ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

ROAD SHOW

The journey of Robert Frank's "The Americans."

BY ANTHONY LANE

In June, 1955, Robert Frank bought a car. It was a Ford Business Coupe, five years old, sold by Ben Schultz, of New York. From there, Frank drove by himself to Detroit, where he visited the Ford River Rouge plant, in Dearborn, as if taking the coupe home to see its family. Later that summer, he headed south to Savannah, and, with the coming of fall, set off from Miami Beach to St. Petersburg, and then struck out on a long, diversionary loop to New Orleans, and thence to Houston, for a rendezvous with his wife, Mary, and their two children, Pablo and Andrea. Together, they went west, arriving in Los Angeles in the nick of Christmastime. They stayed on the Pacific Coast until May of the following year, when Mary and the children returned to New York. Frank, however, still wasn't done. Alone again, he made the trip back, going via Reno and Salt Lake City, then pushing north on U.S. 91 to Butte, Montana. From there, it was a deep curve, though a swift one, through Wyoming, Nebraska, and Iowa to Chicago, where he turned south; at last, by early June, Frank and his Ford Business, his partner for ten thousand miles, were back in New York. It had been a year, more or less, since he embarked, and there was much to reflect upon. Luckily, he'd taken a few photographs along the way.

In fact, he took around twenty-seven thousand. There were more than seven hundred and sixty rolls of film to develop: an impressive tally, even to snap-happy profligates of the digital age. Then there were contact sheets to print and mark up; from those, he made a thousand work prints, which were tacked to the walls of his apartment on Third Avenue, near Tenth Street, or laid flat on the floor for closer inspection, before being whittled down to a hundred. The final count, from all those months on the road, was eighty-three pictures: enough for a slim book, which was published in November, 1958, in Paris, as "Les Américains," and here, in January, 1960, as "The Americans." For his pains, Frank was paid two hundred dollars in advance, a sum that rose to just over eight hundred and seventeen dollars by the end of the year. By then, the book was out of print.

And now look at it. Back on the walls again, not of his apartment—at eighty-four, he divides his time between New York and Nova Scotia—but of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where "Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'" runs from September 22nd through January 3rd. Before that, it showed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and, back in January, at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, where Sarah Greenough, the senior curator of photographs, put together the exhibition

"Drug Store—Detroit" (1955), opposite, and Frank in 1956. To the earliest viewers of "The Americans," he was the enemy within.

©ROBERT FRANK, FROM "THE AMERICANS"; OPPOSITE: WAYNE MILLER/MAGNUM

and edited the catalogue—a beast of a book, more than five hundred pages long, stacked with a dozen essays, reproductions of letters and contact sheets, early Frank, late Frank, and, most helpfully, a map. Inside every fat volume, of course, a thin one is signalling quietly to get out, and, tucked away inside this hulk, not even starting until page 209, is the source of the fuss: the original pictures, of a burnished black-and-white, in all their roaring silence.

Here, for example, is Butte, which Frank reached in May, 1956. Not a human in sight, though the imprint of human activity could hardly be more pronounced: a row of receding roofs and a line of cars on a cloth-gray street, at the end of which, in softer, pencilled tones, come the disfigured slopes of a copper mine. Drawing the eye, toward the top, is a plume of bright smoke, and, framing the whole design, as translucent as a bridal veil, are two thin patches of drape, left and right: "View from Hotel Window," the title reads, and we realize that here is our human after all. We are sharing the gaze not just of Robert Frank but of every traveller who has ever woken in an unfamiliar town, moved blearily to the light, and shivered at the depths of his unwelcome. Others have tasted the same bleakness:

> Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
> Fall to within five inches of the sill,
>
> Whose window shows a strip of building land,
> Tussocky, littered.

