

Foreword

The name first. The “River of No Return” is a nickname for the Salmon River, which originates in the Rockies and flows through central Idaho, where it joins the Snake River, which joins the Columbia in eastern Washington. The Salmon River got its other name from the swiftness of its current. It drops as streams out of the mountains into the Sawtooth Valley, which is the subject of many of these photographs. The Nez Perce have lived along the Salmon River and so have a Shoshone people. Lewis and Clark passed north of the valley, and fur hunters must have passed through after them, but the valley was settled by European stock only when the prospectors arrived in 1867. They brought names with them: Lucky Boy, Sunbeam, Custer Mill. They mined for gold and silver and quartz. In 1879 the mine at Custer Mill took out a million dollars in gold in its first year of operation, and five to eight million before it closed in 1888. Lucky Boy closed in 1904 and Sunbeam in 1911. The area was by then known as Custer County, and it had turned to farming and ranching. (You probably do not get more American or more mythic than to locate yourself at Fourth of July Creek Ranch in Custer County with the Sawtooth Mountains in the distance and the River of No Return flowing through your pastures.) The Silas Mason Company of Shreveport, Louisiana, bought up all the old mining properties in 1940, brought in a huge gold dredge to work the river, and churned out of it an estimated 80 percent of the remaining gold before closing down in 1952. The Nez Perce called it the River of No Return because it was easy to get down and almost impossible to get back up. Rivers, of course, are metaphors for time—and for nature, and for history, all of which are irreversible processes.

Laura McPhee made these remarkable photographs over several years on successive visits to the valley. This book of seventy-two images is itself a work of art: it accumulates meanings through echo, repetition, statement and counter-statement, digression, and return. I didn’t feel this, paging through the photographs the first time, taking my bearings among the images. On the second or third time through it began to dawn on me what Laura McPhee was up to, to see that *River of No Return* is organized like a long poem or a piece of music, that it is, as well as a stunning look at an actual place, a meditation on rivers, nature, history, the history of landscape photography, of the American West and of the idea of the American West. And—while I am piling theme on theme—the nature of fact and the nature of myth, and how we hold the world in our hands.

It is a book that tends to reverse the roles of fact and myth, and this probably has as much to do with the recent history of central Idaho and the Sawtooth Valley as it does with the history of photography. The Silas Mason Company pulled out of Custer County in 1952, and it isn’t too hard to imagine the condition in which the operation left land and river. The country, in those years, was busy fighting the Cold War and constructing the postwar system of national highways, and must have left the valley to itself for a decade. In the war years and in the 1950s the country had returned to its pell-mell exploitation of its natural resources. It was a little schizophrenic about this, since this was also the period when the genre of the Western film flourished with its myth of unfettered freedom and wide open spaces, when the most popular form of landscape photography was the cinematography

in the films of John Ford. The country was celebrating an imagined past it also seemed that it could not erase fast enough.

Then, in the early 1960s, for a startling few years the country began to take account of the damage that had been done in the headlong development of the previous two centuries, and to do something about it. One form this took was the Wilderness Act of 1964, which set aside nine million acres of public land that were deemed to be “untrammeled by man” to be managed “for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.” No roads were to be built on this land, no structures were to be erected, and motor vehicles were to be excluded. The Wilderness Act was followed by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968, which specified that the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, along with several other rivers or sections of rivers, be kept “in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.” In 1980 the River of No Return Wilderness was established, setting aside 2.3 million acres of land, the largest protected wilderness area in the continental United States. This signaled a shift, not in the wilderness of the place of unfettered freedom but in a place managed by a federal bureaucracy for some notion of a common good. This is the place that Laura McPhee came into and began to look at.

Thinking about her experience, I found myself returning to the second photograph in the book, *One Car Passing, Valley Road, Sawtooth Valley, Idaho, 2003*. It is difficult to think about photographs of the American West without thinking of the history of photographs of the American West, but I didn't think about much of anything looking at that image. I was in the car raising that dust and in the distance watching it, the sense of space, the hazy mountains in the distance, a hawk's distance, that dry high desert landscape, the time of year that raises that dust, the curious grandeur and poverty and toughness of the arid inland West. It's all there, and so is the elegant and orderly punctuation of those fence posts, which almost seem to be there to remind the viewer of Charles Olson's remark that the history of the West is the history of barbed wire. Above all, I loved and can make no particular account of that sudden swerve of the road and the car and the dust in the middle upper right of the image. Where is that pickup? Jeep? old

Chevy going? Somewhere. Going about its business in this astonishing and mysterious enactment of intention.

