

END PAPER

Fossil AND ECHO ON THE HIGH PLAINS



LIVING ROOM IN A HOUSE
IN SOUTH SAN YSIDRO,
EASTERN NEW MEXICO,
NOVEMBER 29, 1992

RUINS are an essential enzyme in any landscape. They leaven the daily taken-for-granted and substantiate that most ponderous of abstractions, Time. On the Great Plains of North America, abandoned dwellings, like most anything larger than a watermelon, stand out in high, nearly defiant relief. . . . To confront them, to ponder their teasing implications, to *people* them, is instinctive and long traditional. There are wonderful stories from native plains tribes about Coyote, or someone like him, passing an old elk skull (a skull being one of the ultimate ruins) and detecting a diminutive music within it, an unexpected inner life—the mice are holding a sun dance!

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Great Plains tolerated many settlers from the eastern half of the continent, but they heartlessly expelled a similar number, and the ruins bear solid and long-lasting witness. The very climate that drove families away—the unnervingly steady dryness—now preserves, almost fastidiously, their leavings.

The word “weather” has always held a sharp edge on the plains. Early Euroamerican visitors were often shocked

by it. The High Plains—the formidable, high and lonesome area between the 100th meridian and the foothills of the Rockies—receives just 15 to 20 inches of rain most years, a figure usually rendered laughable by the deadly high evaporation rate. . . .

The harmless daily winds—daily as in day after day after day—can drive one to strong drink. And then late summer brings the hot winds, from the south or southwest, that can scorch an entire cornfield in a couple of days. Abusive hail is also a Great Plains specialty, and winter brings blizzards. It is fierce, legendary weather a good bit of the time, and it can send you packing.

There are many eloquent remnants from the Dust Bowl between west Texas and Montana, old hulks eroded down to the lathings and beyond, with long-dead windmills, storm-cellar doors, and perhaps a single Chinese elm in the yard. . . . Many of these wind-hammered sites—so exposed and vulnerable—must have had a sepia-toned poignancy even at full occupancy. How could anyone even *dream* of putting down roots *here*?

But the process was ongoing through the 20th century, Depression or none, and continues to this day. Much of the

rural High Plains is still losing population, families giving up after 100 years of trying. The funerals outnumber the baptisms, reporters like to tell us. If the weather doesn’t get you, the demographic tides and generational malaise just might. There are ruins datable by the strata of their artifacts. . . .

They all hold a similar aura: the stark alkaline piquancy of a squelched microcosm within a vast and unremitting macro. It is a complex aura, at once plaintive and disturbing, wistfully proletarian and geographically ordained. Even the Dust Bowl classics are of too recent a vintage to fit into any sort of manageable, impersonal myth zone of “deep time”; their hollow profiles are close enough to us to be vaguely threatening. In the end their message is unmistakable: “Hearth rejected.”

But now, with Steve Fitch’s photographs in hand, we are given the sudden extra dimension of the interiors of such places. What from a distance appeared *vacant* now appears, to use Fitch’s photographer’s term, *abandoned*. A mystery of silhouette becomes a mystery of fine-grained detail.

There is a sense of hurry in the odd, seemingly random

array of items left behind in most of these houses, and even in the public buildings. But it is a numb, perhaps stoic hurry that heightens the biting blend of pathos and unease, of heroics and the cut-and-run, despair and liberation. Once-intimate things sit, endure, in a debris of prairie dust, rodent droppings, festoons of shrill coral-reef-colored wallpaper. Why this? And why that? A coffee cup, a child’s drawing, *two* televisions. . . .

And after a few moments of reflection, we all drive on. We could see the ruins a long way approaching, and we will see them a good while in the rearview mirror. They stand as both fossil and echo. We leave them to their watersheds and the oceanic weather and the hawks overhead. They will be there a long, dry time. Even the coyotes hardly bother to sniff them anymore.

The text and photographs are from the book Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains, edited by Steve Fitch, an assistant professor of photography at the College of Santa Fe. The book was published by the University of New Mexico Press. The text is by Merrill Gilfillan, and the photographs are by Steve Fitch.



BEDROOM IN A HOUSE
SOUTH OF HOUSE,
EASTERN NEW MEXICO,
NOVEMBER 11, 2000
(DETAIL)



LIVING ROOM WITH A MIRROR WALL
IN A HOUSE NEAR LEFORS,
WESTERN TEXAS,
MARCH 20, 1998
(DETAIL)