That is from "Mr Bleaney," composed by Philip Larkin in the year before Frank's stay in Butte, and, with its musings on a man who "lay on the fusty bed / Telling himself that this was home," it accords with the gloomy, monkish pleasure, as bitter as old marmalade, that Englishmen of a certain bent have always taken in the Spartan deficiencies of their land. But Frank was in America, on the verge of Eisenhower's second term, when the deficient was not to be relished but redeemed and made good. Just consider the next photograph in the sequence: unpopulated, again, and filled to the brim with the window grid of the Metropolitan Life building, in New York. In front of us, at street level, is a vender's rack of magazines, their names alight with exhortation and plaudit: *See*, *Whisper*, *Tan*, *Amazing*, *Fantastic*. (And is that really one called *Gay Love*, tucked in below a book of crosswords?) Bottom right is *U.S. News & World Report*, with its infinitely consoling headline: "IKE'S PLAN TO AVOID A WAR."

The question to be asked of Robert Frank was whether he and his photographs, with their cool and color-free stares, had by design set out to disturb the peace. The cops certainly thought so in McGehee, Arkansas. On November 7, 1955, two patrol cars stopped him on U.S. 65. They checked his registration and his luggage, then drove him to the city jail and locked him up. Frank, writing two days later to his friend and mentor Walker Evans, takes up the story: "That was 12:30 P.M. I did ask, if I could have some coffee (I had nothing to eat since 6 AM that day) but the answer was that if I would not be quiet they would teach me how to be quiet." The patrolmen didn't like the look of this guy, or the sound of him, or the fifth of Hennessy they found in his glove compartment ("Foreign whiskey," Frank wrote, mixing his drinks). He was fingerprinted and asked to hand over his rolls of exposed film, which he refused to do. Years later, he recalled the exchange with the authorities:

> "What are you doing here?"
> "I have a Guggenheim scholarship."
> "Who's Guggenheim?"

Frank presented a problem, first for the Arkansas police and then, when "The Americans" came out, for the critics. Like his brandy, he was foreign. He was a Swiss Jew, born in Zurich in 1924 to a Swiss mother and a German father, and thus of ever more precarious status as his first twenty years unfolded, even in a middle-class family under the wing of a neutral state. Not long after the war ended, he left. "I didn't know exactly what I wanted, but I sure knew what I didn't want." (Another judgment was yet more succinct: "How can one be Swiss?") His boat docked in New York in the spring of 1947, a time and place that must rank as one of history's better cures for restlessness. "Coming to America felt like the door opened—you were free," he told a British television crew in 2004, still buoyed by the liberty more than half a century later. On that maiden trip, he bore with him the fruits of a rigorous apprenticeship with Swiss photographers: a private book entitled "40 Fotos," not published but spiral-bound, and strong

"Belle Isle, Detroit" (1955). We should not be led

enough to win him a staff job with Alexey Brodovitch, the art director of *Harper's Bazaar* and a demigod of energy, equipped with a fearsome eye. Maybe, in retrospect, it wasn't such a good idea to head south, in 1955, with an admiring reference from a fellow with a Russian name. You didn't get many Brodovitches in McGehee. As Frank told Evans:

> The lieutenant leand back and said: Now we are going to ask you a question: Are you a commie? I said no. He said, Do you know what a commie is? I said yes.

