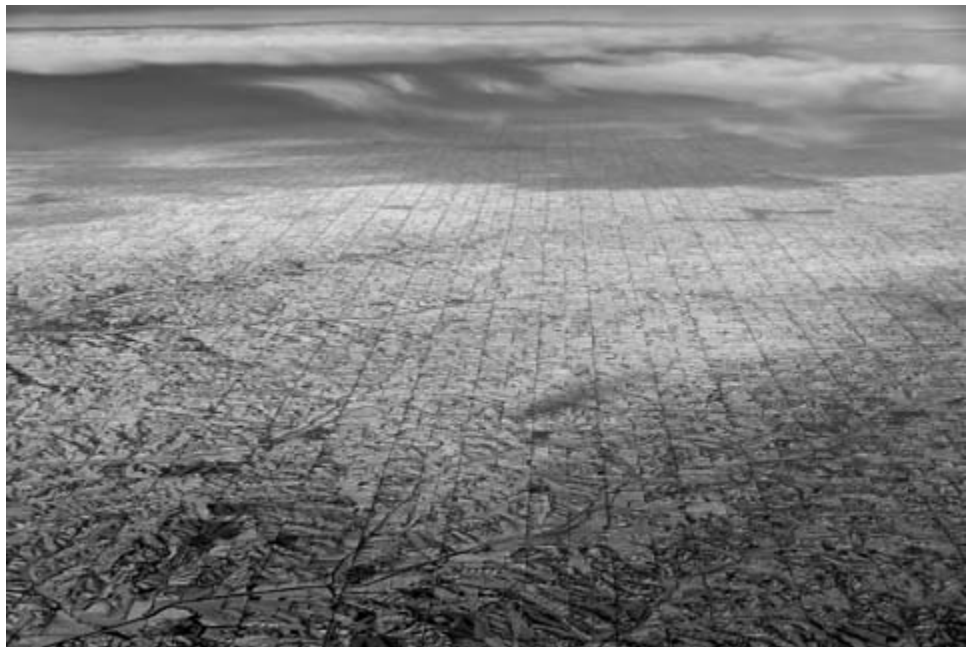
The Grid, From A Flight Between New York City, New York, And Denver, Colorado (2007)

Hint: From sea to shining sea, over purple mountain majesties, and upon the fruited plains was it laid.

³ Curt Meine, *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004), 190.



Powerlines, Clouds, Colorado (2000)



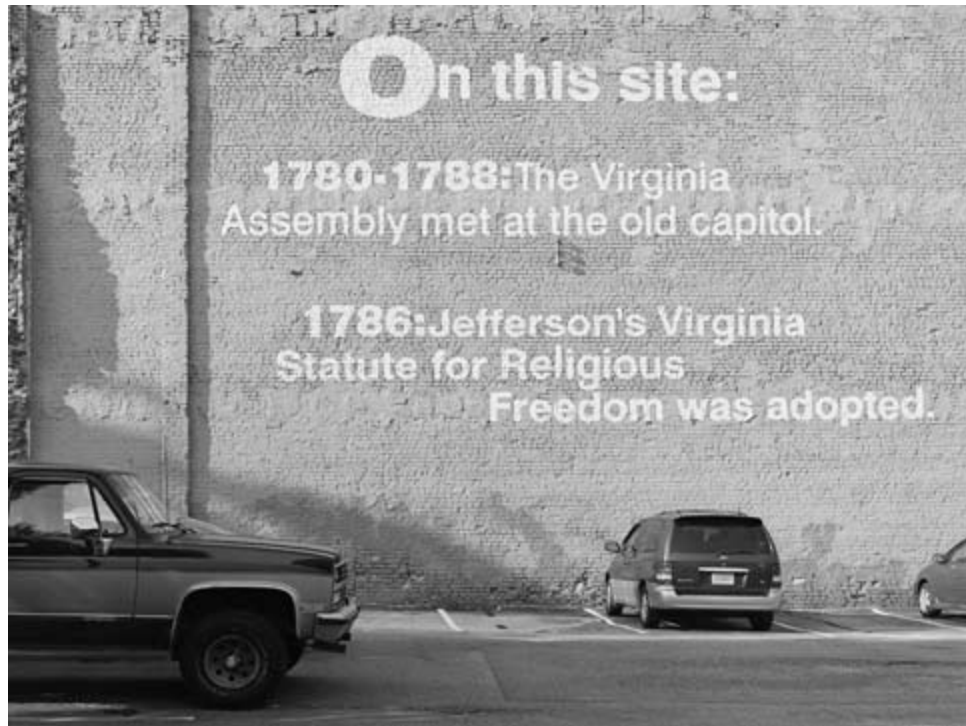
The Grid, From A Flight Between New York City, New York, And Denver, Colorado (2007)

On This Site, Richmond, Virginia (2006)

On this site:

2006: We parked our cars.

With the market for inspiration and high ideals paved over in the East, the market – and we along with it – moved west.



On This Site, Richmond, Virginia (2006)

Grand Canyon, From The North Rim (2002)

“If I were an American, I should ask myself is this good enough to exist in the same country as the Canyon? How would I feel about this man, this kind of art, these political measures, if I were near the Rim?”⁴

“I have heard rumors of visitors who were disappointed. The same people will be disappointed at the Day of Judgment.”⁵

British author J.B. Priestley, after visiting the Grand Canyon on two separate occasions in the 1930s

⁴ Blaine Harden, “At Grand Canyon, No Way To Run A Railroad,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2002, U.S. section.

⁵ Henry Shukman, “Walking Into the Earth’s Heart: The Grand Canyon,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2009, Travel section.



Grand Canyon, From The North Rim (2002)

“Goodbye God. I’m going to Bodie.”⁶

Anonymous diary entry from a young girl upon learning that her family was moving from San Francisco, California to the mountain mining town of Bodie, California. 1800s.

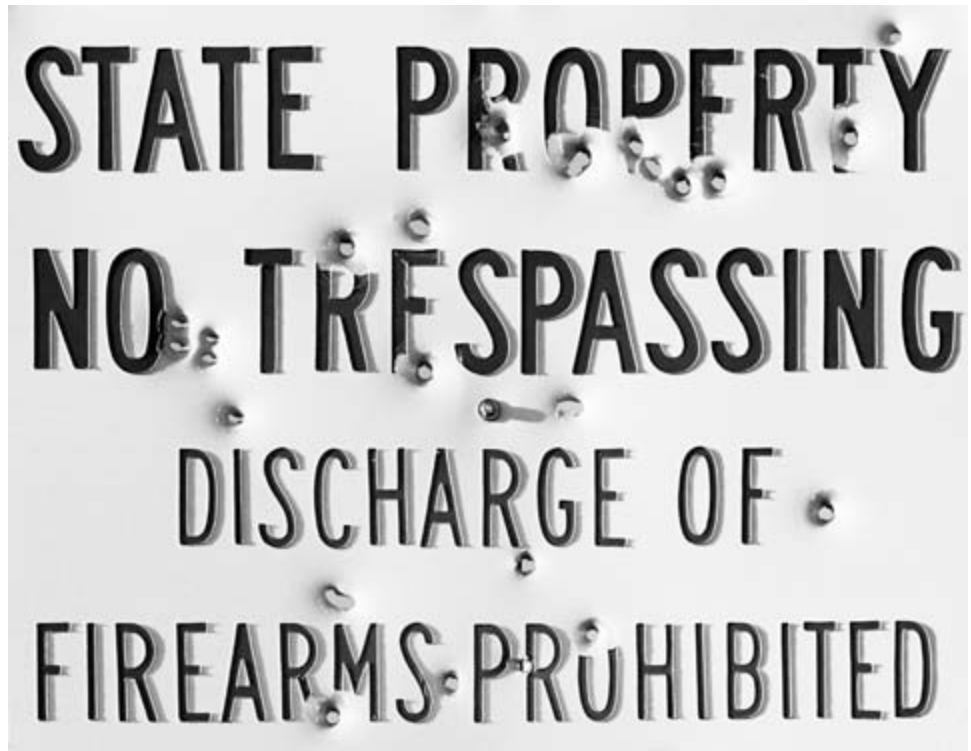
SURGEON GENERAL’S WARNING: Quitting Nostalgia For The Past Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks To Your Ability To Understand The Present State Of The American West. Mining Towns Of The American West Contain/Produce Chemicals And Related Hazards Known To The State Of California To Cause Cancer, Birth Defects, Or Other Reproductive Harm. Inhabitants Have Also Suffered From Diarrhea, Dysentery, Bronchitis, Silicosis, Typhoid Fever, Diphtheria, Small Pox, Scarlet Fever, Hypothermia, Mercury Poisoning, Alcoholism, Bullet Wounds, Abject Poverty, And Death. And Should You Find A Modicum Of Nostalgia In The History Of The Western Cowboy Instead Of The Western Miner, The Surgeon General Urges You To Consider That The Quintessential Western Cowboy, The Marlboro Man, Died Of Lung Cancer.

