"male." It is sons, these stories tell us, that are from birth given the status and value that can later be lost and therefore luxuriously mourned. Male self-pity proves much more stubborn and debilitating than its female counterpart because it is based on the revocation, by time or whatever else disconnects the son from Gatsby's "pap of life," of an actual and original gift. This is why, in our culture, men are so often passive and women so often angry; it is why Bret Harte remains the ever-popular chronicler of the Gold Rush. His stories retail a past that can be warmly remembered: they replace, for the uncritical reader, the pain of memory with the revisions of nostalgia. The story of the Chinese in California serves, in contrast, not only as the story of the daughter's arrival as a cultural force but, in its challenge to the most fully realized male fantasy about California's good gone past, as the story of history's return.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE

The Culture of Spectacle

THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE knocked William James out of bed. Lying awake at about half past five in the morning in his little apartment on the campus of Stanford University, he felt his bed begin to waggle. Before departing on his western tour, the philosopher-psychologist had been wished well by Bakewell, a friend from California:

> "I hope they'll treat you to a little bit of an earthquake while you're there. It's a pity you shouldn't have that local experience." Well, when I lay in bed at about half-past five that morning, wide-awake, and the room began to sway, my first thought was, "Here's Bakewell's earthquake, after all"; and when it went crescendo and reached fortissimo in less than half a minute, and the room was shaken like a rat by a terrier, with the most vicious expression you can possibly imagine, it was to my mind absolutely an *entity* that had been waiting all this time holding back its activity, but at last saying, "Now, *go* it!" and it was impossible not to conceive it as animated by a will, so vicious was the temper displayed—everything *down,* in the room, that could go down, bureaus, etc., etc., and the shaking so rapid and vehement. All the while no fear, only admiration for the way a wooden house could prove its elasticity, and glee over the vividness of the manner in which such an abstract idea as "earthquake" could verify itself into sensible reality.

Writing four days after the earthquake, the working psychologist quickly translated the experience into an experiment where abstractions were verified. James even insisted on visiting the epicenter of the disaster and so boarded the only train that reached San Francisco on April 18. In an essay published two months later, "On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake" (in *Memories and Studies,* 1911), he translated the California events into a parable of morale.

In the essay James made two important modifications to his initial account: "Sitting up involuntarily, and taking a kneeling position, I was thrown down on my face as it went *fortior* shaking the room as a terrier shakes a rat." In the letter there was no mention of being thrown on his face or of doing anything involuntarily. Perhaps James decided to play up his vulnerability so as to highlight the moment when he would assume control. In the letter James heard the earthquake saying, "Now, *go* it!" In the essay he himself says this, in response to the delight and welcome he feels in the middle of all the shaking: " '*Go* it,' I almost cried aloud, 'and go it *stronger*!' " In assuming the voice of the earthquake, James aligns himself with the disaster and its telluric power.

Both the letter and the essay personify the earthquake; it is animated by a will. Of course James knew that the event was one without an actual intention and that from the point of view of science "earthquake is simply the collective *name* of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen." But since, as a psychologist, his concern was with subjective phenomena—with our way of taking things—James felt liberated to explore the immediate data of consciousness. His openness to the irrational and primitive nature of his own responses produced some of the best writing about the earthquake, imposing conflict and suspense on an otherwise random, physical event in order to give it the "overpowering dramatic convincingness," as he put it, of a story.

There is no significant "literature" of the San Francisco earthquake and fire, and for this, perhaps, we should be grateful. Of my five fires, it is the only catastrophe instigated by nature. Writing is not much given to elaborating events that are brief, sudden, and inexplicable. Movies have had better luck with the subject, since it does afford plenty to watch. In novels like *Storm* (1941) and *Fire* (1948), George Stewart attempted to make personified meteorological events into active protagonists. He located the action in California because California is the place where such events are located. It is a naturalist's paradise: to live with the prospect of

earthquake and forest fire and drought and "the Santa Ana is to accept," Joan Didion argues, "consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior." In order to live with this view, as James showed, we must also repress it.

James and the Californians he wrote about survived the earthquake and fire by subsuming the experiencing into the spectatorial self. At a moment when nature most dramatically asserted herself, James draws attention to the cultural mediation of the event. The process begins with the first tremor. In the letter James feels "no fear, only admiration." In the essay his first consciousness is of "gleeful recognition." Recognition and admiration are not components of overcoming terror. Delight and welcome, rather, are James's portion. He maintains in the essay that "sensation and emotion were so strong that little thought, and no reflection or volition, were possible in the short time consumed by the phenomenon." Yet his own detailed and shapely verbal account of the "short time" belies this claim. The gap between James's emotions and his awareness of them is so distinct that it impressively conveys the ever-present power and composure of the human *watcher*.

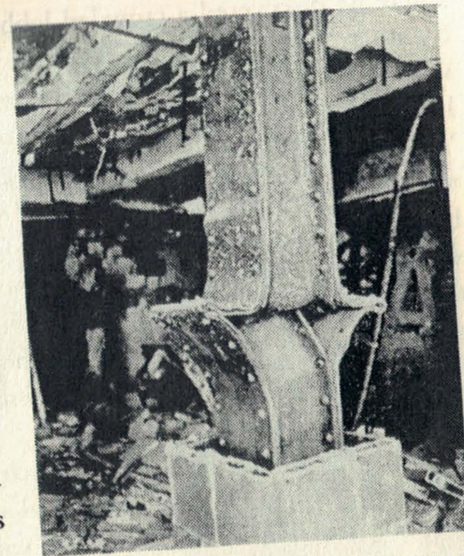
Once he arrives in San Francisco, James witnesses a city rapidly recomposing itself. He chooses to say nothing of the material ruins. Two things strike him instead. The first is "the rapidity of the improvisation of order out of chaos." Everyone who can work is at work. The second is the "universal equanimity" he sees. People's faces are "inexpressive of emotion," and he hears not a pathetic or sentimental word. "The terms 'awful,' 'dreadful,' fell often enough from peoples' lips, but always with a sort of abstract meaning, and with a face that seemed to admire the vastness of the catastrophe as much as it bewailed its cuttingness." Admiration, then, is present on every hand, and the conversion of the catastrophe into something to be admired suggests that Californians have learned to cope with loss by casting themselves into the distanced, dimensionless space of a photograph.

I begin with James's two accounts of the earthquake in order to establish that even during the most overwhelming catastrophes, people will make representations of the event. Robert Altman makes this point at the end of his 1992 *Short Cuts,* where the audience of the movie watches an audience in the movie watching on TV an earthquake through which they are living. James's two versions underscore that even a single watcher can generate a plural response. And such responses take on a life as

enduring as the physical consequences of the event—consequences from which San Francisco, in any case, quickly recovered. With the earthquake and fire, San Francisco began an immediate translation of the text into the myth. The distinction is Gary Snyder's: the text is the given particulars of an event, the facts on the ground; the myth is their transformation into the dramatic convincingness of a story. The particular story that San Francisco told itself about the earthquake and fire was of a city coolly eyeing its own destruction, a city acting "casual," as Kathryn Hulme describes a man blowing drifting char from his hands, "casual when you knew he wasn't feeling so." The conversion of catastrophe into spectacle depended, in turn, on the emerging technologies of still photography.