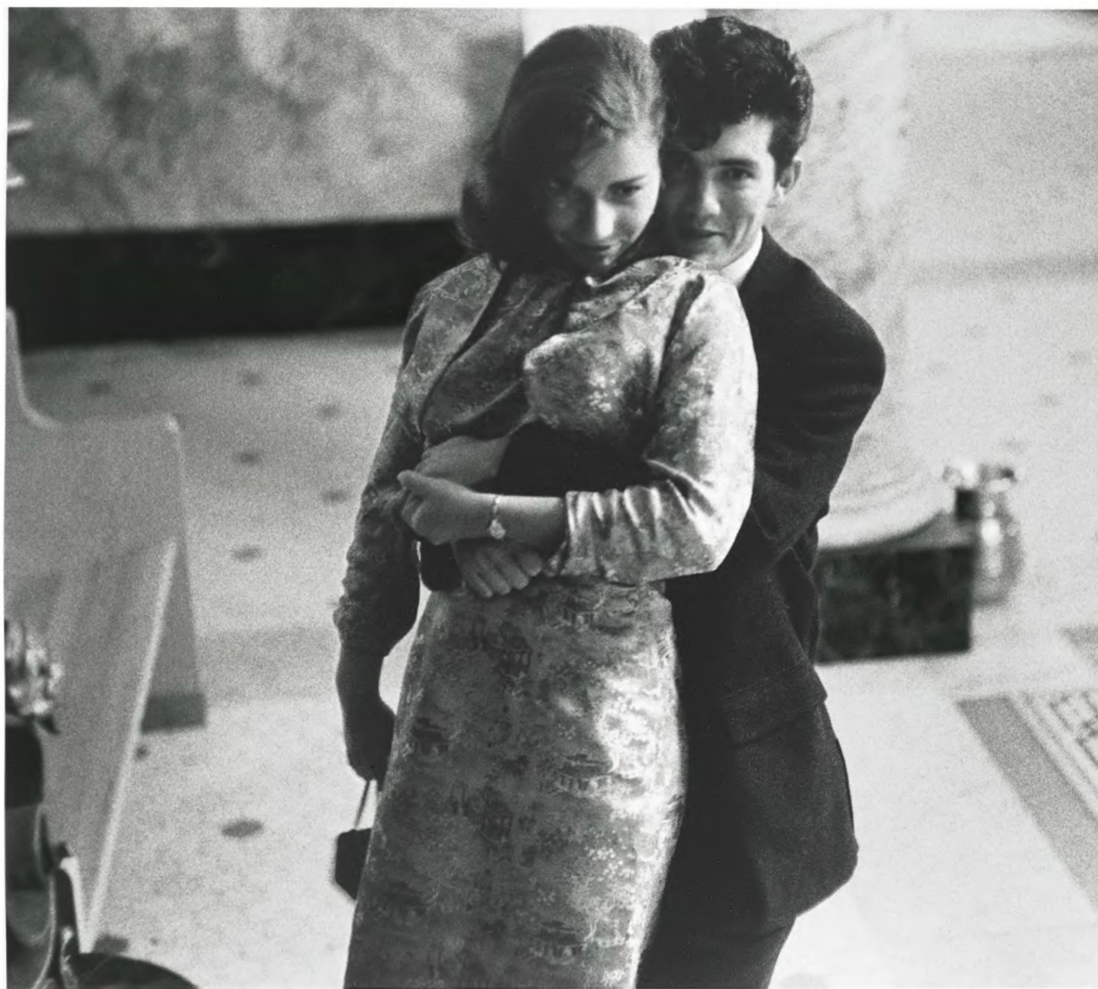
Brodovitch was one of five supporters for an application that Frank submitted to the John Simon Guggenheim Foun-

by our own conscience to reconstruct Frank's book as an exercise in raising awareness or stoking the flames.

©ROBERT FRANK, FROM "THE AMERICANS"

dation in the autumn of 1954; others included Evans and Edward Steichen. If Frank, not yet thirty, could count on the endorsement of older figures as august as these, it was because he had in the preceding years built up a broad and muscular body of work, not just in New York but on prolonged, irregular trips back to Europe, plus half a year in Central and South America. His Guggenheim project, which was approved in April, 1955, and renewed a year later, was to record "what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere." We need to tread carefully here, because most of the wording is by Evans, who redrafted Frank's submission and smoothed over the cracks in his English. (And preëmpted his naturalization; Frank was not yet a citizen.) But Evans was acute enough, and generous enough, to pinpoint what mattered in Frank: the highly selective prying ("finds to see"); the quizzical angle most likely to be struck by a stranger fresh to the heartland; and, in the putative catalogue of subjects that Evans compiled—"a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house, the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur"—an uncanny soothsaying of the themes that did indeed roll through "The Americans."