⁶ *Bodie State Historic Park*. Sacramento, California: California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1988.



Reflecting On The Past, Bodie, California (2001)

Approximately 50% of the land in the American West is publicly owned. In Nevada, this proportion rises to 85%. This fact, when tossed in the blender with the Western myth of rugged individualism, has been known to give birth to a certain degree of conflict.



Signpost, Nevada (1999)

PEPSI: It's a Great American Custom.⁷

DIET PEPSI: The Choice of a New Generation.⁸

DR. PEPPER: Makes the World Go Round.⁹

7-UP: You Like It, It Likes You.¹⁰

Got milk?

⁷ 1947 slogan.

⁸ 1984 slogan.

⁹ 2006 slogan.

¹⁰ 1937 slogan.



Utah (2001)

A Four Piece Conversation:

“Whiskey is for drinkin’, water is for fightin’ over,” said the old adage of the American West.¹¹

“The meek shall inherit the earth, but not the mineral rights,” chortled oil magnate J. Paul Getty.¹²

“The meek haven’t got a prayer,” rejoined the refrigerator door magnet.

“Oil and water mix quite nicely, as long as you’re the owner of the rights,” commented the photographer.

¹¹ This comment is often attributed to Mark Twain.

¹² Patricia Nelson Limerick et al., *What Every Westerner Should Know About Energy* (Boulder: Center of the American West, 2003), 20.



Oil / Gas Wells, From A Flight Between Denver, Colorado And Phoenix, Arizona (2010)

“When all the rivers are used, when all the creeks in the ravines, when all the brooks, when all the springs are used, when all the reservoirs along the streams are used, when all the canyon waters are taken up, when all the artesian waters are taken up, when all the wells are sunk or dug that can be dug in this arid region, there is still not enough water to irrigate all this arid region... I tell you, gentlemen, you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation over water rights, for there is not sufficient water to supply these lands.”¹³

John Wesley Powell, speaking to the Irrigation Congress
in Los Angeles, California in 1893

A Primer On Cause And Effect Relationships:

CAUSE	EFFECT
Kate kicks the ball.	The ball rolls.
Kevin drops the glass.	The glass breaks.
The Rio Grande silvery minnow lays eggs that hatch in 24 hours.	The Rio Grande silvery minnow dominates the 1,850 miles of the Rio Grande River.
Accelerating human demands for Rio Grande water begin to exceed supply.	The Rio Grande River runs dry in parts and often fails to reach the Gulf of Mexico.
The Rio Grande silvery minnow population falls to less than 5% of its original numbers.	The Rio Grande silvery minnow is listed as an endangered species on July 20, 1994.
A U.S. district judge rules that some 12,000 farmers and the city of Albuquerque can be forced to relinquish Rio Grande water to protect the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow. ¹⁴	Lawsuits fly.

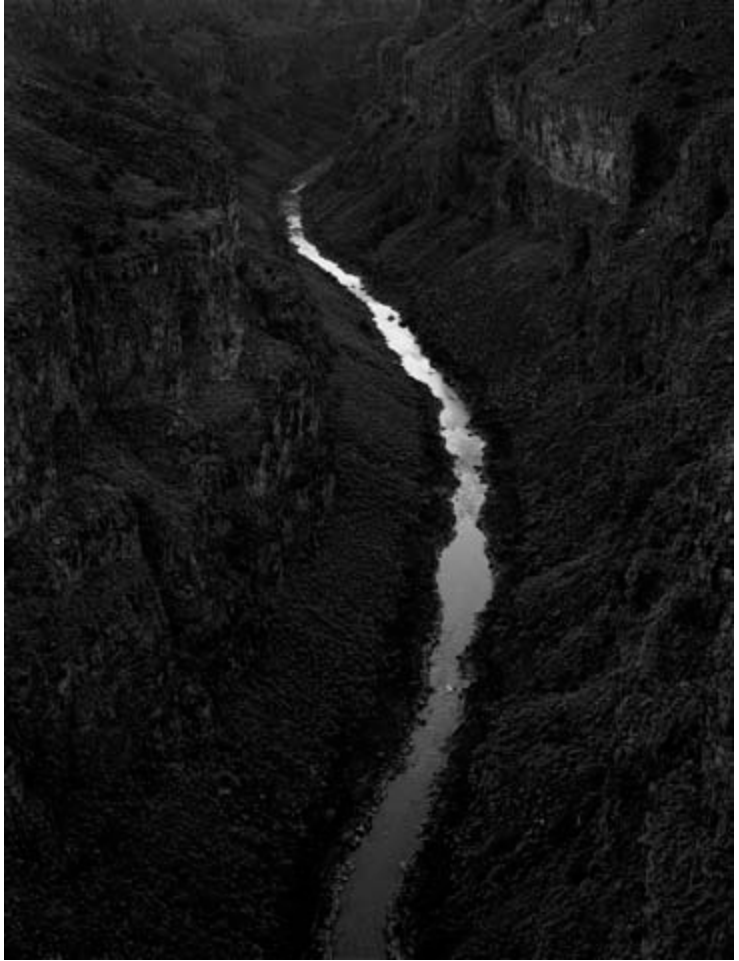
My sister, a kindergarten teacher, took 5 year old Bradley by the hand and walked him down to the nurse’s office on the first floor for a clean-up. As Bradley clung to my sister with one hand and the stairway railing with the other, he innocently explained, “I thought it was a bubble,

¹³ Patricia Nelson Limerick and Claudia Puska, *Making the Most of Science in the American West: An Experiment* (Boulder: Center of the American West, 2003), 21.

¹⁴ Laura Paskus, “Truce remains elusive in Rio Grande water fight,” *High Country News*, August 4, 2003.

but it came out as a poop.” Those who study the complex interplay of cause and effect in the history of the American West will tell you that this kind of thing happens all the time.¹⁵

¹⁵ To paraphrase Douglas Adams, had he been a scholar of the American West instead of the Universe at large.



Rio Grande River, New Mexico (2001)

Excerpt from a letter from the photographer to his friend Kate:

Kate,

...