"OH, IS THAT A STILL from a Cecil De Mille picture?" This question was actually asked about the most famous photographic image produced of the San Francisco earthquake and fire—Arnold Genthe's shot down Sacramento Street taken on the morning of April 18, 1906. Photography played a unique and sometimes peremptory role in recording the event, and the surviving books about the disaster display, for the most part, a preference for image over word. The Roebling Construction Company's commissioned volume, *The San Francisco Earthquake and Fire* (1906), does not immediately recommend itself as an adequate account of those four April days; the book sits dusty and unconsulted on a few university library shelves. Yet even this market-driven document maintains a kind of mute eloquence through the sheer power of its photographs, images that convert an otherwise tedious report into a visual representation of the vanity of human wishes. Here are steel uprights melted into themselves like ribbon candy. A large entablature supported by two columns stands, like a vestige of the Roman Forum, before the ruins of City Hall. In some photographs, the only vertical shapes are the outlines of still-standing chimneys.

Roebling sent engineer A.L.A. Himmelwright to San Francisco as soon as it was "possible to visit the burned district." That area covered 4.11 square miles, virtually all of San Francisco's old downtown. Water mains had been severed by the earthquake, and fire burned virtually unchecked throughout the city until the U.S. Army began dynamiting. After three days the fire was stopped as it threatened to jump the Van Ness corridor. By that time 435 people had lost their lives, and 514 city blocks had been burned.



This photograph was first published in A.L.A. Himmelwright's The San Francisco Earthquake and Fire *(1906). A structural engineer, Himmelwright was sent to the city immediately after the fire to assess the efficacy of reinforced concrete construction. Courtesy of the University of Virginia.*

Roebling had pioneered fireproof construction methods, especially the use of reinforced concrete. After examining more than sixty buildings, Himmelwright concluded that the most resilient building design was a steel skeleton with reinforced-concrete curtain wall construction. As proof of this he produced a photograph of the Hotel St. Francis, a building remarkably uninjured. The St. Francis had been built with Roebling segmented-concrete floors and concrete column protection.

But most of the book's photographs, taken by R. J. Waters and Company, tell a different story. They depict a shock and heat so intense that the notion of prevention looms only as a supreme fiction. If the Crocker Building stood relatively intact, it was because it was "subjected to normal fire only." In his conclusion, "The Lessons of the Earthquake," Himmelwright brings his argument into line with the visual evidence. As a structural engineer, he draws conclusions about overly high chimneys, mortar quality, and roofing tiles. But his primary conclusion radically expands the notion of prevention: It entails the depopulation of the two major cities in the state. Striking at the very heart of California as a site for human architecture, Himmelwright suggests that builders should henceforth "Avoid Locations in Close Proximity to Geological Fault Lines." His suggestion has not been followed. By 1990 more than 20 million people lived within twenty miles of the hundreds of California earthquake faults.

Photographer Arnold Genthe might have been sympathetic to Himmelwright's conclusions. He was certainly in a position to admire the resiliency of Hotel St. Francis. After wandering about on the morning of the quake, he found himself hungry and made his way to the hotel.

There he discovered a crowded lobby and dining room. His last meal, the night before, had been a supper after Enrico Caruso's performance in *Carmen*. Now, near the entrance to the hotel, he saw the opera singer himself in a fur coat and pajamas muttering to himself, " 'Ell of a place! 'Ell of a place!" Despite the lack of gas and electricity, the hotel coffee was hot. After a breakfast of bread and butter and fruit, Genthe asked his waiter for a check. "No charge today, sir," he replied. "Everyone is welcome as long as things hold out." The equanimity with which Californians today coexist with the imminence of natural catastrophe can be explained, in part, by the pathos of such moments, in which the loss of property is offset by the temporary gain of a felt sense of community.

Genthe had arrived in San Francisco in 1885. Trained as a draftsman, he wandered into Old Chinatown and attempted to make some sketches of it. But his subjects refused to sit still, disappearing into cellars and doorways. So he "decided to try to take some photographs." Knowing that the Chinese saw any camera as the "black devil box," he bought one small enough to conceal, with a Zeiss lens.

Because of the darkness of Chinatown's narrow streets, the reserve of its inhabitants, and the slow speed of his plates and films, Genthe learned to efface himself so as to capture his subjects without being seen. The result, *Pictures of Old Chinatown* (1908), is the most enduring visual record of the eight blocks of the Chinese district that went up in the 1906 fire.

The fire that destroyed Chinatown also opened up California to a new wave of Chinese immigration, since the fire also destroyed the municipal records that controlled the flow of newcomers from China. According to the laws in force in 1906, any Chinese who could claim U.S. citizenship by birth or derivation was allowed to enter the country. After the fire, a thriving trade in "paper sons" grew up, since an invented genealogy now had as much standing, given the loss of the paper record, as a real one. Before the earthquake, immigrants claiming the right to admission had been subjected to a cross-examination at the port of entry until an identity could be verified. Now, for immigrating Chinese, these interviews now took on the quality of an elaborate and deadly serious game in which the inventiveness of the immigrant was matched against the suspicion of the interviewer. "Every paper a China Man wanted for citizenship and legality burned in that fire," Maxine Hong Kingston writes. "An authentic citizen, then, had no more papers than an alien. Any paper a China

Arnold Genthe's "Street of the Gamblers." The German-born Genthe discovered San Francisco's Chinatown in the early years of the century and photographed its inhabitants with a concealed camera. His Pictures of Old Chinatown *was published in 1908, a little over a year after the eight-square-block neighborhood had been destroyed by fire. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Man could not produce had been 'burned up in the Fire of 1906.' Every China Man was reborn out of that fire a citizen."

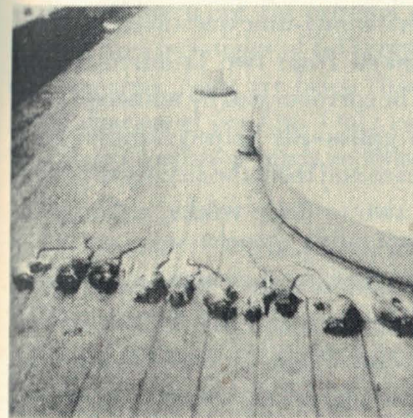
Thus began the Angel Island period. Before the earthquake, Chinese arriving at San Francisco had been detained at a two-story shed in the San Francisco harbor. With the increase in immigrants after the fire, Chinese leaders called for a more accommodating structure. A barracks was built on Angel Island, and until 1940 all Chinese immigrants were detained and processed in this facility.

While the Angel Island story may appear a digression from the drama of the earthquake, it proves, instead, to be the heart of the matter. For already existing San Francisco communities, earthquake and fire, as ordeals to be endured, were an opportunity to cope in style. The movie *San Francisco* has given this resiliency its most enduring, sentimental, and apolitical treatment. Yet beyond the immediate and terrible losses suffered, the fire had lasting consequences for the lives of Californians. The

"U.S. Quarantine Station (Port of San Francisco). Several views showing shops, foreground, laundry, bathing barracks, and disinfecting plant." After 1910, when the Angel Island facility was opened, Chinese immigrants were detained at the facility and subjected to rigorous questioning about their claims to citizenship status. Some were held on the island for months and even years. This and the following four photographs were taken by the National Health Service and are published here with their original captions. Courtesy of the National Archives.

"Aliens arriving."

"Packing baggage after disinfection."