Thus it is that we find ourselves on the hood of a brand-new car, peering in. The paintwork is no more than a tenebrous gleam, but the interior is creamy with light, sufficient to illuminate the driver's profile, and the solemnity of the two passengers in the rear. None can be more than twelve years old, for these are kids, playing at being their fathers—or richer, harder versions of their fathers—inside a show car at the Los Angeles Motorama of 1956. One of them looks



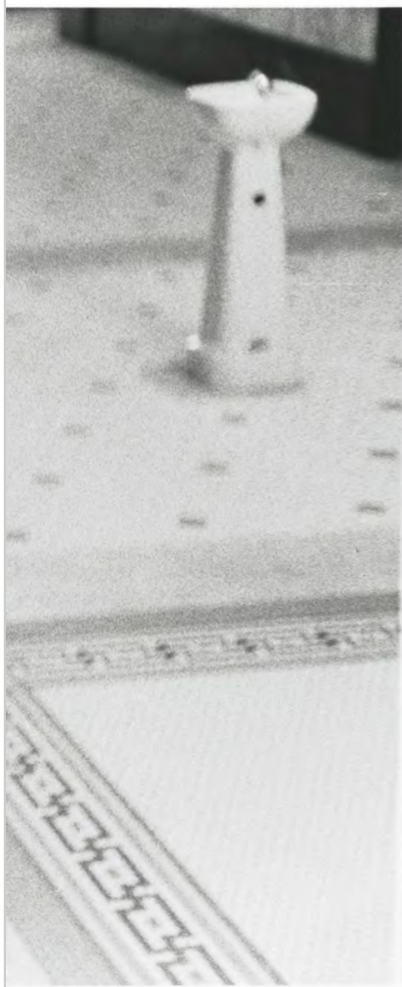
"City Hall—Reno, Nevada" (1956). No wonder that Frank so despised the heartening photographic layouts in Life—"those god-damned

straight at us, knowing no fear, half of his face concealed in shadow; if you want to know what Michael Corleone was like as a child, here, indelibly, is your answer. Was there ever a book as full of looking as Robert Frank's? Every kind of eyework is here, from the brief glance to the loaded iron glare and the mask of attentive purpose. A few looks are addressed to us, like that of the Hispanic dandies of New York, with their arching eyebrows, or the coiffed biker swivelling in his saddle to meet the lens head on, but many more are directed offstage, away from the frame, the scariest example being the Hollywood waitress with frozen pupils, vampire lips, and signs above her head for hot dogs and beefburgers ("Absolutely No Fillers Used Whatsoever"). Is she dreaming of distant shores, or is there nothing, no fillers whatsoever, beneath that unbreakable glaze?

To the earliest viewers of the book, there was no doubt. Frank was a hater and an agitator, the enemy within. Sarah Greenough rounds up the more outraged reviews: "A slashing and bitter attack on some U.S. institutions"; "A Degradation of a Nation!"; "a sad poem for sick people." In short, "The Americans" was un-American. What was the source of that riling? What nerves were being hit by the "Swiss Mister," as *Photo Arts* labelled Frank when it printed some of his work? A full answer would have to reach back at least a hundred years—to the first edition of "Leaves of Grass," and its clarion call of exhilaration. Whitman, like Frank, unrolled a litany of the visages and everyday deeds that would rise up and meet the traveller. The land of opportunity, for the poet, offered the chance not just to make something of yourself but to make common cause with other selves:

> Sauntering the pavement or riding the
> country byroad here then are faces,
> Faces of friendship, precision, caution,
> suavity, ideality,

© ROBERT FRANK, FROM "THE AMERICANS"



stories with a beginning and an end."

> The spiritual prescient face, the always welcome common benevolent face,
> The face of the singing of music, the grand faces of natural lawyers and judges broad at the backtop,
> The faces of hunters and fishers, bulged at the brows . . . the shaved blanched faces of orthodox citizens.