My records tell me that I shot this image in the general region of your new home on August 5th, 2002. Surely it was done in anticipation of your eventual move. I have to admit that I find a certain beauty in the smooth curves of this landscape highlighted by a sinking submarine summer sun. The shapes and the light reminded me of photographing sand dunes in Death Valley. Just as in the dunes, this particular location struck me by an unusual silence and desolation. Of course, one expects this of 115 degree sand piles. I'm not sure that one should expect this of rural Washington. I recall passing through one small town nearby with a single main street crowded by beautiful old brick buildings. Yet almost every window had been boarded up. I found the absence of any kind of human presence entirely disturbing. Was it the aliens again? Or does cheap food from large scale industrial farming carry costs which we haven't properly accounted for?

And where in this image is there room for the chirpers, the buzzers, the squeakers, the howlers, and the hooters? Ok. Maybe there's room for a nice pair of hooters in the distant dilapidated barn, but you tell me what they're going to dine on. Dirt? Photographer's light?

I sometimes imagine this landscape stretching to infinity and beyond (this was encouraged by the fact that I shot this photo from a gully so couldn't actually see anything beyond the immediate horizon anyway). Am I off in thinking that it wouldn't kill us to bump up the level of accommodations for the local inhabitants? Couldn't we spare some room in the inn for a slightly feathery and furrer crowd? Surely some portion of this land could have been left as native prairie.

...

Dirk

Excerpt from a letter to the photographer from friend, mentor, and historian, Mark Fiege:

Dirk,

...

You are right to be skeptical about agriculture. But I think it is imperative that we differentiate what is wrong from what is right. The mining of the soil, the connection between agriculture and colonial conquest, the astonishing abuse of power, the degradation of the land in general – these are to be decried. The act of producing food, the quest to sustain both land and families, the effort to reconcile democratic civilization with ecology, these are to be cherished, celebrated, and fought for. The beauty that inheres in a landscape in which all-too-human farmers try to reconcile their goals with nature – this should be the foundation for something greater. We must eat, and we must find a way of using the land that allows our perception of beauty to match our knowledge that the beauty is not skin-deep but rather a sign of ecological and moral integrity.

To me, that the Declaration of Independence calls Indians "savages" and that Congress deleted references to slavery does not diminish the truths that the document

addressed. That Jefferson and other Founding Fathers were slaveholders and elitists does not destroy my belief that they laid out some worthy principles. That the United States deliberately bombed civilians in WWII does not detract from my knowledge that although this is an imperfect civilization, it is often animated by high ideals. That the United States destroyed innocent people in the conflict does not undermine my knowledge that my father came home from the war psychologically wounded but deeply committed to the belief that he had fought to destroy something truly evil and inimical to the concept that every human life has value. So, too, that agriculture is destructive does not detract completely from my belief that some things about it – the dignity of laboring in nature, the production of food for children, the need for citizens in a republic to dirty their hands, the beauty of a field or pasture – are profoundly good and true. We cannot expect perfection from the world. We can only expect of ourselves that we try to build upon what is right about what we do. Perfection is the standard of religious zealots and absolutists.

Some people think that the project of agriculture – indeed the project of humanity – is a lost cause and that we are a rogue species worthy of our impending extinction. I can't accept this – I can't accept this and be a citizen, a teacher, a friend, a husband, and a father.

Mark



Farm, Eastern Washington (2002)



1972 Strip Mine View Cartoon By Dana Fraden From “The Complete Cartoons Of The New Yorker” On The Kitchen Table Of The Photographer (2010)



View From The Strip Mine View, Utah (2002)



Half Dome, Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park, California (2007)

“You’ve never seen Yosemite?” asked the shocked Frenchman.

“What are you doing here?! Go back and see your own country!” he exclaimed to my friend Buffy.

“Return here only when you’re finished.”



O'Shaughnessy Dam, Hetch Hetchy Valley, Yosemite National Park, California (2001)

O'Shaughnessy Dam in Yosemite National Park helps provide 85% of San Francisco's water. The San Francisco Water Department argued that the dam saved Hetch Hetchy Valley from the blight of excessive tourism.¹⁶

"Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man,"¹⁷ argued John Muir, who considered the valley's beauty to exceed that of Yosemite Valley.

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 226.

¹⁷ John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York: The Century Company, 1912), 262.

Three Perplexing Questions:

1. What if the Hokey-Pokey isn't what it's all about?
2. If we can't remember the past, what *can* we remember?
3. Is the photograph still beautiful if you know that the landscape is overrun by the invasive species, cheatgrass?



Cheatgrass Landscape, Near Reno, Nevada (1996)

Pictured from left to right:

1. *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* by Isabella L. Bird, 1873.

On the cover: *Yosemite Valley from Glacier Point* by William E. Hahn, 1874.

2. Naturally Boulder Rocky Mountain Artesian Water. "A higher source of refreshment. Higher, because it's from our backyard... right here in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, a special place far above civilization. A timeless place of pristine, natural beauty, where souls become refreshed and rejuvenated."¹⁸

On the label: Grand Teton, Wyoming.

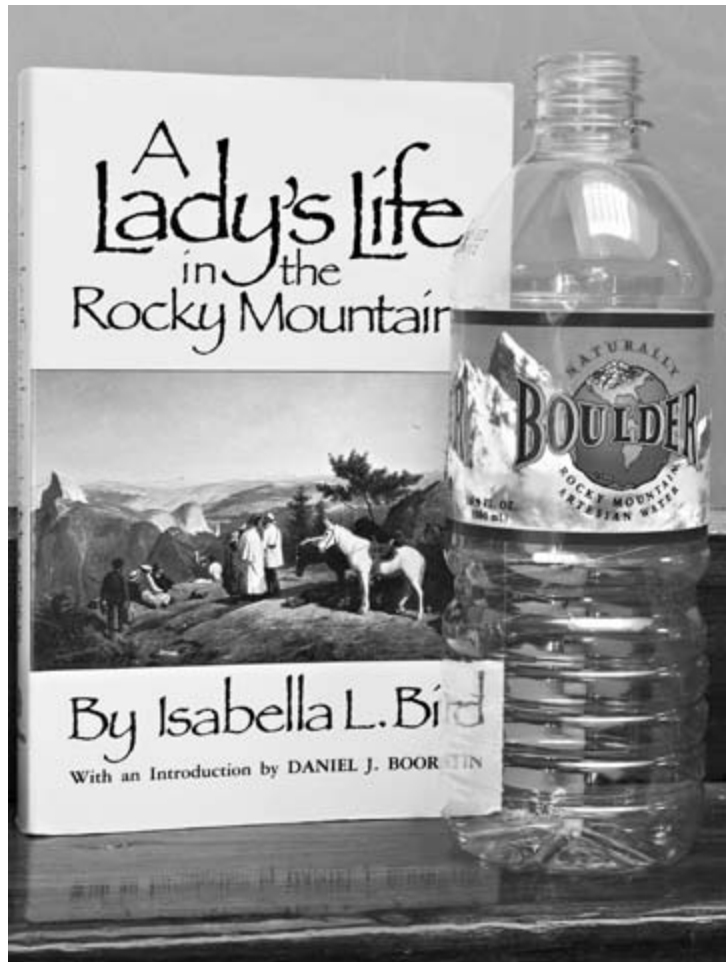
Unavailable at the time of the photograph but joining us in spirit:

3. *Denver Post* insert from Neumann Homes advertising "sweeping mountain vistas" from its new homes outside Denver, Colorado.¹⁹

On the insert: Teton Range, Wyoming.