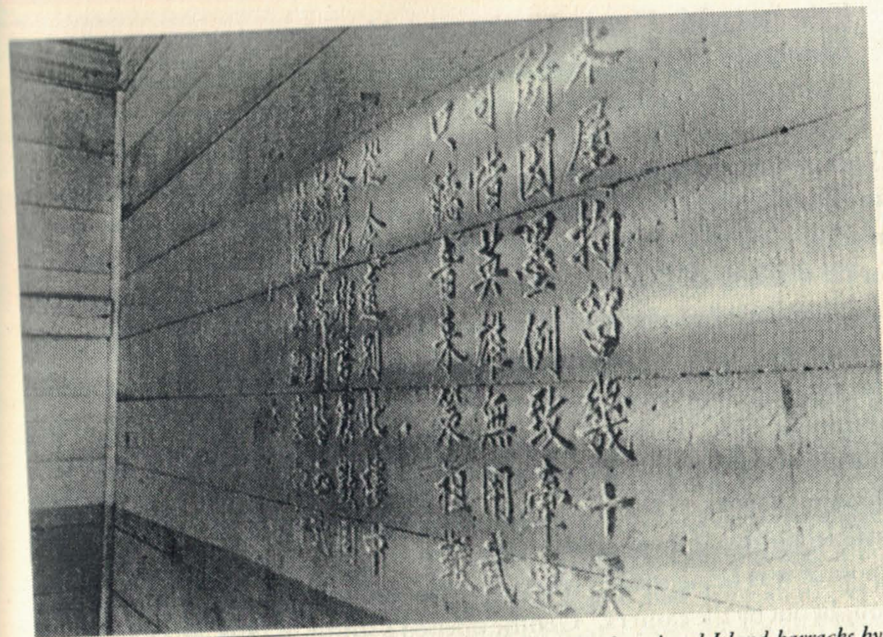
"View aboard vessel showing partial result of fumigation from destruction of rodents."

"View aboard vessel."

spectacle of San Francisco watching itself burn was elaborated, in part, to obscure these consequences and to suggest that in its aftermath the city was required simply to rebuild.

For Chinese immigrants, the fire resulted in far more—it radically improved their odds at achieving entry. Those odds were complicated, however, by the screening measures enforced at the new immigration station. "There are two islands in San Francisco Bay which contain ruined buildings with doors four inches thick," Shawn Wong writes in the 1979 novel *Homebase*. "The islands are Alcatraz and Angel Island. Alcatraz is a National Park and Angel Island is a California State Park. Both were places of great sadness and great pain." On Angel Island the Chinese were separated from the immigrating Japanese and other Asians. The sexes were also segregated; up to three hundred Chinese men and fifty Chinese women were held on the island at any one time. Visitors were forbidden, in order to prevent coaching of the newly arrived. But every immigrant required coaching, since even those with valid claims were asked detailed questions about the number of steps to Father's house in Canton or the location of Uncle's rice bin. Judy Yung reports that "one Chinese woman who was illiterate resorted to memorizing the coaching information on her family background by putting it into a song." Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in New York were asked, typically, twenty-nine questions; at Angel Island those seeking entry could be asked from two hundred to one thousand. The answers they gave had to be corroborated by witnesses. The Chinese kitchen staff on the island surreptitiously helped families keep their stories straight by ferrying messages to and from the city. By the 1920s the average period of detention lasted two to three weeks, although in some cases it could stretch into months or even years.

In 1970 park ranger Alexander Weiss noticed some Chinese characters inscribed on the walls of the long-abandoned island barracks. It turned out that the walls were covered with poems. Weiss arranged to have the walls photographed. Mak Takahashi's photographs recovered the text of some 135 poems that had been written on the barracks walls by detainees. But the first act of recovery had begun in 1931 and 1932, when detainees Smiley Jann and Tet Yee copied most of the poems then on the walls. These manuscripts, along with Takahashi's photographs and rubbings and additional copies made over the years, have been gathered by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung into *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980).



This photograph shows one of the poems carved in the wall of an Angel Island barracks by a male Chinese immigrant. Courtesy of Chris Huie.

To a Western eye, the original poems comprise, on the page, beautiful squares and rectangles of calligraphy. All of the poems are written in the classical style. Most are brief, from four to eight lines long, with five to seven characters per line. Only poems by male detainees have survived. The first translation reads as follows:

The sea-scape resembles lichen twisting and turning for a thousand li.
There is no shore to land and it is difficult to walk.
With a gentle breeze I arrived at the city thinking all would be so.
At ease, how was one to know he was to live in a wooden building?

The Chinese character for "wooden building" recurs frequently in these poems; the men who wrote them clearly thought of their time on the island as an imprisonment. Fantasies of revenge and return to China are also linked throughout. The shortest of the sixty-nine poems refigures the difficult journey to California as a conquest in which the Chinese occupy the United States (the land of the Flowery Flag) and make historic preservation of the barracks their ultimate payback:

If the land of the Flowery Flag is occupied by us in turn,
The wooden building will be left for the angel's revenge.

GENTHE'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF old Chinatown testify to a survival in discontinuity, a remnant saved from the fire. The techniques he developed in making them also enabled his future career. Struck by the beauty of California women, and aware of the money to be made from San Francisco's vain nouveau oligarchy, the handsome German émigré decided to apply his new method to society portraiture. He thus made the transition from documenting the elusive or invisible "other" to representing the already-prominent rich. "Perhaps, I thought, if they were photographed in the unobtrusive manner which worked so well with my shy and unsuspecting Chinese subjects, if they were not allowed to become self-conscious by artificial posing, if they could be kept from knowing the exact moment the exposure was being made—then something more of their spirit might be brought out by the camera." Genthe opened a studio in 1898. His first client was the wife of W. H. Crocker, and as he succeeded in pleasing her, the industry of modern celebrity photography in California was born.

Genthe's memoir of his years in San Francisco, *As I Remember* (1936), contains 112 of his photographs, including images of Mary Pickford, Isadora Duncan, and Sarah Bernhardt. The book also contains a chapter called "Earthquake and Fire." The prose of this chapter measures the adequacy of verbal accounts of catastrophe in the age of photographic reproduction.

Genthe begins by describing the "terrifying sound" of Chinese porcelains crashing to the floor—an event that marks his social status but also establishes his tone of dandified chagrin. The earthquake becomes, for him, an inconvenience that requires a sporting response. The question of dress being paramount in his mind, Genthe starts to disrobe but decides "that the most suitable 'earthquake attire' would be my khaki riding things—I was to live in them for weeks."

The psychologist and the photographer: Could the city have been more fortunate than to have these professional witnesses on hand that day? Like James, Genthe converts the event into an allegory of morale, and like James, he maintains his own morale by distancing himself from the experience, turning it into a spectacle to be watched. "The streets presented a weird appearance," Genthe writes,

