

REVERSALS: GREGORY CREWDSON'S SENSE OF TIME

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The blonde woman with the tan lines and darkened eyes sits on the bumper of a pickup truck (plate 2). A man, naked, lies face down on the truck's bed. For the woman, the only time is now. Whatever grief or disappointment governs her isolation—whatever has just gone wrong or right—she knows only the moment. To talk of history with her makes no sense, unless we think of her own immediate past, what happened there, what brought these two to this place. A vaster time—what occurred, say, before she was born—does not matter in the privacy of her misfortune. Yet a sense of the past—of American history—governs Gregory Crewdson's work.

The key to that past is place. Crewdson's favored locale of western Massachusetts is by now his own territory, a fantasy of main streets and frozen lakes, of American cars and telephone wires, the photographic equivalent of Thomas Hardy's Wessex and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Like their imagined lands, Crewdson's western Massachusetts is a creation roamed by memorable characters. Juliane Hiam's map of Becket (fig. 1), the town in western Massachusetts where *Cathedral of the Pines* is set, recalls the maps of fictitious places that greet the reader at the start of editions of *Jude the Obscure* or *Absalom, Absalom!* As surely as we will encounter Quentin Compson, we will find some memorable inhabitant of a believable land that does not exist. But Becket is also a real place: the blonde woman in Crewdson's photograph sits on October Mountain, designated at the top left of Hiam's map. Given its name by Herman Melville, who lived in nearby Pittsfield, the mountain rises above the town in an 1879 map (fig. 2). The trees in the photograph are straight and narrow and real enough, planted there by WPA workers in the 1930s. But what of it to the woman and her companion? Do they need

FIG. 1 (OPPOSITE)
Juliane Hiam, Becket, Massachusetts, 2015

FIG. 2 (BELOW)
Lucien R. Burleigh, Aerial view of Becket, Massachusetts, 1879
Image courtesy the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center,
Boston Public Library