¹⁸ Naturally Boulder Rocky Mountain Artesian Water, www.naturallyboulder.com (accessed September 22, 2010).

¹⁹ Betsy Marston, "Heard Around the West," *High Country News*, January 19, 2004.



Still Life of Mislocation (2010)



Backlit Advertisements, LaGuardia Airport, New York City, New York (2007)



Eastern Colorado (2010)



“Wilderness”, California (2002)

“The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild...



Wilderness, California (1999)

... and... in Wildness is the preservation of the World.”²⁰

Henry David Thoreau, 1862

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*, (1862).

If you believe that there is no abstraction in reality and no flexibility to its borders, that there exists an American West that can be defined through the crunching of numbers or by an entry in an encyclopedia, then you will see a saguaro and nothing more.

If you understand that the American West lies wrapped in a veil of myths and imagination, a place where anything can happen and everything is possible, then perhaps you'll see more than just a saguaro. And you'll understand what my friend Quincy meant when she saw this image and said, "Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it."



Saguaro, Arizona (2002)

“Oh stay, Oh pride of Greece! Odysseus stay! Oh cease thy course, and listen to our lay! Blest is the man ordain’d our voice to hear. The song instructs the soul, and charms the ear. Approach! Thy soul shall into raptures rise! Approach! And learn new wisdom from the wise!”²¹

What the...? No matter which station he tuned to, the same voices filled the airwaves.

Quite frankly, it wasn’t supposed to be this way. But the gods can be fickle, and so here Odysseus sat, reincarnated as a Colorado Cadillac. Weary from his travels but still exhilarated by the speeds (Oh Zeus! A Cadillac rides so smooth but a Ferrari Odysseus truly wished to be!), he found himself confronted and confounded by the seductive song of the sirens, themselves returned to earth as figures in a wall mural at 10,000 feet. Trapped without stalwart companions to block his antenna, Odysseus soon fell to the sweet sway of their voices over the radio.

They sang a ballad of days past, of myths of the West, and of 14,000 foot mountains to the south. They sang of untold riches pulled from the mighty mines of Leadville, and they beckoned to the Superfund site to the north, the lasting legacy of the mines. They whistled a tune of taxpayers (yes, You, Odysseus!) footing the clean-up bill. They hummed of complex and contradictory values. Their voices resonated across the parking lot as they sang of locals preventing the EPA from a full clean-up of the site; a slice of history they sought to preserve in the form of toxic tailings.²² They asked if the missing half of a mountain on the edge of town might serve as slice enough, and they whispered that perhaps some residents had drunk the mysterious wines of the runoff. But alas! Only Athena, the goddess of wisdom, could understand the ways of man.

They sang, quite frankly, of what a bitch it was to hike these mountains in their stodgy corsets, and Oh! Odysseus The Cadillac, would you be so kind as to fetch some paint and re-

²¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*.

²² Katie Redding, “EPA Proposes New Clean-Up Plan For Leadville,” *The Colorado Independent*, August 4, 2009, <http://coloradoindependent.com/34677/epa-proposes-new-clean-up-plan-for-leadville> (accessed October 6, 2010).

clothe us in moisture-wicking Gore-Tex? For clouds gathered on the horizon and stormy weather lay ahead.



Leadville, Colorado (2001)

“There are two types of people in the world: those who follow the money and those who don’t know they’re supposed to follow the money.”

Overheard in the English Rose Tea Room just off Easy Street in Carefree, Arizona.

The critic stepped back and nodded approvingly at the structure.

“Truly magnificent! A surreptitious tip of the hat to the Suprematists that simultaneously challenges Christo to a duel in the desert with its splendid integration into the monumentalism of the city behind us. The resplendence and reflection of raw light conjures the inner anatomy of the Twinkie, while so overwhelming the cones of the eye as to obscure any semblance of shadowed background, thus relegating the lonely rods to the dark alleyway of the mind. A beacon on the hill, beckoning the folk of the land with its plywood paneling, and yet all the while hinting to alluring dangers and powers as manifested through the galactic constellation of bullet holes on its flat white facade. This stands as a rectilinear masterpiece that presupposes a certain confidence of engineering over the superfluous curves of the surrounding nature. And yet it is not so grand as to fall beyond the ways and means of you and I, the ordinary hominids of the land. Our anonymous figures stand above it all and yet remain one with the piece, accentuating the experience in all our multifaceted capacities, be it through the procurement of goods, accelerated bipedal movements, or golf. And yes, that mystical club rising high into the stratosphere, with its implications of green verdancy and leisure amongst desert sands, fully supersedes the quaint restraint of ‘rain shall follow the plow.’ Indeed, the very thought of labor runs antithetical to the notion of this treasure and its affiliated urban counterpart. And yet suffused with honesty, it is still able to transmit a commentary on the contents of the wallet upon departure.”

“So what you’re saying is that the American West has always signaled hope. And that Las Vegas specializes in the business of selling hope. But that while one of these is authentic, the other is all hat and no cattle,” noted the photographer.

“Precisely!” lauded the critic.

“Then why not just say that?” asked the photographer as he put away his tripod.

“This is Vegas, baby!”



Billboard, Las Vegas, Nevada (2001)

Saguaros, Towers, Phoenix, Arizona (2002)

“Can you hear me now?” asked the saguaro.



Saguaros, Towers, Phoenix, Arizona (2002)

Follow the arrows.



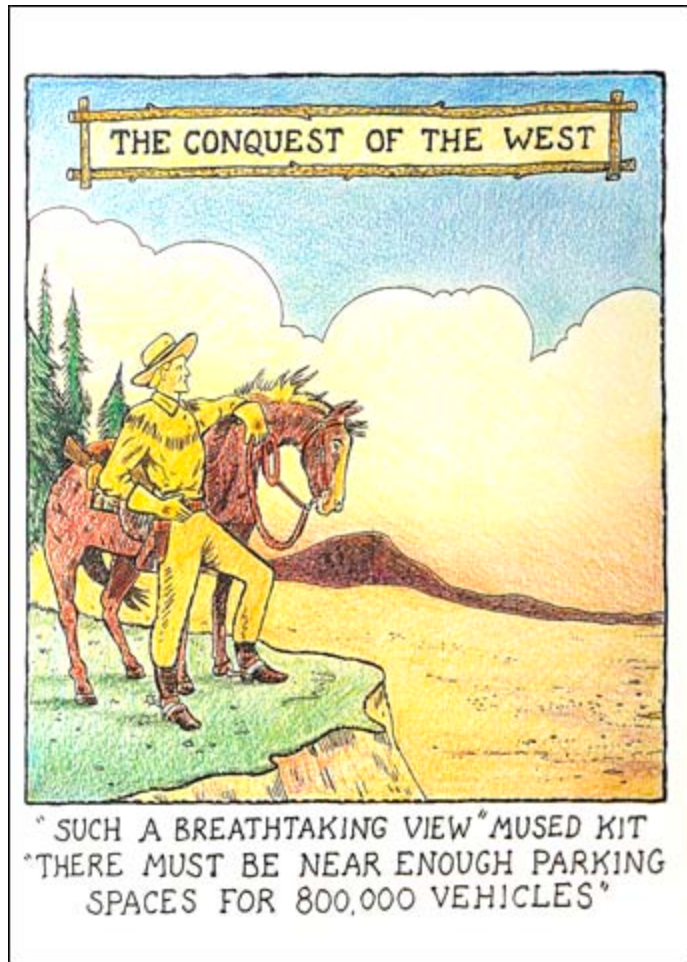
Petroglyphs, Phoenix, Arizona (2002)



Walmarts Of The West (2010)

Center: *Abandoned Walmart, Montrose, Colorado (2001)*

Clockwise from top left: *Walmart, Rock Springs, Wyoming (2003)*; *Walmart, Salida, Colorado (2004)*; *Walmart, Avon, Colorado (2002)*; *Walmart, Montrose, Colorado (2001)*; *Abandoned Walmart, Fort Collins, Colorado (2010)*; *Walmart, Fort Collins, Colorado (2001)*; *Walmart, Cottonwood, Arizona (2002)*; *Walmart, Newport, Oregon (2002)*; *Walmart, Taos, New Mexico (2001)*; *Walmart, Provo, Utah (2002)*; *Walmart, Durango, Colorado (2001)*; *Walmart, Springville, Utah (2002)*



The Conquest of the West, courtesy of Glen Baxter. Found in a shop in Taos, New Mexico.