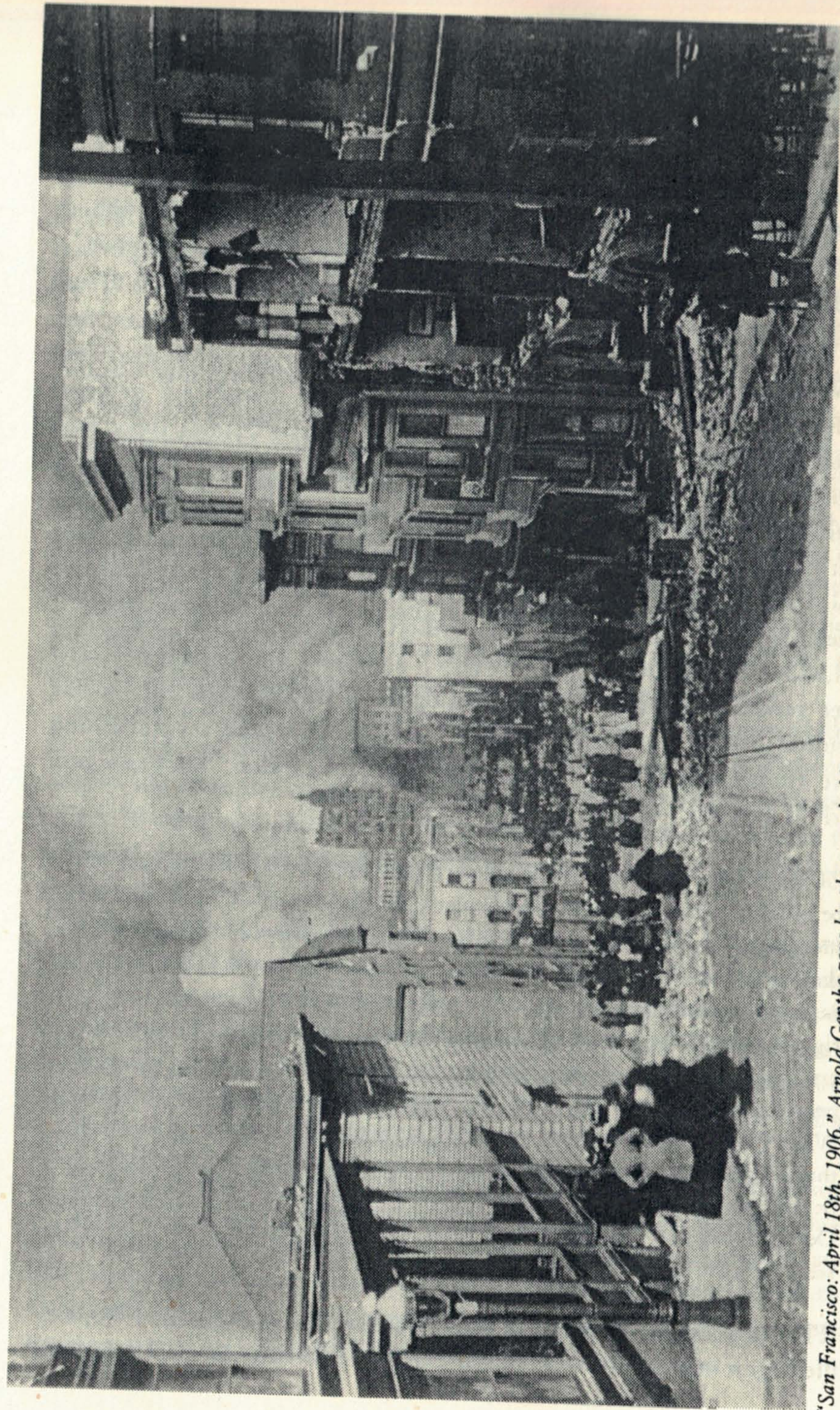
> mothers and children in their nightgowns, men in pajamas and dinner coats, women scantily dressed with evening wraps hastily thrown over them. Many ludicrous sights met the eye: an old lady carrying a large bird cage with four kittens inside, while the original occcupant, the parrot, perched on her hand; a man tenderly holding a pot of calla lilies, muttering to himself; a scrub woman, in one hand a new broom and in the other a large black hat with ostrich plumes; a man in an old-fashioned nightshirt and swallow tails, being startled when a friendly policeman spoke to him, "Say, Mister, I guess you better put on some pants."

What counts here is what meets the eye. Understanding this, Genthe has his breakfast, then returns to his studio to get a camera. But there he discovers that falling plaster has damaged everything. He then walks to Montgomery Street and borrows a #A Kodak Special from George Kahn and hits the streets. "For several weeks I did not concern myself with any thought of the future. I blithely continued to take photographs."

Genthe's society portraits had used soft focus and deep shadows to flatter his subjects. He applied this method to the earthquake and fire as well, as in "Steps that Lead to Nowhere," a moonlit shot of chimneys and other verticals against the twinkling lights of distant hills. But in one fortuitous image he abandons the picturesque and captures something more. In *As I Remember* the photograph bears the caption "San Francisco: April 18th, 1906." Genthe gives it this description:

> Of the pictures I had made during the fire, there are several, I believe, that will be of lasting interest. There is particularly the one scene that I recorded the morning of the first day of the fire (on Sacramento Street, looking toward the Bay) which shows, in a pictorially effective composition, the results of the earthquake, the beginning of the fire and the attitude of the people. On the right is a house, the front of which had collapsed into the street. The occupants are sitting on chairs calmly watching the approach of the fire. Groups of people are standing in the street, motionless, gazing at the clouds of smoke. When the fire crept close, they would just move up a block. It is hard to believe that such a scene actually occurred in the way the photograph represents it. Several people upon seeing it have exclaimed, "Oh, is that a still from a Cecil De Mille picture?" To which the answer has been, "No, the director of this scene was the Lord himself."

This extraordinary question could not have been asked in 1906; DeMille began making movies only in 1913. In 1906 the more apt reference



"San Francisco: April 18th, 1906," Arnold Genthe gave his photograph this caption in his memoir, As I Remember, *published in 1936. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

would have been to San Francisco–born producer and playwright David Belasco. Belasco's turn-of-the century theater productions were noted for their melodramatic plots and ambitiously realistic sets. His 1905 *The Girl of the Golden West* became famous for the special effects in a storm scene; in a play staged in the year of the earthquake, Belasco insisted that real oranges be hung on the set's artificial trees.

Belasco gave DeMille his start in the theater. The filmmaker transferred Belasco's obsession with mimesis to the screen and received, for his 1923 production of *The Ten Commandments,* his teacher's highest accolade: "At last! A spectacle that out-Belascoes Belasco!"

Genthe's position in this evolution is pivotal. His famous photograph of the earthquake marks the transition from the realism of three-dimensional theatrical space to the surrealism of two-dimensional film projection. In this progression the world viewed—and especially its arresting catastrophes, since DeMille loved shipwrecks and surging mobs—is steadily internalized into a manageable and manipulable image. The sense of something staged, as if Genthe had taken a picture of people acting in a movie; the repetition of words like "watching" and "gazing" in Genthe's prose; the emphasis upon "the attitude of the people" rather than on the content of what they see—all this marks the full emergence, on California soil, of the culture of the spectacle.

"I'M A CALIFORNIA PHOTOGRAPHER": Ansel Adams introduced himself to Alfred Stieglitz with these words in 1933, on the occasion of their first meeting in New York. Adams had trained for a career in music, but in 1930 Paul Strand convinced him to commit to photography after seeing his negatives at a dinner party in Santa Fe. Adams soon became the center of Group f/64, a gathering of Northern California photographers who were opposed to the reigning pictorialism of the day and dedicated to "straight photography." The membership included Adams, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Willard Van Dyke, and Weston's son Brett. While he would later call Weston the "top man" in photography, it was Adams himself, through his monumental images of the Sierra Nevada and especially of Yosemite, who became the state's most visible exponent of camera work. As his service with the Sierra Club and his association with the national parks transformed him into a national figure, Adams met with presidents—he befriended Ford, photographed

Carter, and spent fifty minutes arguing with Reagan about the environment in 1983—and developed friendships with artists like Mary Austin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange.