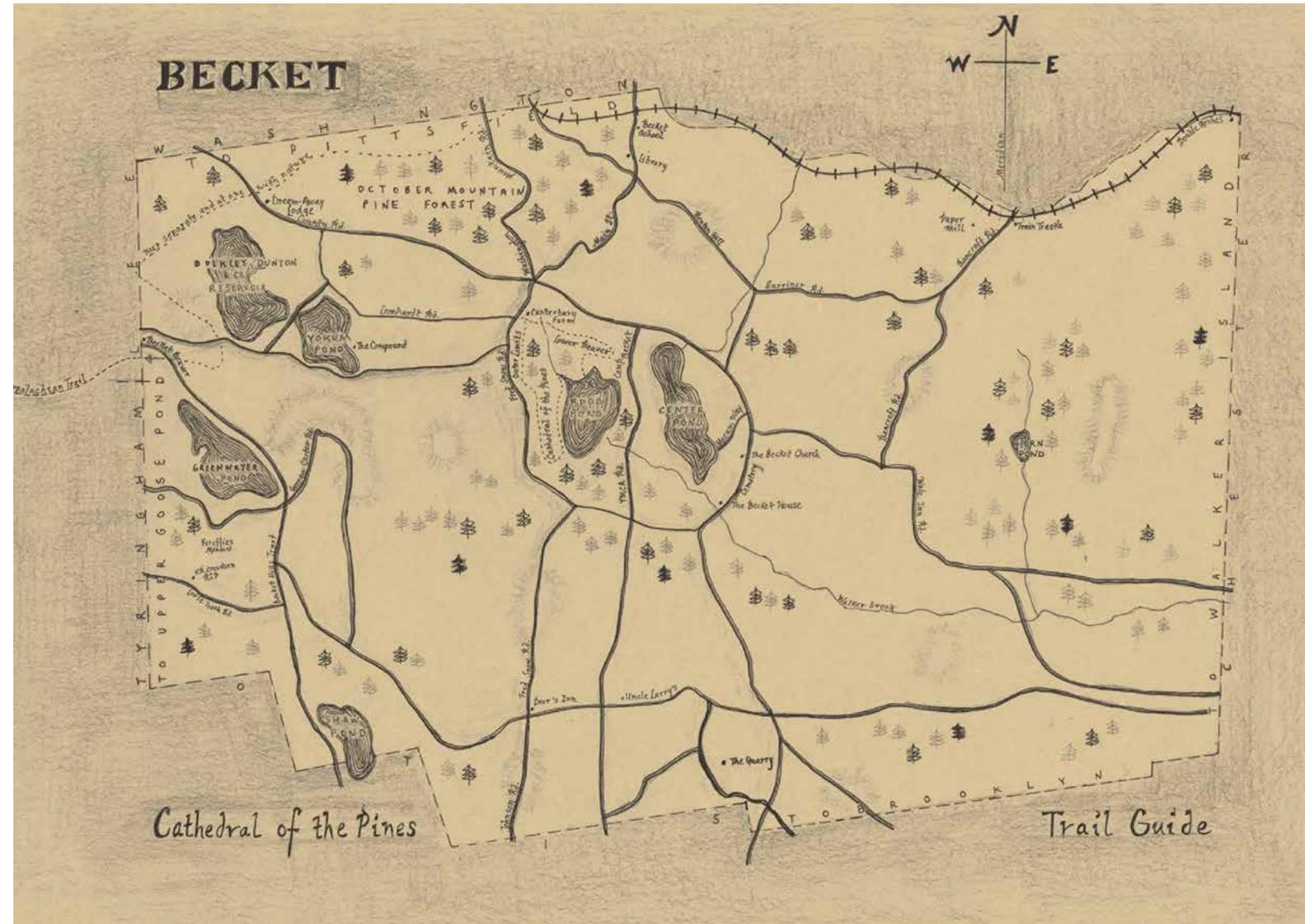
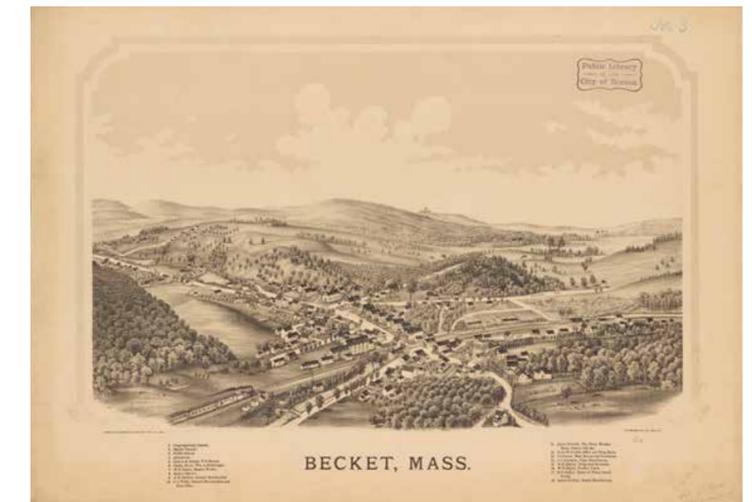


FIG. 3
Asher Brown Durand, *In the Woods*, 1855
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
and courtesy Art Resource, New York

a history lesson to know their own sorrow? Do they not continue to live in the Now of their mysterious disappointment? Or is somehow the history of this place—lesson or not—a matter of deep consequence to them and to Crewdson?

The woman's part-nakedness—she wears only a skirt—recalls American historical tales in which the naked sit scourged in the wilderness. Indian captivity narratives, often taking place in Massachusetts, feature the ritual stripping of white settlers. "There was one who was chopt into the head with a Hatchet, and stripped naked, and yet was crawling up and down," wrote Mary Rowlandson in the first and most famous of these narratives, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, published in 1682. The Algonquian raid on Lancaster, Massachusetts, on the morning of February 10, 1675, when a war party descended on the town, gave Rowlandson visions she had never seen before: a man "begged of them his life, promising them Money . . . but they would not hearken to him but knockt him in head, and stript him naked, and split open his Bowels." Led into the wilderness with three dozen other captives, including her three children, Rowlandson suffers from hunger and exposure and humiliation. Like Hannah Dustin, abducted from the town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, on March 15, 1697, and told by her captors that she and another woman "must be Stript, and Scourg'd and run the Gantlet through the whole Army of Indians" once they arrived at the Indian village, Rowlandson went to an uncertain fate. Although she and Dustin both returned—Rowlandson was ransomed, Dustin escaped—each understood what the Indians made clear: nakedness is the sign of squalor and abjection, the stripping of the settlers' pretense to decency, order, and godliness.