*Little Boxes*²³

By Malvina Reynolds, 1962

Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses
All went to the university,
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same,
And there's doctors and lawyers,
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course
And drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children
And the children go to school,
And the children go to summer camp
And then to the university,
Where they are put in boxes
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business
And marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

“There should be as many kinds (styles) of houses as there are kinds (styles) of people and as many differentiations as there are different individuals. A man who has individuality (and what man lacks it?) has a right to its expression in his own environment.”²⁴

Frank Lloyd Wright, 1908

²³ Words and music by Malvina Reynolds, Copyright 1962 Schroder Music Company.

²⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, “In The Cause of Architecture,” *Architectural Record*, 1908.



Near Durango, Colorado (2001)

“Places like Vail, Park City, Tahoe, Sedona, and Steamboat Springs report that up to 70 percent of their housing is owned by non-residents, most of it not rental property but rather sitting empty until owners can get away to enjoy it. Entire ‘ghost’ subdivisions may be empty during the off-season, and use may be brief even in winter at ski resorts; and these houses are heated, cleaned, and the driveways cleared of snow by an army of house-watchers and maintenance workers.”²⁵

“Second homes take up large amounts of land in Colorado mountain resort areas where developable land is already in short supply. As a result, the second homes’ values and the land surrounding them rises above that normally paid for worker housing. As their numbers increase, and the land available for development decreases, a dilemma is created. Second homes have generated the need for more workers, but the rise in property values and subsequent housing costs have made it difficult for the workers to live within reasonable distance of their place-of-work.”²⁶

“Oh, hello Pat and Vanna. I didn’t expect to see you two in a piece about second homes in the West, but your visit is indeed timely. Pat, would the *Wheel of Fortune of the American West* be willing to make a trade for a small parcel of punctuation?” asks the photographer.

“I think we can accommodate that. What can we get you?” replies Pat.

“I’d like to exchange a period for a question mark, if you’ve got one in stock,” responds the photographer.

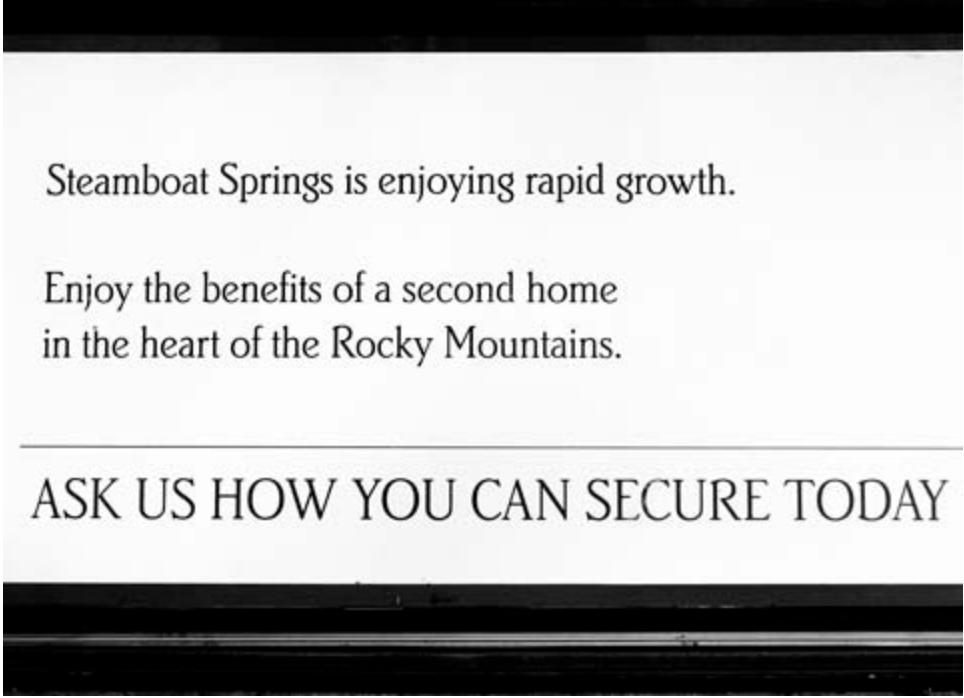
“No problem. Vanna, give the man a question mark.”

The particular combination of text in the window of the real estate office in Steamboat Springs represents but one of 10,888,869,450,418,352,160,768,000,000 possible arrangements of the 27 words that appear on the page. Here’s another:

Can you enjoy a second home today?
Ask us how Steamboat Springs is enjoying the rocky benefits of rapid growth in
the secure heart of the mountains.

²⁵ James Robb et al., *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 104.

²⁶ Linda Venturoni, *The Social and Economic Effects of Second Homes: Executive Summary* (Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, June 2004), 5.



Steamboat Springs is enjoying rapid growth.

Enjoy the benefits of a second home
in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

ASK US HOW YOU CAN SECURE TODAY

Real Estate Office Window Sign, Steamboat Springs, Colorado (2001)

The trouble with some photographs is that they just don't know if they're supposed to be black or white. So they go all gray. It's like smearing Seattle's winter weather on paper. No amount of dodging, burning, or cropping can save the image. It's a failure.

Why is 35 acres the magic number in Colorado? Because any lot equal to or larger than 35 acres stands exempt from subdivision regulations. Larger lots are therefore chopped down to as many 35 acre lots as possible and sold off for maximum gain with minimum oversight. The outcome? Extensive rural sprawl, lost agricultural productivity, fragmented landscapes, and \$1.65 million in infrastructure costs for every \$1 million such developments bring in.²⁷ (Are you a Colorado resident? Do you hear that flapping sound? That's the money flying out of your pocket to pay the difference through increased taxes.) And because of these outcomes, the 35 acre exemption in Colorado is much like this photograph.

²⁷ *Losing Ground: Colorado's Vanishing Agricultural Landscape* (Environment Colorado Research and Policy Center, March 2006), 2.



Failed Photograph, Failed Policy, Colorado (2004)

“Enchanted Hills” Subdivision, Rio Rancho, New Mexico (2001)

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*



“Enchanted Hills” Subdivision, Rio Rancho, New Mexico (2001)



Cobb Lake, Fort Collins, Colorado (2001)

An exclusive gated community, *The Hill* found itself the subject of contention even before construction began. Numerous area residents protested that by placing homes directly atop a ridgeline, the planned linear cluster of homes directly violated the county's land use code. Despite these objections, the development passed approval by the county planning commission on a 6 – 3 vote.