Adams had lived through the San Francisco earthquake at the age of four. In the first chapter of his autobiography, Adams reprints Genthe's famous "April 18th" photograph, although he identifies the shot as taken down Clay rather than Sacramento Street. Later in the volume, Adams writes of curating the first exhibit for the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940. Wanting to include Genthe but finding no adequate prints, Adams nervously approached the famous man, who agreed with enthusiasm to Adams's printing of both "The Street of the Gamblers," a Chinatown photograph, and the now-renamed "View Down Clay Street, San Francisco." Instead of using Genthe's greenish textured paper and warm-toned developer, Adams decided upon glossy paper toned in selenium. The result was so good that Genthe exclaimed, " 'Why didn't I print them that way in the first place?' "

So Adams revisited and retouched the famous image of the earthquake and fire. In *An Autobiography* he represents the earthquake as his most profound early memory, and Genthe's is the only photograph of it that he chooses to include. As Adams tells his story, here and in *Letters and Images,* the earthquake provided for him both a point of departure and an object of reaction, a managed trauma that helped him to consolidate a countervailing artistic vision.

In 1906 the Adams family lived in a spacious house in the dunes beyond the Golden Gate. From his room Ansel could hear the waves crashing on Baker Beach. The evening of April 17 was quiet; Ansel slept in his child's bed next to Nelly, his nanny, while Kong, the Chinese cook, slept in the basement.

> At five-fifteen the next morning, we were awakened by a tremendous noise. Our beds were moving violently about. Nelly held frantically onto mine, as together we crashed back and forth against the walls. Our west window gave way in a shower of glass, and the handsome brick chimney passed by the north window, slicing through the greenhouse my father had just completed. The roaring, swaying, moving, and grinding continued for what seemed a long time; it actually took less than a minute. Then, there was a eerie silence with only the surf sounds coming through the shattered window and an occasional crash of plaster and tinkle of glass from downstairs.

The family regrouped outdoors, after preventing the dazed Kong from starting a fire in the kitchen stove. Adams quickly learned to wait for aftershocks, to hear them building: "It was fun for me, but not for anyone else." The call came for breakfast, and as he ran to answer it, a severe aftershock threw him to the ground. "I tumbled against a low brick garden wall, my nose making violent contact with quite a bloody effect." A doctor advised that the nose be left alone until Adams matured, and it was never fixed. Hence the famous Adams nose: "My beauty was marred forever—the septum was thoroughly broken."

Despite the disfigurement, Adams refrains from claiming the earthquake as his own. A day later, after a trip to Chinatown, Kong returned looking grim: "He had found no one and fire was everywhere. He never discovered what happened to his family." In retrospect, Adams imagines Kong's losses: "I have heard an estimate of four hundred lives lost; it was also said that the real total was closer to four thousand, as it is probable that the Chinese had never been counted." He also understands "the intense anxiety my father must have felt, thousands of miles away." Arriving in the city six days later and unable to rent a horse and buggy, Charles Adams walked and ran the five miles to his family's home.

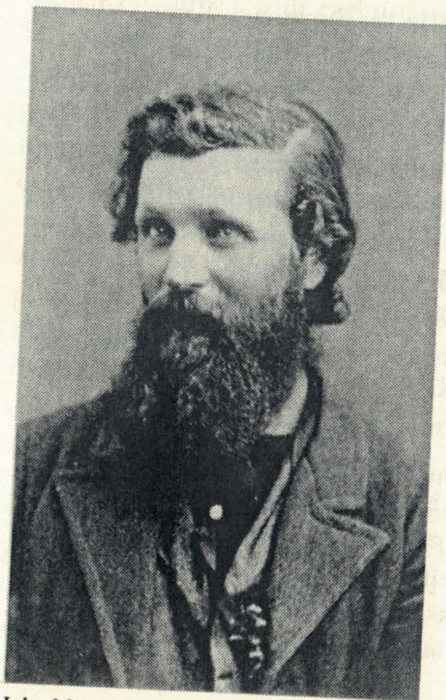
Adams ends the chapter called "Beginnings" with the following paragraph:

> My closest experience with profound human suffering was that earthquake and fire. But we were not burned out, ruined, or bereft of family and friends. I never went to war, too young for the First and too old for the Second. The great events of the world have been tragic pageants, not personal involvements. My world has been a world too few people are lucky enough to live in—one of peace and beauty. I believe in stones and water, air and soil, people and their future and their fate.

The will toward affirmation in these words makes it possible to conclude that Adams, like Emerson, lacked a vision of evil.

Such a conclusion is supported by looking at his work. Adam's photographs, like his writing about his life, betray an inability or an unwillingness to register pain. "America is a land of joy," he wrote in 1938, after studying Walker Evans's photographs of the Depression. "The promise of the world—the dawn wind and the smell of orchards, the inherent sweetness of simple people, the great *possibilities* of a reasonable life—

these things are important and Art (except in a few instances) consistently bypasses them." Adams would bypass neither the sweetness nor the light. "Perhaps we must go through a real fire of some kind to re-establish a sense of reality," he wrote in 1948, but Adams himself seems to have avoided such a fate. His life was singularly loss-free and productive, and he is to be believed when, in his early forties, he called himself "happier than almost anyone I know." His relentlessly affirmative and even anthemic images suggest that for Adams the big shock came early, left its mark on his face, and then insulated him against any comparable "suffering."



John Muir arrived in California in 1868 and drove a herd of sheep into Yosemite Valley in the following year. Believing that glaciers had shaped his beloved valley, he roamed the high country in search of the living glacier which he discovered in 1871. Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892. Courtesy of the John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections, University of the Pacific Libraries. Copyright 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust.

The style and content of Adams's mature images certainly cannot be reduced to the aftereffects of an early trauma. Still, his work does make a case about the place of catastrophe in our lives. By choosing Yosemite as his central subject and shooting it so consistently, Adams took sides in the debate between John Muir and Clarence King, one rooted in conflicting geological visions, about the beneficence of creation itself.

Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892, was the writer who popularized and fought to protect, through the creation of Yosemite National Park, the Range of Light. King, who served as the first head of the U.S. Geological Survey, conducted, in the 1860s, the initial survey of the major peaks of the Central Sierra. His 1872 *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* is as apocalyptic as Muir's 1894 *The Mountains of California* is benign. Both men loved the mountains, but they squared off over the question of how they had been made.

In the nineteenth century talking about geology was a way of talking about God. Muir believed in the slow work of glaciers, those powerful carving architects that create and then disappear. Glaciers operate as a "tender" hand from above rather than an unpredictable fault from below. Muir did live through a number of earthquakes while living in Yosemite Valley in the 1860s and 1870s, but he stubbornly maintained that glaciers had done the essential work of carving there. "Glaciers work apart from men," he wrote in his first newspaper article, published in 1871, "exerting their tremendous energies in silence and darkness, outspread, spirit-like, brooding above predestined rocks unknown to light." The language here intentionally echoes the Book of Genesis; Yosemite is a "readable glacier manuscript," and God its invisible and loving author.

King, by contrast, reasoned that Yosemite Valley had been precipitated by earthquakes. The high mountains of California, he came to believe, had been formed by sudden and discontinuous events rather than by a gradual and steady evolution. While King did admit that the "terrible ice-engines" called glaciers had done some work in the Sierra Nevada, he sided with his boss, Josiah Whitney, head of the California Geological Survey, in identifying earthquakes as the primary architects of the valley. The geology of the West "was distinctly catastrophic in the wildest dynamic sense," and Yosemite survived as its most vivid emblem.