Not that the woman on the pickup truck thinks of this. Or that Crewdson thinks of it when he plans and makes the photograph. The past appears not as an "allusion" or a "theme" any more than what I write presently is an "interpretation." Such words play small with Crewdson's work and that of the critic. The past is there, rather, because it is the simple basis for what Crewdson can say and what we can see. A backstory of guilt and vulnerability and pain and dejection—with always the possibility of being *redeemed*, as Mary Rowlandson eventually was—gives Crewdson's work its emotional depth.

The woman's Now remains as vivid as ever. She is oblivious to all else. But her misfortune is more than momentary. It drags and scoops and elongates across days and centuries before she was born. The beer cans may litter the ground, the pickup truck may have taken a wrong turn on the joyride, and the pickup's enigmatic bed may call to



mind the bed of a couple whose sexual failure is so singular that the whole world, not to mention the rest of history, falls away to inconsequence before the uniqueness of their dysfunction. But the historical record shows that every place at every time is alive with experiences equally private and unrepeatable. Any historical marker we happen to encounter on the side of the road will tell us so. And together, these individual naked states—battles, attacks, slaughters, partings, breakups—form a ribbon connecting one time to another. Each intensity of suffering, separate and irreducible, joins with the others to make a palimpsest of time in one place.

An indifferent artist does not know or care what to do about this. But an artist alive to the pain and sadness of his characters does. What we feel in that artist's work is the fate of people "stript naked" over time, one person's disaster summoning the misfortunes of others from long ago. A bad prom date recalls sinners and the cold light of winter stars,

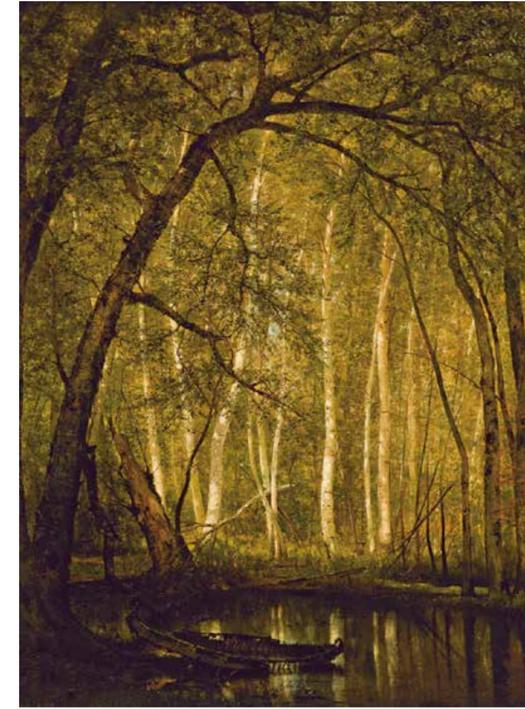


FIG. 4
Worthington Whittredge, *The Old Hunting Grounds*, 1864
Courtesy Reynolda House Museum of American Art, affiliated
with Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C.

"And yet how hath the Lord preserved me in safety!" Rowlandson rejoiced at a moment of special hardship. "Oh the experience that I have had of the goodness of God, to me and mine!"

But Crewdson's world is godless. The thick woods of the "Cathedral of the Pines," the spot where the pickup truck is parked, run overgrown with a ground layer of weeds and bushes. The gap in the trees, to the left of the woman, does not open like the vista glimpsed through the arching boughs in, say, Asher Durand's godly forest of 1855 (fig. 3). Durand's darkened path is strewn with difficulty and foreboding, but a heavenly light glows at the end of the tunnel. Crewdson's view, so different, has more in common with the closed and lawless thicket of Worthington Whittredge's *The Old Hunting Grounds*, painted nine years later in 1864 (fig. 4). There, the cathedral of overhanging trees makes an apse where hallowed sounds echo, reverberating in the stillness like the reflections of the birches and the remains of a desiccated canoe. But at the high altar we no longer see the heavens. Instead only the Darwinian enclosure of trees and more trees, prospering with a nameless and incoherent beauty, strikes up and strikes down the wishful dream that God still presides. In the quiet of the solitary forest every individual noise and motion withers in the absence of godly sanction, dying without notice. The cathedral is still there, but it is empty—the congregation departed—and nature, ravenous and entwining, grows to fill the halls. Crewdson's cathedral likewise reverberates with an absent divinity.