“The Hill” at Cobb Lake, Fort Collins, Colorado (2010)

One commissioner noted that the code did not explicitly define the term “ridgeline.” He said that he would instead call the hill a knoll.²⁸

The cover of the original marketing materials for *The Hill* prominently quoted Frank Lloyd Wright from his 1932 *An Autobiography*:

“No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together, each happier for the other.”

²⁸ “Height Limits Recommended For Cluster Development At Cobb Lake,” *North Forty News*, March 2001.

BACKGROUND:

Phoenix, Arizona (2002)

FOREGROUND:

First image of Mars taken by the panoramic camera on the Mars Exploration Rover Spirit (cropped) (2004). Image Courtesy of NASA / JPL-Caltech / Cornell.

*Astronomer Warns of ‘Wild West’ Mars*²⁹

Reuters

LEICESTER, England (Sept. 11) – Mars could resemble the lawless Wild West if privately funded adventurers seeking to exploit the planet get there before governments, a leading British astronomer said Wednesday.

There could be a permanent human presence on the Red Planet within a century, Sir Martin Rees of the Institute of Astronomy told a science conference.

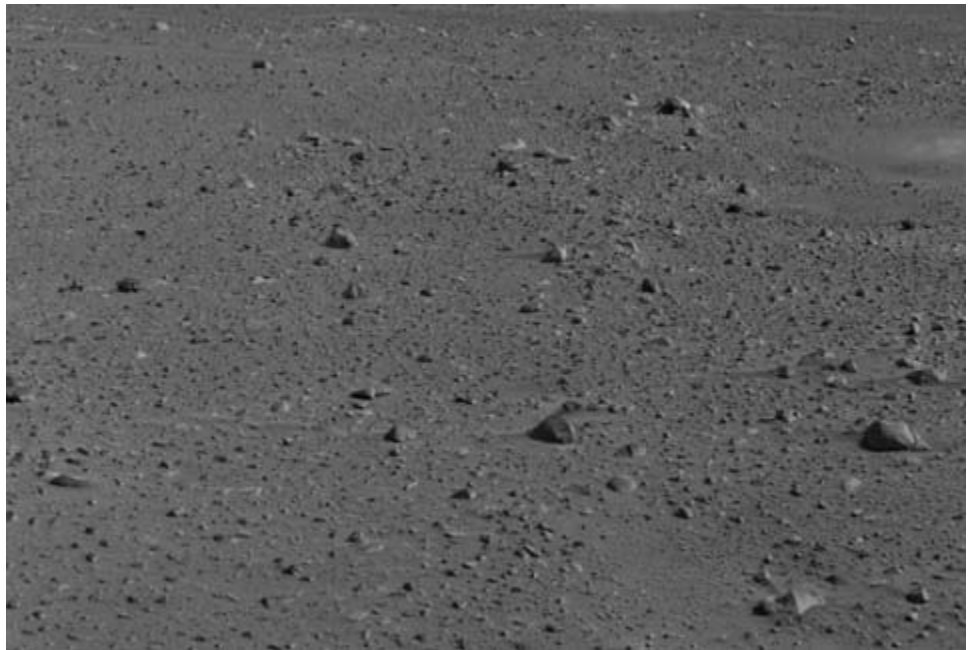
“If the explorers were privately funded adventurers of free-enterprise, even anarchic, disposition, the Wild West model would be more likely to prevail,” he said.

Mars, the fourth planet from the sun, was first photographed from space in 1965. More recent missions landed on the surface of the rocky, cold planet and discovered the possible presence of water.

²⁹ Reuters 14:23, September 11, 2002.



Phoenix, Arizona (2002)



First image of Mars taken by the panoramic camera on the Mars Exploration Rover Spirit (cropped) (2004). Image Courtesy of NASA / JPL-Caltech / Cornell.

In his philosophical treatise, *On Bullshit*, former Princeton University philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt notes that the realm of advertising is “replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept. And in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right.”³⁰

Alas, even the best stumble on occasion. The signpost disappeared faster than a block of butter under a sizzling Sahara summer sun. Inadvertently implying time as well as space, the days were numbered for “Prairies End.”

³⁰ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.



"Prairies End", Back Roads Between Fort Collins And Boulder, Colorado (2001)

Excerpts from the personal diary of the photographer:

April 4, 2002: Received 2,542 spam emails equally divided between pills to enhance my prowess, free university degrees, and once-in-a-lifetime real estate opportunities. Am starting to question my masculinity. Wonder whether I should spring for one of those free degrees in lieu of my masters that actually requires work. Think I may be missing out on chance to make millions flipping real estate. Must reconsider life goals. Should probably exercise more.

October 8, 2003: Dreamt my friend Justin was driving a group of us in his short yellow bus. Bus pulled over for a rest stop. Crazy old guy in a fishing outfit suddenly starts throwing metal darts at us. I block the darts with my camera bag as I run away. Old guy had damn good aim. Hit Justin four times. Fool. Should have been carrying a camera bag. Felt concern that darts may be poisoned. Will camera bag be ok? Suddenly the scene shifted. We were all drinking beers with crazy old guy. Couldn't figure out how to ditch him. Walked to the edge of a cliff overlooking an expansive valley. Three Canada Geese and three hairy gray yetis levitated past my perch en route to the valley below. Geese told me to buy real estate. Yetis nodded in agreement. Must discuss with Dr. Cindy. What is universe trying to tell me?

May 13, 2004: My 29th birthday! Gathered all my friends for celebratory New Belgium and Odells beers at The Crown Pub. After touring gastrointestinal track, beer decided it wanted out, so beer and I took a trip to the lavatory. Sidled up to urinal to let beer embark on next stage of its journey. Found myself staring at real estate ads. Good grief! It's my birthday! Can't they give a guy a break?! Hey, you! Yeah, I'm talking to you, Chantal! Keep your eyes above the waste! That's better.

Finally, Heaven Is For Sale!

Can you imagine the size of the realtor's commission?

A 1920s parody presented at a mining convention captured the essence of those times, as western entrepreneurs rushed to stake claims across the region and then convince a gullible public to invest in often questionable enterprises:

There are mines that make us happy,
There are mines that make us blue,
There are mines that steal away the tear drops
As the sunbeams steal away the dew.
There are mines that have the ore chutes faulted,
Where the ore's forever lost to view,
But the mines that fill my heart with sunshine,
Are the mines I sold to you.³¹

One can imagine an early 21st century revision being in order:

There is real estate that makes us happy,
There is real estate that makes us blue,
There is real estate that steals away the tear drops,
As the sunbeams steal away the dew.
There is real estate on which the owners defaulted,
Where the investment's forever lost to view,
But the real estate that fills my heart with sunshine,
Is the real estate I sold to you.

Or, tracing the industry to its roots in Wall Street, one might prefer to replace the words "real estate" with "interest-only negative-amortizing adjustable-rate subprime mortgage." Many on Wall Street would embrace both the obfuscation and outcome of the revised parody alike.

We have mined the American West for its beaver and its bison, its forests and its grasslands, its minerals and its water. All too often we have acted on a false premise of

³¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something In The Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 123.

limitlessness. The natural beauty of the West may be the last resource the West has to offer.³²

Aided and abetted by the hallelujah chorus of Wall Street³³, and pressing on with the tools of house and subdivision, we are consuming the natural beauty of the West with limitless abandon.

And yet the underlying premise remains false.

Finally, Heaven Is For Sale!

Sold.

³² An idea that originates from friend, mentor, and conservation biologist, Rick Knight.