Once sounded, that note of brotherly encouragement ("I see them and complain not and am content with all") never died; watch John Ford's film of "The Grapes of Wrath," and you find the title's fury starting to ease in the gentle framing of the Joads' resilient expressions, and in the sense that every searcher, even in hours of wretchedness, could take heart from the swell of fellow-feeling. When Frank set off, however, exactly a century after the publication of Whitman's "psalm of the republic," he stumbled into solitudes. From them he forged what Evans called the "ungentle poetry" of "The Americans," and, years later, slipping into the historic present (the most comfortable tense for a photographer), Frank recounted his modus operandi: "I go into post offices, Woolworths, 10 cent shops, bus stations. I sleep in cheap hotels. Around 7 in the morning I go to a nearby bar. I work all the time. I don't speak much. I try not to be seen."

If Frank didn't talk to his subjects, how many of them wanted to talk back? A bunch of high school boys in Port Gibson, Mississippi, told him he looked like a Communist and suggested that he "go to the other side of town and watch the niggers play." Meanwhile, his camera delved into the spaces between people—even people who were physically jostled, cheek by jowl—and found them riddled with mistrust. Hence the starlets, or the stars-in-waiting, who attend a movie première in Los Angeles: one of them gazing proudly to her left, with the first twinge of desperation, as if praying to be observed by somebody of note; the other no more than a shimmering blur, with Frank's lens focussed instead on the fans behind, one of whom, a half-bedraggled soul, chews her nails, an autograph pen gripped in her fist. Skip ahead a couple of pages and you land at the lunch counter of a drugstore, in Detroit. Every stool is taken; the customers are waiting for their orders, two of them clasping their hands as if saying grace. Half of them look straight ahead, like drivers in dense traffic; not one seems to be talking to his neighbors. As Greenough suggests, this broken togetherness would have been bewildering to one who grew up amid the café society of Europe, with its binding hubbub.

Mind you, what would the diners say, if quizzed on their silence? Maybe they just came off a noisy shift, and could use a minute's peace; maybe they're simply tired and hungry; maybe, with a grilled-cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee inside them, they might warm up, and, if the man with the camera returned in half an hour, he would walk into a perfect storm of yakking. Whenever I see Frank's photograph, with its citrus slices of cardboard or plastic dangling overhead, I think of "The Blues Brothers," and John Candy briskly ordering drinks for himself and a couple of cops: "Orange whip? Orange whip? Three orange whips." For every segment of melancholia that Frank cut from America, in other words, America could dish up a comic response, or at least an upbeat equivalent. When he picked up a pair of hitchhikers and allowed one of them to drive, the sideways image that he took shows the driver—a dead-eyed ringer for Richard Dreyfuss in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind"—in determined profile. Check the contact sheet at the back of the catalogue, and you come across the succeeding frame: same angle, same guy, but now with a definite grin—closer in mood, instantly, to the Dreyfuss who gunned his truck in pursuit of the alien craft, his face lit with chirpy wonder. Then there is the heroine of "The Americans," an elevator girl from Miami Beach, of whom Jack Kerouac asked, in concluding his introduction to the U.S. edition:

> And I say: That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?

Again, it is worth consulting the relevant contact strip: fourteen shots of the same woman, at least half of them catching her in the act of a smile—a polite gesture adopted for those riding beside her, you might say, but then professional courtesy is no less a national trait than the ruefulness on which Frank preferred to focus. For every little ole lonely girl, there will have been a dozen young elevator operators as perky and unslumped as Shirley MacLaine in "The Apartment" (1960), fending off the office demons and fighting down their disappointments. Such is one definition of "The Americans": a sheaf of stills from a film that was never made—or a film that was made but never released, after the studio heads, examining a rough cut, discovered that every scene had been shot at just the wrong time, when the smiles of the stars and the chatter of the extras had yet to kick in, or had already started to fade. The happiest picture in "The Americans," entitled "City Hall—Reno, Nevada," shows a couple, presumably just married, with a water fountain where they might have hoped for an altar. Only at a pinch does their posture seem like celebration; he hugs her as you do when pulling someone back from the

brink. Does she look down out of shyness, or into the future's gulf? No wonder that Frank so despised the heartening photographic layouts in *Life*—"those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end."