So Crewdson's woman with the tan lines gets no redemption, not at least of Mary Rowlandson's kind. His naked sinner succumbs and frets without the comfort of a heavenly sign. Even a scourge would have been promising to her, since it would indicate a divine will ordering all events. But how much more terrifying her ordeal, since it happens without order, without purpose. By contrast, even the most extreme violence of an earlier time could be sanctioned by a plausible appeal to the heavens. Jane McCrea looks to God, beseeching him as well as her oppressor, as she goes under the hatchet in John Vanderlyn's magnificently posed painting of 1804 (fig. 5). Her bodice no less tight than the clasp of her killer's hand on her wrist, or that of her own hand on the wrist of the man about to lift the scalp from her head, she is sainted all the same. Even in the dark woods the martyr lights up like tinted marble in the grace of her demise. But Crewdson's people suffer their torments without the designs of providence. They are whiplashed by unseen and indiscriminate forces. The arms of overmastering trees twist with the energies not just of their minds but of a universe in which they are strangers.

FIG. 5
John Vanderlyn, *The Murder of Jane McCrea*, 1804
Courtesy Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.

The fate is the same in other *Cathedral of the Pines* pictures. The older man and young woman, set and staring at a television, recall the Indian chief and his captive in Eanger Irving Couse's painting of 1891, a picture made many years after victims stopped beseeching the heavens in such tableaux (plate 7; fig. 6). Couse's man and girl, like Crewdson's, are opposite universes, irreconcilable proximities, enclosed in an incomprehensible situation. The feelings remain—everything ever celebrated and sunlit by order and decree: saints and sinners, blazes of glory and drops to hell—except now the cosmos of supplication and evil spirits, of deliverance and redemption, has drained out until nothing is left but the enigma of emotions happening in a vacuum.

Yet the otherworldly light of evening falls on Crewdson's people, and what saves them is *time*. The connection of one unaccountably singular misfortune to other sorrows is what gives these people lives beyond their own. Struck dumb in a soundless world, they shadow-act with shades such as Rowlandson's that they draw near. Consider: the farmer's daughter rejects her suitor, who trudges away dejected in the evening light. But her lacerating sadness and his shattering grief gather the stars of other misfortunes, until each is smitten with a dark glory their small lives would not otherwise see. Ahab reflects in *Moby-Dick* that "even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heart-woes [have] a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur." There in western Massachusetts, not far from where Melville wrote those words, Crewdson understands this mystic significance—how it endures, signifying after the fact, strummed up and taken on by woes it cannot know. In the ceremonial planning and creation of his monumental photographs, he senses that the dejected prom queen meets the bludgeoned prisoner and that each joins a light-bathed host of mortals struck to saintliness by their sad defiance of time.

This is a theory of American experience, a theory of American history. In Crewdson's opening image in this book (plate 1), two women stand naked on the bank of a river beneath a beautiful bridge. The bridge is one of the Keystone Arches, part of Becket, and part of American history. Designed by the railroad engineer George Washington Whistler, the father of the famous painter James McNeill Whistler, the arches were completed in 1840, a progressive time when engineering marvels and other industrial feats drew one place closer to another, encouraging settlement and prosperity. Rhetoric went apace, soliloquies and sonnets dedicated to peace and opportunity. All seemed true and straight, words and railroads flowing smoothly on well-oiled paths. Yet some



undercurrent of guilt—perpetual and inescapable—lurked in the shadow of progress. Crewdson's two women beneath the bridge, the nearer one holding a baby, know something about this feeling.