³³ The photographer would like to point out that Wall Street, being headquartered in the East and marked by a willingness to subordinate all else to “shareholder value” (especially when the shareholder is Wall Street), has little vested interest in the long-term outcome of the American West.



Finally Heaven Is For Sale, Salt Lake City International Airport, Salt Lake City, Utah (2005)

Golf Course Mansions, Trailer Park, Edwards, Colorado (2002)

To see and be seen.



Golf Course Mansions, Trailer Park, Edwards, Colorado (2002)

Crossroads Mall, Boulder, Colorado (2004)

Pearl Street Mall, Boulder, Colorado (2004)

Choose your own retail therapy adventure...

(Hint: This is a false choice. The bulldozers ate one of these malls for lunch.)



Crossroads Mall, Boulder, Colorado (2004)



Pearl Street Mall, Boulder, Colorado (2004)

“Jesus here. Can you hold please?”

“Jesus. Can you hold please?”

“Hello, this is Jesus. Can you please hold?”

The help line had been ringing off the hook all afternoon. Jesus hadn’t even had time for food and drink. The bread lay unbroken. And God had been pretty clear about the rules regarding turning the water into wine during working hours. Would this day never end?

The clock ticked. And tocked. And ticked. And talked. “Five minutes to five,” it announced aloud.

“Thank God,” thought Jesus as he placed another caller on hold. He might be able to wade through the final inning of calls, but the backlog of supplications was going to have to be delayed again. There simply wasn’t enough time in a day to deal with the quagmire in the Middle East, much less the situation in the American West. Though unclear to many, Jesus understood all too well that the primary problem of the Middle East and the primary problem of the American West were, in fact, one and the same: Land, the thorny rose of God’s creation.

Pleasant Valley Ranch was to be its title. The landowner placed two applications with the county over the course of two years, envisioning approximately 200 homes clustered on over 1000 acres of a 6900 acre tract in a sleepy community known more for its cows than cars.

The Department of Health and Environment ruled that the development would violate air quality standards. The proposed development was further cited for lacking sufficient infrastructure to meet water and sanitation requirements. County engineers expressed concern over the potential impact of traffic associated with so many new homes. Locals formed a citizen’s coalition to fight the development.

The proposal eventually died on the planning vine, expiring “due to lack of interest.” The property thus passed undeveloped to the next generation of the family.

With real estate booming across the nation at the turn of the 21st century, the valley again found itself in the pressure cooker of development. Having inherited the vast tract of land, the next generation contemplated the surrounding developments and offered a response.

On the weekend of July 4, 2005, in keeping with a long history of explosive land use confrontations across the American West, mysterious forces blew the truck to kingdom come.

Jesus called it a day and punched out at 5pm. God napped on the front porch in the diminishing light of a crimson Colorado sun. The help line offered callers a polite recording: “Divine intervention is currently unavailable. Please call back during regular business hours. In the meantime, we encourage you to work it out amongst yourselves.”



"Jesus, Save Our Peaceful Valley From The Developer," Colorado (2000)

DEVELOP

v. developed, developing, develops

1. To build on or otherwise change the use of (a piece of land), esp. so as to make it more profitable.
2. To cause to grow or expand.
3. To begin to exhibit or suffer from.
4. To cause to mature or evolve.
5. To bring out the possibilities of; bring to a more advanced, effective, or usable state.
6. To process (a photosensitive material), especially with chemicals, in order to render a recorded image visible.

In “New West” terminology, the concept of “develop” focused entirely on Definition 1. This led to cities, suburbs, and exurbs that followed Definition 2... until Definition 3 caused inhabitants to pause and reassess the driving process behind Definitions 1 and 2.

Having spent the better part of two centuries working through Definitions 1, 2, and 3, the American West was thus offered ample opportunities for Definition 4. And while Definition 1 still drives many of today’s land use decisions, it now finds itself increasingly in competition with an alternative viewpoint as provided by Definition 5.

And so when the 1700 acre property went up for sale, despite a name that the marketing department of any residential housing development firm could fall in love with, The Nature Conservancy instead emerged as the eventual buyer. Known as “Phantom Canyon,” its title arose from the fact that as you travel across the grasslands in its direction, you do not expect to see a canyon of such magnitude. It lies unexpected and hidden until you arrive at its very edge.

Since 1987, staff members and volunteers have actively developed this property by reintroducing natural ecological processes of grazing and fire; by restoring the prairie through seed collecting, planting, and invasive weed management; by providing habitat for such species as black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, golden eagles, redtail hawks, and the rare Larimer Aletes;

and by tearing down fences, both literal and figurative, to create partnerships with neighboring ranches and the larger community.



Phantom Canyon, North Front Range, Colorado (2002)

Phoenix Metropolitan Area, Arizona (2009)

This is not a state park.

This is not a national park.

This is not wilderness.

This is a portrait of over 4,000,000 individuals.



Phoenix Metropolitan Area, Arizona (2009)

The Teton Range And The Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming (1997)

Dear Viewer,

Allow me to introduce myself. I stand before you – unabashedly – as one of the world’s finest examples of an entirely unoriginal photograph. At the very moment at which the photographer pressed the shutter release, at least four other cameras simultaneously locked light to silver. You will find my countenance in books and on billboards, on a water bottle in Colorado and in a housing development advertisement in *The Denver Post*.

In any given year, this location draws millions of viewers. Ansel Adams produced the most famous - and perhaps most enigmatic - image of the Tetons from this same spot back in the early 1940s. The clouds, sensing a fleeting opportunity at fame, emerged in full force for a carefully coordinated performance backed by the supporting solo of a softened sun.

I arose from admittedly humbler origins in 1997, as the photographer taught himself the art of photography by emulating a master. I emerged as a rare success in a long line of failures.

There are those who will try to convince you that you will be disappointed should you experience this sight in person. Others will cast aspersions and with narrowed eyes of excessive erudition, utter the term “nature porn.” I encourage you not to lose yourself in the fog of the critics and cynics. Imbibe a stiff shot of grandeur. Let others pursue the pallid path of Prohibition.

Much of life comes down to what you’re shooting for. How big are you willing to dream? Or will you settle for less and just take what comes your way? Is it possible that a mountain and a river can help to elevate our sights?

Approximately half of the lands in the American West lie in the public realm. As an American citizen, this is your heritage, and these are your lands. To develop a relationship with the land, even if it comes in the secondary form of a photograph, is to develop a relationship with life. And to develop a relationship with life is, by its very nature, to develop a relationship with something greater yet.



The Teton Range And The Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming (1997)

There are multiple ways of looking at the American West. One is through the electrical towers of the Hoover Dam. A patchwork of individual pieces connected to and supported by one another, the structure of the towers says as much about electricity and engineering as about the nature of a region with choices to make between autonomy and independence, between embracing connections and attempting to live in segregated isolation, whether through wealth, politics, color, gender, or sexual orientation. The choice determines whether the towers stand or fall, perched as they are at precarious angles to the depths below.