Clarence King climbed the major peaks of the Central Sierra for the California Geological Survey during the mid-1860s. A Catastrophist rather than a Uniformitarian, King believed that the geology of the West, and of the Sierra in particular, has been formed by violent and discontinuous "moments of catastrophe." He favored earthquakes over glaciers as the primary architects of Yosemite Valley. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

Muir wanted to believe that creation was a tender rather than a terrible affair; but nineteenth-century geology and biology had upset the notion of a creator presiding with love. The way of the glaciers allowed him to fuse tradi-

tional creationism with the insights of modern science. Adams shared Muir's passion for tenderness, a quality in made things that lay even beyond technique. After meeting Stieglitz in New York, he wrote: "I will always remember what you said about the quality of *tenderness* (it's a rotten word for a deep cosmic quality) in things of art. Tenderness—a sort of elastic appropriation of the essence of things into the essence of yourself, without asking too many intellectual questions, and the giving of yourself to the resultant combination of essences. The soup stirs the cook—perhaps that's what happens in Art." The particular challenge Adams set himself was to choose as his subject a world of rock and to give it, through his "neat, clean, clear-cut technique," the quality of tenderness.

In the summer of 1916, after reading J. M. Hutchings's *In the Heart of the Sierras,* Adams insisted that his family visit Yosemite. On the morning of their arrival, his parents gave him his first camera, a Kodak Box Brownie. The first shot he took was of Half Dome, upside-down; Adams fell while shooting and accidentally hit the shutter. "There was light everywhere," he later wrote, and the valley and the high country beyond it were to become his spot. Photography began for Adams as a visual record of his mountain trips. "From that time on," he told Nancy Newhall in 1944, "things became crystallized in a far more healthy way." Adams lived in the valley during the 1930s and 1940s, and after discovering it as a boy, he visited Yosemite in every year of his life. He met his wife Virginia there in 1920 and married her at Best's Studio, run by her father, in 1928. While on a Sierra Club outing in 1933, Adams missed the delivery of his first child, who was born in the valley.

Like Muir, Adams often hiked the high country for days alone. Like Muir, he sometimes camped in snow. Neither man favored fancy equipment; Adams's preferred footwear in the mountains was rubber-soled basketball shoes. Both men sought in the mountains the clarity of "crystal days." The metaphor of crystal is Adams's, but it originated in Muir. In *The Yosemite* (1912), Muir wrote:

> No pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future. These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Drinking this champagne water is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable. One's body then seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal.

Crystal is the sublime essence of rock, matter pressured into transparency, a solid trembling on the brink of spirit. For Muir, crystal embodied the promise of a life beyond tension and of a body in seamless harmony with its world. For Adams, crystal became the figure for his "transcendental" art. He sought "crystallization of perception," the "crystal incisiveness" of those brittle-blue distances above and beyond the horizon of the sea off his childhood home. Crystal finally became a figure for the integrity of the man himself: "I remain the same old rock, taking pictures of the same old rocks. . . . I seem to have changed least of all the photographers I know."

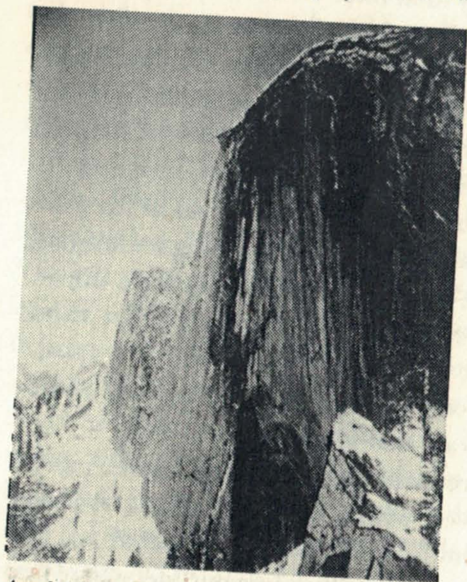
What would a crystal photography look like? It would be a photography purged of people. Adams did take wonderful portraits, and to the complaint that his images typically contain no human figures, he responded: "There are always *two* people; the photographer and the viewer." Yet we can no more imagine salient human figures in Adams's landscapes than we can imagine Edward Weston's without them. In *California and the West* (1940), Weston juxtaposed the curves of his wife's body with the curves of California earth, thereby establishing a continuity between human and natural forms. Adams's work argues for a discontinuity; his recurring subject is a peak or monolith, a shape that stands alone and dwarfs and instructs the viewer. "What is lonely is a spirit," A. C. Bradley wrote in his lecture on Wordsworth, and Adams's photographs attempt to evoke and celebrate that loneliness.

A crystal photography would prefer line over form. Weston's vegetables, dunes, and bodies are endowed with a palpable weight; Adams's shapes glow with an unearthly light. They contain not a hint of sex. His mountains, trees, and water exist to affirm a bounding outline, where line becomes the token of a master engraver. In 1920 he wrote his father from the valley: "Even in portraying the character and spirit of a little cascade one must rely solely upon *line* and tone. Form, in a material sense is not only unnecessary, but sometimes useless and undesirable." "Elevation" is the goal, and to a height greater than the Sierra's maximum 14, 495 feet. Adams achieves it by way of a kind of hyperexposure; he opens the

camera to light and then filters it out. The blacks and whites that do burn through seem to vie for space in the finished print. In looking at an Adams photograph, the salient effect is of sharp and even surreal contrast. The contrast sets up a shimmer that destabilizes the solidity of the subject. As late as 1967, he could write: "I wonder if I am printing too strong and tone-full!!! My prints all seem to have about 2x the silver of most others I see."

A crystal photography chooses as its subject, then, a recalcitrant hardness, like granite, and works to sublimate that hardness into the affective *"equivalent,"* to use Stieglitz's word, of the power of mind. "The subject is absolutely secondary" to its effect. The photographic image that best reveals this theory put into practice was taken by Adams on April 17, 1927, exactly nineteen years to the day (minus one) after the chimneys fell in on his childhood home.

"One bright Yosemite day in 1927 I made a photograph," Adams wrote in the autobiography, "that was to change my understanding of the medium." It was to become "my first true visualization." With Virginia and three friends Adams had hiked to the Diving Board, a slab of granite on the west shoulder of Half Dome. Arriving at the spot at noon, he found the face of the monolith in shade. He exposed all but two plates while waiting for the light. At 2:30 he placed a K2 filter over his Zeiss Tessar lens and composed the shot. "The shadow effect on Half Dome seemed right, and I made the exposure." "As I replaced the slide," Adams continued,