To a European eye, this insistence on open endings, and on feelings that could at any point fluctuate and sink, was the outcome neither of satire nor of perversity; it was known as realism. "There is only one thing you should not do, criticize anything," Frank said of America, writing to his parents in Zurich, a week after he had first arrived in New York. I would argue that, despite the rumpus raised by his book, he obeyed his own command, and that "The Americans" is a work not of criticism but of a painful and unblinking honesty. What has happened to it, over half a century, is that its legion of admirers has not essentially displaced the claims of its early detractors; both proceed on the assumption that Frank *was* severely critical, and the sole difference between the two schools is that the modern fans accept the criticism as thoroughly deserved. The country, in short, was asking for it:

> Like the opening stanzas in an epic poem, the first chapter reveals the themes the book will explore: the immense, even ruthless power of the country's political, military, and business leaders; the lack of power of its poor; the alienation of its youth; the isolation of its wealthy; the boredom of its middle class; and the ineffectiveness and lack of true insight of all.

Yikes. Of *all*? That is Sarah Greenough, who tellingly refers to "The Americans" as if it were literature, complete with chapters. Those depicted in it, she writes, "often mindlessly obey the dictates of others," and "hawk their deepest religious beliefs as casually as any other commodity." Her case is compellingly put, and backed by most of her fellow-contributors; I only wish I could find the evidence. When Frank photographed the factory floor at the Ford River Rouge plant, the outcome, according to Greenough, shows men "enmeshed by machinery and surrounded by a hellish chaos." But that cannot be so. If it were chaos, no cars would be built. And if it were hell the plant would be closed and the men would be out of a job, with no means of feeding their families. Maybe 1955, in the glory days of auto manufacture, seemed infernal to some in Michigan, but that still leaves you with the deeper devastation of today.

What pulls me into the picture is the fuzz of its focus and the murk of its grain; Frank was using Kodak Tri-X, a famously tolerant film, which only proves how low the light was on the assembly line. Sometimes, to judge by the contacts, he switched to Plus-X, a slower emulsion, but nobody in the catalogue can tell us whether this was a deliberate choice, or a simple matter of loading what came to hand. Again, what lens did he fit to his Leica for the River Rouge shot? Much of "The Americans," I would guess, was shot on 50-mm. or wider, but the way in which the Ford workers are stacked up tight suggests a short telephoto lens; if museumgoers are informed, by a small plaque, that a painting was executed in egg tempera, or oil on poplar, why should lovers of photographs be left in the dark? These things matter, whenever battle is joined over art. It matters, for instance, that Jasper Johns's "Flag," on which he labored from 1954 to 1955, was painted in oil and encaustic, a wax-based medium: first, because it allowed him to embed barely visible scraps of newsprint beneath the pigment, like messages from the journalistic beyond, and, second, because the rough stickiness of the surface—so uncomfortable a contrast to the dry nap of an actual Stars and Stripes—added to people's genuine unease about whether he was paying due homage or making insubordinate sport.

Within the year, Frank, too, was weighing the iconography of the same flag; unlike Johns, he was not brought up to honor it, and so, when he elected to open "The Americans" with a shot of the flag, flapping between two women as they watch a parade in Hoboken, and chopping one of them off at the head, was that not a mischievous statement? He then studded the book, at intervals, with other flag pictures; in one of them, two little girls in white party dresses, holding balloons, skip beneath a vertically hung flag—patched and worn, so that we can see through to the trees behind. This strikes me as a crux. If you believe that Frank's exposures were just that, exposing the threadbare values of a society deluded by its satisfactions, this picture would be Exhibit A; but it will suit your purpose, equally, if you happen to view transparency as a virtue, or take pride in a country's devotion to the homespun. Those girls in white are having fun.

