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Book Review: *Gone: Photographs of
Abandonment on the High Plains*

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Mexico Press, 2003. xii + 175 pp. Color photographs, map, list of plates. \$39.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Steve Fitch's photographs depicting the interior of abandoned houses, schools, and stores on the High Plains are struck though with melancholy. Not the self-absorbed and self-pitying brand, but that of an observer who has come upon something tragic—lost potential, displaced lives, failed communities.

Thomas Jefferson's vision for the expansion of the fledgling United States was centered on the image of a free nation populated by yeoman farmers tilling the soil and reaping the benefit of their own labor. That ideal, regardless of collateral damage, helped fuel the settlement of the West. And for the most part Jefferson's vision was realized, albeit imperfectly. Farming and ranching communities that dot the Plains have persisted at a human scale for roughly one hundred years, punctuated by bumper crops and barren fields. And while life at the foot of the Rockies was never easy, it went on. But the family farms that hold communities together have proven no match for industrial scale agribusiness. The human landscape of the Plains is changing.

The pictures collected in *Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains* document the aftermath of that transition: abandoned structures with roofs collapsing and paint peeling—the glow of outdoors pouring through every crack and crevice as if trying to break in. The images are beautifully still with an unflinching descriptive power. This is due both to Fitch's matter-of-fact compositional approach and his choice of tool—an 8 x 10 inch view camera. Superficially the photographs fit neatly into the continuum of image making pioneered by Walker Evans. Fitch's, however, offer something else that I found hard to name initially. For all their stillness and obvious emptiness they have an uneasy quality. Not horror movie scary, but more an underlying tension. Fitch accomplishes this by avoiding a rigid approach to composition (the images often feel a bit off balance) and through

Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains. Photography by Steve Fitch. Foreword by Merrill Gilfillan. Essays by Steve Fitch, Kathleen Stewart Howe, and Evelyn A. Schlatter. Albuquerque: University of New

finding the right details. It seems as if the people who once occupied these vacant structures left in a hurry. The Smith family gets up, finishes the morning chores, eats breakfast, loads the car and leaves forever. Gone. A child's drawing left hanging on the wall; bags on the bed waiting to be packed; the stage backdrop for the last school play still in place. Family farms and small towns all dying sudden deaths.

A bedroom, probably a child's, in an abandoned house in Pritchett, Colorado, mustard colored paint falling away from a wall that bears the hand painted words "TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE." Thomas Jefferson's dream gone bust.

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