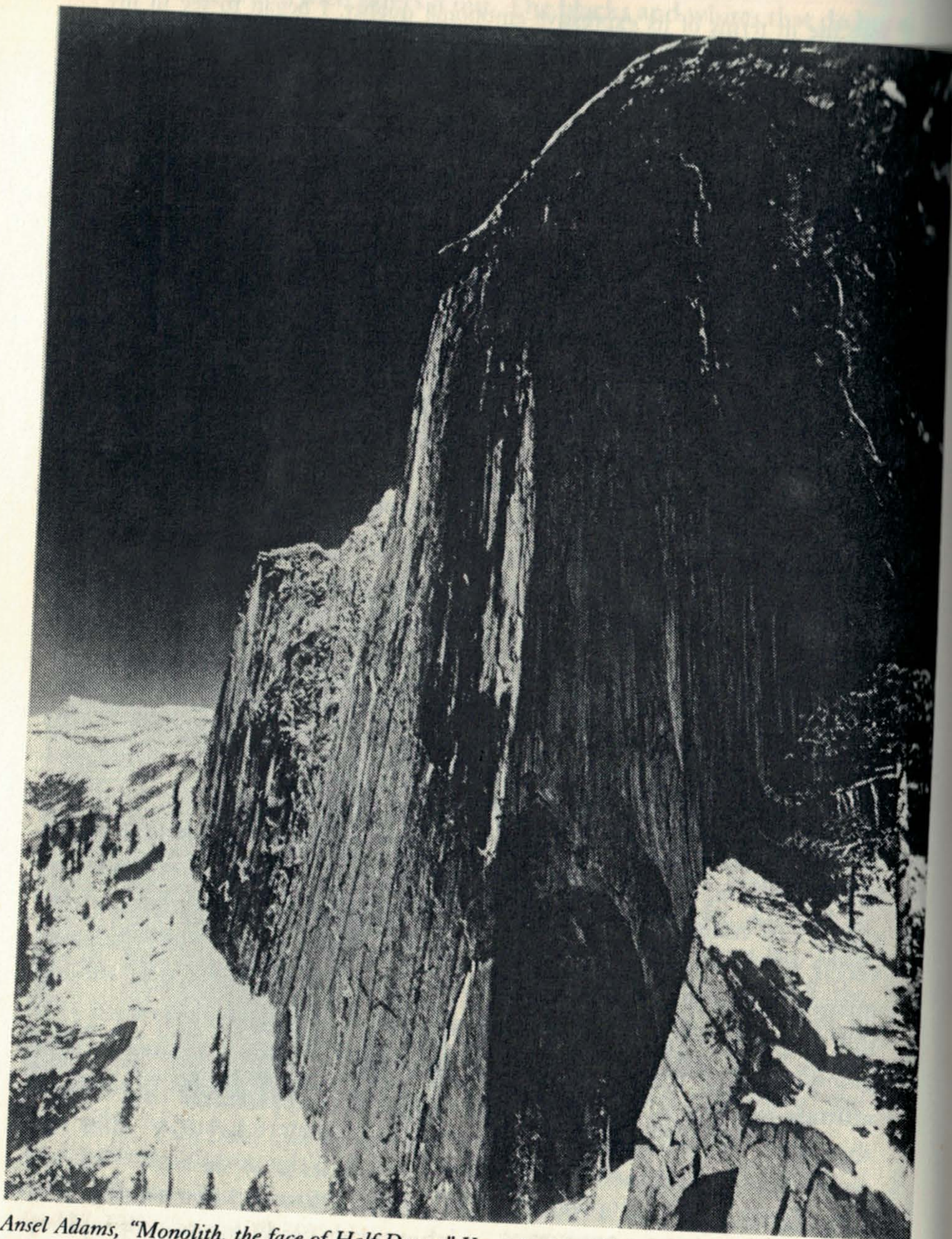
Ansel Adams, "Half Dome with K2 yellow filter, 1927." This is the first of the two photographs Adams took on the afternoon of April 17, 1927. Copyright © 1995 by the Trustees of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All Rights Reserved.

> I began to think about how the print was to appear, and if it would transmit any of the feeling of the monumental shape before me in terms of its expressive-emotional quality. I began to see in my mind's eye the finished print I desired: the brooding cliff with a dark sky and the sharp rendition of distant, snowy Tenaya Peak. I realized that only a deep red filter would give me anything approaching the effect I felt emotionally.
>
> I had only *one* plate left. I attached my other filter, a Wratten #29(F), increased the exposure by the sixteen-times factor required, and released the shutter.

The second and last shot resulted in the "desired image: not the way the subject appeared in reality but how it *felt* to me." *"How it felt to me"*: this is Joan Didion's phrase, used in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* for why she keeps a notebook. Like Adams, Didion knows that feelings are hard to have, honor, and express, and like Adams, she defines her California-centered art as a deeply affective one.

The image that Adams produced in his second shot had little to do with accurately recording the world. "The sky had actually been a light, slightly hazy blue and the sunlit areas of Half Dome were moderately dark grey in value. The red filter dramatically darkened the sky and the shadows on the great cliff." The resulting image offers a viewer day-for-night, a high-resolution glimpse of the rock face that seems to coincide with a near-eclipse of the sun. This is not a light ever seen on land or sea. It is a light that brings into focus the power of photography to create a world answerable to the shape and scope of human desire.

Like Muir, Adams conducted a lifelong campaign on behalf of his beloved Sierra, using both photographs and political action to make his case. Both men created through their activities a popular demand for access to the very wilderness they sought to protect. In 1940 Adams's images, shown to President Roosevelt, helped secure passage of the bill that created Kings Canyon National Park. "Public presentation is a game," Adams wrote Weston in 1934, "and none of us can neglect that attitude towards it." Adams played the game so well that he became, by the 1970s, the most famous photographer in America, a man who had converted the lineaments of the mountains into the portable spectacle of calendar art. In 1981 a mural-sized print of *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941* sold for $71,500, the highest price paid for a photograph up to that time. Adams estimated that a million copies of his books had been sold before the 1979 publication of *Yosemite and the Range of Light*. By



Ansel Adams, "Monolith, the face of Half Dome," Yosemite National Park. The second photograph taken of Half Dome on April 17, 1927. In his autobiography, Adams called it "a personally historic moment in my photographic career." Copyright © 1995 by the Trustees of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All Rights Reserved.

1985, that volume had sold a hundred thousand copies in paper and another hundred thousand in hardback. As the Adams industry grew, his household came to include two cooks, a photographic assistant, a computer operator, a bookkeeper, and a manager-biographer.

In 1949 Paul Strand wrote Adams a letter about "the whole problem of establishing a proper value for a photograph." Strand complained that Adams had set too low a price for a run of a portfolio, a price that undermined the basic concept of the value of a photographic print. In a cheerful reply Adams wrote, "To me the essence of the photographic process is its reproducibility." By way of his reproductions, more tourists have visited Yosemite than could ever have crowded into the valley in fact. Through his consistent practice and vast productivity, Adams converted California into a hard-edged, idealized, and above all an *available* version of itself, an image that usurps the need for physical travel.

When Beaumont Newhall was removed from the directorship of the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, Adams wrote a letter of protest against "a *regime* which is inevitably favorable to the spectacular and 'popular.'" Yet these were precisely the aspects of twentieth-century photography with which he became firmly associated. Few would argue the sheer appeal of Adams's images; they are, by any standard, beautiful things. A question that remains is whether his photographs adequately reflect, in Didion's words, "the price of things."

The catastrophes that shaped Adams's beloved Yosemite—and, for that matter, his own life—remain invisible presences in his panoramas of composure. The irony of his Yosemite Valley images is that they minutely record the aftereffects of the very natural processes they set out to suppress. Modern geologists agree that earthquakes had a prominent role in creating the present spectacle of the valley. Arrested by this catastrophic production, Muir and Adams choose to focus on a theory of making that left out shock and pain. But catastrophe *produces* spectacle; this is the hard lesson imparted by California history and geology. For evidence of this fact, Adams had only to refer to Genthe's career, which was made by the opportunity provided by an earthquake. It was after San Francisco had been split open that Genthe had gone out into the streets and produced "pictures," as he wrote, "of lasting interest." The metaphor of crystal, so dear to Adams and to Muir, compensated for the fact of a primal fracture, a break that also had the power to make a landscape of surpassing force. Adams's is a vision haunted by the very forces it would exclude, and it is

possible to read his photographs as the equivalent of an immense anxiety, one generated by the carefully managed awareness that he lived in a land of faults as well as beauty.