When the lines of the grid give way to the curves of the land; when the East rediscovers the high ideals that animated the founding of the nation; when the Grand Canyon is the standard of measure; when nostalgia for the past is replaced by recognition of the present; when state property and guns can coexist;

When size and quantity give way to quality; when rights are balanced by responsibilities; when warnings of cause and effect are heeded in advance; when we differentiate between what is right and what is wrong in agriculture; when there is a new view from the strip mine view;

When visitors see both sides of the park; when the photograph of a degraded landscape is not beautiful; when we recognize the wonders of the locations in which we actually live; when we acknowledge both sides of the state; when wilderness is wilderness;

When the saguaro is more than just a saguaro; when the sirens sing a different song; when we embrace authentic hope instead of a cheap substitute; when we can hear the words of

the cacti; when the arrows point in a different direction; when the breathtaking view reveals near enough space for 800,000 antelope;

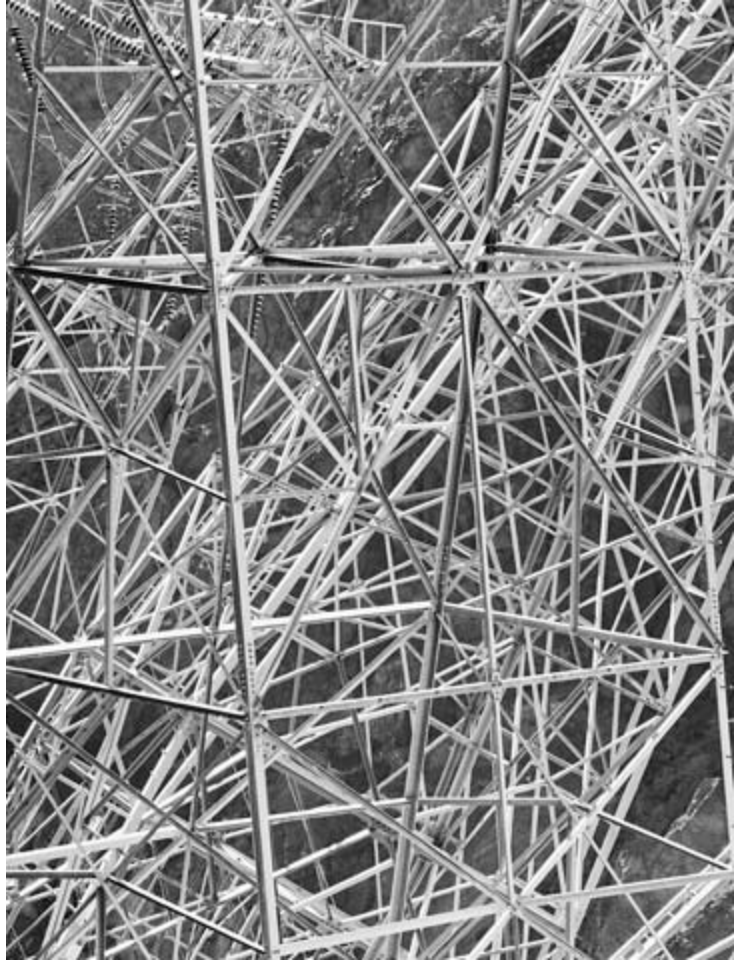
When the homes embrace the individuality of the inhabitants; when we arrange the words in a different order; when the failed photograph is omitted from the collection; when the places we build live up to the names with which we label them; when the words of a master architect aren't misappropriated for a lesser cause;

When the earth looks less like mars; when the bullshit gives way to honesty; when the sports pages are back on the wall; when Heaven is not for sale; when it's about more than seeing and being seen; when the malls accentuate the human instead of the automobile;

When the next generation chooses a different path in ever larger numbers; when the word 'develop' falls under the fifth definition; when we see beauty amongst our millions; when we develop a relationship with the land; when we recognize our interconnectedness and choose autonomy over isolated independence;

When we have done all of this and more, we will have passed well beyond the doorstep of the Next West.

There are multiple ways of looking at the American West. One is through a collection of black and white photographs.



Electrical Towers, Hoover Dam, Nevada (2001)

“Gentlemen, why in heaven’s name this haste? You have time enough. No enemy threatens you. No volcano will rise from beneath you. Ages and ages lie before you. Why sacrifice the present to the future, fancying that you will be happier when your fields teem with wealth and your cities with people? In Europe we have cities wealthier and more populous than yours, and we are not happy. You dream of your posterity, but your posterity will look back to yours as the golden age, and envy those who first burst into this silent splendid Nature, who first lifted up their axes upon these tall trees.... Why, then seek to complete in a few decades what the other nations of the world took thousands of years over in the older continents? Why do things rudely and ill which need be done well, seeing that the welfare of your descendants may turn upon them? Why in your hurry to subdue and utilize Nature, squander her splendid gifts?... Why hasten the advent of that threatening day when the vacant spaces of the continent shall have been filled, and the poverty or discontent of the older States shall find no outlet? You have opportunities such as mankind has never had before, and may never have again. Your work is great and noble; it is done for a future longer and vaster than our conceptions can embrace. Why not make its outlines and beginnings worthy of these destinies the thought of which gilds your hopes and elevates yours purposes?”³⁴

Lord James Bryce, 1888

³⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something In The Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 296.

“What does it look like, this Next West?” whispers a tired old New West.

What image will fill the page?

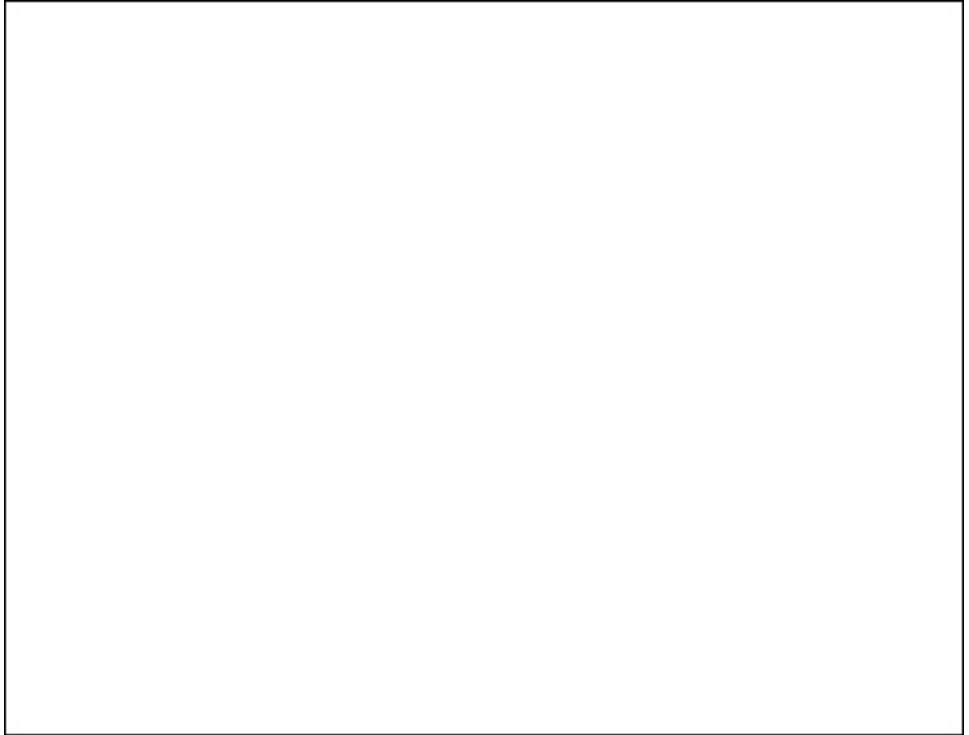
To what ends should we aspire?

Your choice.

We’ll make it up. I’ll make it up. You’ll make it up. We’ll imagine it and design it. We’ll build it and tear it down. We’ll extract it and exploit it. We’ll write about it and photograph it. And with some luck – and collective effort – we will hold it to a standard of unreasonable expectations.

“Angry as one may be at what careless people have done and still do to a noble habitat, it is hard to be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it finally learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the pattern that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match the scenery.”

Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water*, 1969



The Next West ()