The women's place has the feel of the forgotten. Who has not imagined, crossing over a railroad bridge, what people might be living, hermetic and destitute, right beneath the traveler as he goes on his way? The fast and blurry speed of the journeyer counts for little next to these persons who hold their solitude in such quiet. The thousands of travelers over the years may add up, but in their multitude they occupy only the same space that one person of lonely feeling occupies in the density of the universe. So Melville might have said.

Or Melville's friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. The year 1840 was Hawthorne's moment, too, a time when he was writing the short stories that preceded the famous novels he was



FIG. 6
Eanger Irving Couse, *The Captive*, 1891
Collection of Phoenix Art Museum, gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Read Mullan and others

to start creating in quick succession a decade later (*The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance*). The stories, like the novels, make Hawthorne's dispute with progress clear. Haunted by the Puritan past, he could not shake the feeling that depravity and guilt and slanted wickedness run through human nature, and that the wilderness beckons otherwise-good souls to disastrous reckonings with their own propensity for selfishness, lust, and even murder.

In "Roger Malvin's Burial," his story of 1832, the young man Reuben Bourne leaves his fiancée's father to die beneath a sepulchral rock in the woods. The older man, mortally wounded in an Indian fight, has urged Reuben to abandon him and return home on his remaining strength (he too has been injured) rather than waste his energy trying to carry a fatally wounded person or even waiting to bury him. Reuben, leaving the man, returns home, marries the dead man's daughter (in his dying breath the man has blessed the marriage), and the couple soon has a wonderful son. But Reuben, haunted by the scene in the woods, becomes defeated, sad, and bitter. Led as if by fate eighteen years later to the same spot in the woods where he left his companion to die, he accidentally shoots his son while hunting, the boy dying at the spot where the old man's bones lie. Guilt and sadness wrack Reuben Bourne and lead him to his fate. Man returns to the scene of the crime, even if technically it was not a crime at all, until he commits another . . . crime,

an accident that his own neuroses and guilt have led him to the place to commit. In the soaring world of the Keystone Arches, Hawthorne's vision of man keeps a lower path.

So does Crewdson's. His young women beneath the bridge stand before the stream as if despairing of a baptism that would absolve them of their crimes, whatever they are. They have come to this spot as if on purpose (let us meet beneath the bridge), but they look lost. The guilt of nakedness somehow blends with a feeling of obsession and return. There is no such thing as the newborn world but only a nature that vilifies our innocence by returning us, again and again, to remote places where we secretly confront our guilt. The bridge of progress, sailing blithely overhead, becomes something like the sepulchral rock above Roger Malvin's bones. The grooved silence of hidden places—where even the people who know how to get there feel lost once they have arrived—is the province of Hawthorne and Crewdson alike.

They both know too that at such places people endure. In the summer of 1845, Hawthorne witnessed a spectacular and gruesome event: the dredging-up of the body of Martha Hunt, a nineteen-year-old Concord schoolteacher who had gone missing earlier that day and was discovered around midnight at the bottom of the Concord River. Despondent, thrown into an existential crisis, she had killed herself. The body, pulled out by torchlight by a group of men including Hawthorne, was so cold and petrified that it resembled marble. The face was red almost to purple. One of her eyes was injured, possibly by the pike the men had used to feel for her body on the river bottom. Once she was removed to the shore, blood began to flow from her nose without stopping. Her limbs were frozen in anguish; the assembled men tried to push her arms and legs down to a quieted position by her sides, but they kept springing back into their former postures. Hawthorne wrote in his journal that if at 5 a.m. that morning Martha Hunt had known what she would look like at midnight, she would not have killed herself.

Martha Hunt is a forgotten figure, but also an enduring one. She was not an Indian captive, though her fate calls to mind the woes of those other women with God more on their side. Hawthorne's theory of American experience, his theory of American history, like Crewdson's, is this: that people of special feeling leave their tragedy always where they were. Of Zenobia, the woman in *The Blithedale Romance* whose drowning suicide he patterned on Martha Hunt's, Hawthorne wrote: "It was as if the vivid coloring of her character had left a brilliant stain upon the air." Crewdson, by all his own Hawthorne-like art, creates scenes this permanent.