SEVEN YEARS AFTER the earthquake, the water that was to enable the development of the modern city of Los Angeles arrived in Southern California from the Owens Valley. In a pattern that continues today, California agreed to drain its north in order to irrigate its south. The water made subdivision possible, a story told in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). Meanwhile oil was discovered in 1921 at Signal Hill, north of Long Beach. The oil lubricated a building boom, a story told in Jack Nicholson's *Two Jakes* (1990). "There's one thing about Los Angeles that makes it different from most places," the oil man played by Richard Farnsworth says, "and that's two things. You got a desert with oil under it. Second, you got a lot of water around it." Unfortunately the water is salt and the oil is largely gone. What thrives is the culture of spectacle, one in which an entire region can shut down its major north-south freeway in order to cheer the televised escape, in a white Ford Bronco, of a celebrity fugitive.

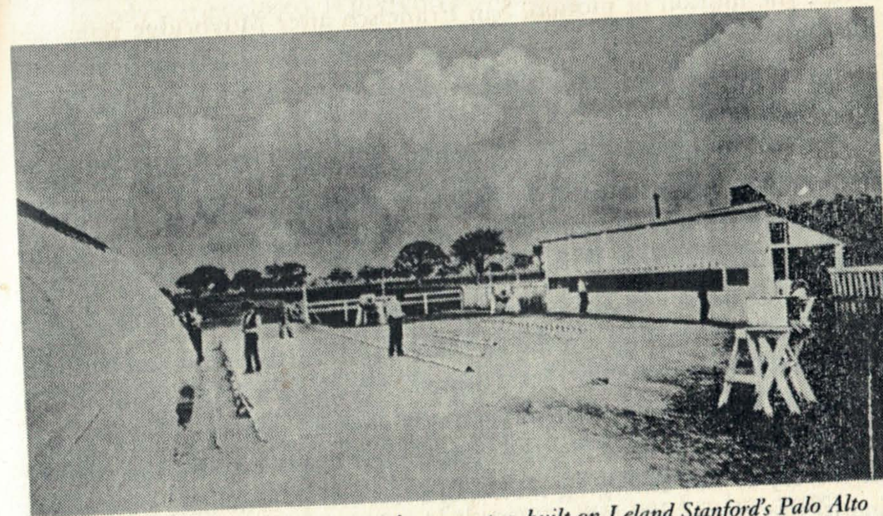
In 1910 D. W. Griffith moved Biograph's winter operation to Los Angeles. In less than three months he shot twenty-one films, most of them using Southern California settings. Cecil B. DeMille located his operation in Hollywood in 1914, after the successful shooting of *The Squaw Man*. The most familiar image of the earthquake and fire was generated some twenty years later in the Clark Gable/Jeanette MacDonald film *San Francisco* (1936). Richard Rodriguez, writing from the Castro district in the 1990s, remarks in *Days of Obligation* on the abiding and usurping power of the film's images: "Few American cities have had the experience, as we have had, of watching the civic body burn even as we stood, out of body, on a hillside, in a movie theatre. Jeanette MacDonald's loony scatting of 'San Francisco' has become our go-to-hell anthem. San Francisco has taken some heightened pleasure from the circus of final things."

San Francisco contains no image equal to Genthe's. But it owes much, indirectly, to the precocity of northern California camerawork. San Francisco can rightly claim, along with New York, to be the agora of modern American still photography, having fostered the careers of artists like Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge, Weston, Adams, Cunningham, and Genthe. It can claim more, since the world's first "moving"

pictures were in fact created by Muybridge, to resolve a bet made by Leland Stanford over the motion of the feet of a horse. Stanford believed that at some point in the trot all four feet of a horse are in the air at the same time. In order to prove this, he hired Muybridge, a Bay Area photographer known for his gigantic images of the Pacific Coast landscape, to make his case. The results were recorded in J.D.B. Stillman's *The Horse in Motion* (1882).

In order to prove the case, Muybridge had a building erected on the west side of Stanford's racetrack in Palo Alto. He then placed twenty-four cameras in the building, in a row, at the level of a trotting horse. Opposite the building were strung trip wires at an interval of every twenty-one inches. As the driver guided his horse and sulky along a grooved track, a wheel of the carriage would trip each wire in turn. The wires fired the shutters, as Muybridge explained in an appendix, until the whole series was taken. Run together at high speed on one of Muybridge's crude projectors, the series of still photographs merged into a motion picture.

In 1887 Muybridge published his eleven-volume *Animal Locomotion*, but he failed to capitalize on the experiments he made in animating these images on what he called his "zoopraxiscope," a circular metal device that,



Eadweard Muybridge's photograph of the apparatus, built on Leland Stanford's Palo Alto farm, to capture the movement of a trotting horse. Using shutter speeds up to one-six-thousandth of a second, Muybridge projected the resulting photographs through a device that gave the illusion of continuous movement and so produced the world's first "moving pictures." Courtesy of the University of Virginia.

"Edgerton—Trotting, Stride, 18FT, 3 IN." This series of photographs by Muybridge shows the carriage wheel and horse as they move across numbered trip wires. From The Horse in Motion, *with text by J.D.B. Stillman and an appendix by Muybridge. Courtesy of the University of Virginia.*

when rotated, projected a series of still images onto a screen in order to create the illusion of motion. San Francisco after Muybridge remained the center of still photography, leaving Los Angeles to commercialize the image in motion with an industry that gave spectacle an unprecedented luminosity and scale.

The San Francisco earthquake and fire mark the eclipse, in California, of a world of dimension and depth, a world replaceable by the image of it. As the century turned, both still and moving photography were beginning to create an alternative universe. Any understanding of how life was lived either in San Francisco or, especially, in its rival city to the south would yield increasingly to the amplified and the two-dimensional; Los Angeles was to become the most "filmed" city on earth. As a result, it was images of Los Angeles that increasingly showed audiences around the world how life was lived in cities. Those who would express and analyze the history of this emerging metropolis learned to articulate themselves against the gathering pressure of a vast visual mediation. Between hearing and seeing—between the claims of voice and the power of spectacle—those who lived in Southern California would henceforth be required to make their unsolitary way.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE POLITICS OF WATER

The Shift South

THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE and fire is an event whose meaning is largely self-enclosed. It presents something of a dead-end for historical analysis, a happening unproduced by human agency and therefore one in which responsibility gives way to response. What figures in the accounts of it is the feel or shape or look of the thing. The fire did break the city's continuity with its Gold Rush origins and "cleared the way," as Kevin Starr has it, for the building of the modern city of San Francisco. But during the rebirth of the city out of the flames, there also occurred a displacement of energy east and especially south. The Moore Shipbuilding Company moved from San Francisco to Oakland in 1906 and inaugurated the first boom in the modern East Bay economy. Los Angeles experienced even more significant growth after the fire. This southward shift was not a case of moving directly into some suddenly opened economic or cultural breach. Rather, all the forces that had been gathering to shift California's wealth and power southward came together in the next two decades. At the center of this story was not fire but water.

The water that brought life and expansion to Southern California also brought deep political hurt. Yet unlike the visitations of fire, the workings of water's power were often invisible. They took effect slowly, over decades, as a kind of occluded spectacle, one whose dimensions are still