Johns's great painting, now at the Museum of Modern Art, was turned down by the MOMA trustees when it was first considered for purchase, in February, 1958, for fear that it "would offend patriotic sensibilities." As for the offense caused by "The Americans," it was short-lived,

"This one, when you open it, smells like the Times."

not enough to sell a complete print run of the first edition, still less to inflame a nation. Jeff Rosenheim, in his catalogue essay on Frank and Walker Evans, reminds us that, as Frank was heading west toward Las Vegas in December, 1955, the breaking news was of Rosa Parks and the start of the Montgomery bus boycott. There is no denying the compassionate vigor with which Frank attended to the experience of black America; once again, though, we should not be led by our own conscience to reconstruct the book as an exercise in raising awareness or stoking the flames. Frank didn't set out to address an issue; he was just looking, and reporting back. That is what realists do. That is what makes him so clear and incontestable a witness, and he stands by his testimony. "What a lonely time it can be in America, what a tough country it is," he said in the British documentary five years ago, adding, "I saw for the first time the way blacks were treated. It was surprising to me. But it didn't make me hate America. It made me understand how people can be."

"I guess the economy is getting better."

Such is the attitude that was given crystalline form in "The Americans," and that now adorns the walls of the Met: surprise and comprehension. Needless to say, we are at liberty to react with indignation to what the photographer displays, but that is our business, not his. A black waitress, dead on her feet in the Detroit drug store, serving a row of whites; an older black woman, alone on a chair in a meadow, one hand pressed against her stiff back at the close of a working day, and behind her a setting sun and a telephone pole like a cross; an unflinching image of a black nanny in Charleston, South Carolina, her features as starched and dignified as her summer dress, cradling a plump white baby who stares in another direction altogether, as if toward a fate very different from hers: these are magnificent allegories of fortitude and patience, but they are first and foremost portraits of individual souls, and we lean too heavily on hindsight, I think, if we read them as self-evident clues to the moment when the patience expired and a culture exploded onto the streets. Our own prejudices, however benign, continue to lead us astray, as Greenough smartly points out, in a footnote on Frank's crisply composed picture of three guys in dark suits, two in hats, two leaning against a car: "The African American men in this photograph have often been misunderstood as chauffeurs waiting for their white employers at a funeral. . . . However, as the contact sheet clearly indicates, they are not chauffeurs but are attending an African American funeral."

All lives, you might say, exist to be enjoyed and mourned, as well as merely endured. That is why Frank could find space not just for the downtrodden but for the four African-American boys in the back of a convertible in Belle Isle, Detroit, one of them standing up with his shirt off, clutching the front seat, the better to revel in the ride. And that is why the first person to get the measure of "The Americans," and still the best reader of its runes, was Jack Kerouac. Frank had not yet read "On the Road" when, a few days after its publication, he met Kerouac at a party and asked him to write an introduction to his photographs. Joyce Johnson, the novelist's girlfriend at the time, remembered Frank carrying boxes of pictures:

> The first one I saw was of a road somewhere out west—blacktop gleaming under headlights with a white stripe down the middle that went on and on toward an outlying darkness. Jack's road! I thought immediately.

And so it was. "Long shot of night road arrowing forlorn into immensities and flat of impossible-to-believe America in New Mexico under the prisoner's moon," Kerouac wrote. He had followed much the same course as Frank, back and forth across the country, in his own peregrinations of 1947-49. He had even been up to Butte, where "a short walk around the sloping streets (in below-zero weather at night) showed that everybody in Butte was drunk." And now, at once, he caught a kindred spirit, one who had "sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film." It took another roamer to fix the abiding strengths of Frank's achievement: its mystery, its sheer fatigue (notice how many pictures tilt and lurch, as if in the beery wake of a hard day's drive), and, above all, the ineffable reach of its sadness. Finger on the shutter release, Frank could find himself transported into what he later called "a state of grace"—a long way from rage, for sure, and not too far from a grudging kind of love. Frank never quite surrendered his status as an outsider; no artist does. But at last, and whatever the misgivings of the Arkansas police, he merged his identity with the new world that he had painstakingly explored, and which was, in the long run—as this book and exhibition charitably concede—honored by his illuminations. In 1963, the Swiss Mister was awarded U.S. citizenship, joined in union with those he had photographed. His own comment, on that occasion, remains as beautifully inscrutable as his work: "*Ich bin ein Amerikaner.*" ♦