It is a wonderful image, odd and beautiful and witty and strange, and I found myself wondering just how acutely self-conscious this assignment, or opportunity, had made Laura McPhee. How could she not have in mind the work of Ansel Adams (and the cinematography of John Ford's cameramen) or, for that matter, of the great U.S. Geological Survey work of Timothy O'Sullivan, whose *Shoshone Canyon and Falls, Idaho, 1873* could not have been shot very far from the Sawtooth Valley? *One Car Passing* complicates this reading of her genealogy. The sense of movement created by the dust gives us the documentary glimpse. But the image with its series of horizontal zones is exquisitely composed. The horizontal line made by the three vertical fence posts doesn't just echo the line made by the road dust; the parallel makes them seem like two kinds of time—nineteenth-century time and twentieth-century time, and this makes the mountain range, hazy in the distance, seem like geological time presiding over both, and these various senses of location and movement in place speak somehow to the exactly rendered foreground of high desert sage. And the whole image of quick passage, therefore, stands still and has its say about wide spaces and mountains and sagebrush and the size of human will and, in my reading anyway, the comedy and melancholy of human endeavor. Even if what the viewer sees is a celebration of human energy and the beauty of the swerve, it is an enormously complicated and subtle image.

Subtlety, richness, complication seem to unfold in the sequencing of the opening set of images. The first image in the book, *Irrigator's Tarp Directing Water, Fourth of July Creek, Custer County, Idaho, 2004*, instructs us in how McPhee is going to use titles in this book, to give us information that the photos don't, to explain and locate in time and place what we are seeing. We would not know that the tarp was directing water if she hadn't told us. It would simply have been an odd, bright mark of human presence in the landscape. And the presence of the tarp reminds us that the fence also, which seems so entirely naturalized, is also a mark, an older one, of human presence. I believe this fence is constructed in the style that used to be called a “worm fence,” as in Walt Whitman's evocation of it: “And mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen and

pokeweed." The tarp gives us the creek, which seems to parallel the fence, and the creek gives us the clouds by way of the water cycle, and the clouds give us that bright scattering of wildflowers, some kind of daisy, and the daisies give us the season—this is an early summer storm. And the blue of the tarp picks up on the blue of the mountains and the blue of the storm clouds. It is palpably, physically, early summer in the mountains, and this theme of human presence in the landscape (echoed in the little distant irregular sticks of another fence) is set out.

Then comes *One Car Passing* to restate the theme. And then we come to Mattie. Here she is *Mattie with a Plymouth Barred Rock Hen, Laverty Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, June, 2004*. And she looks to be another development of the theme, if because of her deadpan and her beauty, a slightly disconcerting one; this *Mattie* looks a bit like a 4-H Club photograph shot by Diane Arbus. A farm girl, a farm girl holding a hen, a Plymouth Barred Rock Hen. "One of the foundation breeds for the broiler industry in the 1920s," a poultrymen's Web site remarks, it was "developed in New England in the early 1800's from Dominiques, Black Javas, and Cochins probably," and first exhibited as a breed in 1869. All of which is to say that *Mattie*, stark against a black background, expressionless, cradling the foundation of the broiler industry of the 1920s in her arms, is not a figure yet for Mother Nature or Artemis, the young half-boy goddess of wild things. She is not yet a symbol of the need to nurture, or of the future, though, by the end of the book, in her repeated and haunting appearances she will become all these things, whether she is holding a Bourbon Red Turkey (bred in Kentucky from a Pennsylvanian stock of Buffs), or a robin's nest containing four blue eggs (while she wears an Isadora Duncanish eighth grade graduation dress), or, in the same dress, a very beautiful northern flicker, a wild bird this time, her arms and elbows mimicking the dead bird's wings.

The fourth image is a field of grass and sagebrush in the mist with the repeated emblem of the fence. The fifth, *Sorting Black Angus Cow/Calf Pairs, Morgan Williams Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2003*, explains the fences and gives us emphatically one kind of work in Custer County. *Mattie* then returns in the sixth image and announces that the matter-of-fact world of the farm and the myth world have been introduced to each other. *Rocks from Sawtooth National Forest*

for Landscaping in Sun Valley, Pettit Lake Road, Blaine County, Idaho, 2003, with its five great rocks and its unhitched trailer—a dust of snow on the mountains, so it must be October—to remind us again of how people continue to make a living in the National Forest, quarrying rock for the swank skiers' terraces of Sun Valley. And the photograph seems to reference, almost helplessly, or perhaps slyly, the great boulders among shafts of paradisaical sunlight and clouds and mountains in Ansel Adams's *Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, 1944*. To remind us once again of the argument being conducted and what seems a deep love of the history of her art that partly informs McPhee's art.

There are other thematic suites of photos in the book—the *Mattie* series; a mines and miners sequence that includes two photographs of old photographs left behind at the abandoned mines, one from a 1940s women's magazine and one from a 1970s *Penthouse*, to provide another kind of meditation on time and photography; there is a brief sequence of fences in different weathers that puts one in mind of Monet's haystacks; a sequence on river restoration ("the civil rights movement we need in the twenty-first century," Bruce Babbitt said) and the endangered sockeye salmon; the butchered elk sequence; a winter snow sequence; and a final meditation on fire. They make an amazingly rich story about people and land and creatures, the past and the future. Near the core of it is the life lived in this place: a girl's feet in a cool stream, a bored child in the front seat of a pickup on a hot day. Much of this sense of a present magically informed by history lies in the image of *Mattie* in her grandmother's wedding dress. The white billows of the dress resemble the billows of smoke from a mid-summer forest fire on the book's concluding pages. Attention, Simone Weil said, is prayer. There is an abundance of it here. *River of No Return* is a book to make you love the photograph and the book of photographs as an art form.

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