

## CAMERAS, GUN SHOPS, AND THE GRAND CANYON:

*Shan Carter*

*Writers comment:* This was the last in a series of three essays about photography that I wrote for Jayne Walker's English 101 (Advanced Composition) class. In my earlier essays, she had identified with my fondness for photography, and she prompted me to peruse Walker Percy's article, "The Loss of the Creature," as a challenge to my own views. Needless to say, I was a little intimidated by the challenge of contesting such a work, but as photography is a passion of mine, I felt a certain obligation to set things straight. I would therefore like to thank Jayne Walker for all her support and encouragement. Her enthusiasm for good, interesting writing helped fuel my enthusiasm for the written word.

— *Shan Carter*

*Instructor's comment:* Shan Carter, a graphic design major, has a real gift for translating his intense visual experiences - an artist's way of seeing - into language. In English 101: Advanced Composition he wrote three memorable essays on photography. The first reported his adventures in seeing through a camera lens; the second explained how the photographic process works. When he had trouble imagining how he could write a persuasive essay about photography, I suggested that he would find much to disagree with in Walker Percy's "The Loss of the Creature." He did the rest, with eloquence and grace.

— *Jayne Walker, English Department*

I have never looked at anything as intensely as I have through the viewfinder of a camera. It may seem odd that my most intense experiences of reality have come through an artificial lens, but a camera is a close cousin to both a magnifying glass and a microscope. It is not only the ability to see things in more detail that commands our attention. It is something else, something about the art of photography that forces us to examine the world as we don't normally do. Normally we don't see things as they are. The familiar is forced into the background of our focus. Objects become ideas. Our couch is no longer a collection of darks and lights, patterns and textures; it is simply a couch. Have you ever found something unusual about something familiar that seems very out of place? For instance, if you find some mole or freckle on your body that you never noticed before, do you wonder if it was always there? How could I have never seen it, you may say to yourself. I look at my arm (hand, foot) every day. Here your assumptions have been challenged. The arm is no longer the arm that we imagined in our head, and it becomes disturbing. Our lives have become predictable in the sense that we see symbols instead of images, and only upon close examination do we find discrepancies between the two.

Walker Percy calls this the problem of symbolic complexes. In his article "The Loss of the Creature," he describes the loss of such grand monuments as the Grand Canyon to these complexes. He states that it is almost impossible to experience the Grand Canyon as its discoverer did because people have already formed an idea in their heads, thanks to the myriad of tourist folders, postcards, and sightseers' manuals that they have seen before the confrontation. Instead of coming upon this great thing and admiring it for what it is, sightseers come upon it and compare it to their already formulated expectations. The whole situation is made worse, Percy says, when the tourist has a camera. In this situation, the tourist comes upon the thing to behold, takes a photograph, and leaves without ever really seeing the thing. He "waives his right of seeing and knowing," as Percy puts it, "and records symbols for the next forty years."

I fell victim to this very thing when I visited the Grand Canyon with my father.

On the trip I remember being very bored. I thought the canyon was interesting at first, but soon I lost that interest. Sure, I told my friends and family later how wonderful it was, how it was "better than the pictures." But truthfully I couldn't have cared less about the sweeping vistas and multifarious buttes. To me, it was less interesting to see the canyon than it was to brag about having seen it later. I am sure everybody has experienced something similar: the stupendous thing you did that didn't really live up to expectations at the time but that everybody knows is wonderful, so you say how great it was later. The thing that interests me now, however, is not my boredom, but my father's continued fascination with our surroundings that summer.

He had recently bought his first camera. I remember being dragged to the library - not the most exciting place for a ten-year-old - and watching him as he searched through old issues of *Consumer Reports* trying to educate himself on the best deal. I even remember the look on the man's face who sold him the camera. He seemed as bored as I did when my dad asked him to expound on the features of different cameras. I think that perhaps it was more his job the man was bored with, though. The cheapest prices in town were at a store that doubled as a gun shop. Racks of guns hung behind the heavy-set clerk; below him was the case filled with cameras.

I hated the camera. On the camping trip it never left his face. It became like a cybernetic attachment to his head, like some strange science fiction abomination. But that was not what was infuriating. What upset me most was how his actions had changed with this new tool. I constantly vied for his attention, but invariably he was focused on the viewfinder. He would stare at rocks, babble about light patterns and colors, hike to out-of-the-way places in order to take a picture. On one hike along the edge of the canyon, he leaned precariously over a 5,000-foot drop in an attempt to capture the grandeur of a scene. While I and

every other sane person kept our safe distance, he stood perched for minutes - apparently waiting for something to happen. I remember wandering off to leave him with his photographic moment.

It was not just because I was young and had a short attention span that my experience was less enjoyable than my father's that summer. Instead, it was the fact that we both saw different things that trip; through that viewfinder he seemed to see things that others didn't. Sure, we were both in front of the same landscape, and both had the same opportunity to see what was there. But not everybody sees things as they are.

The camera helped my dad see the Grand Canyon more closely. Instead of separating him from his subject, as Percy suggests, it brought him closer, deeper. By making his own symbols to represent the canyon (by taking pictures), he was able to concentrate on the canyon beyond its symbolic representation. The camera gave him a power to create and capture images. Just as a writer has to understand what he is writing about, a photographer has to know what he is photographing: he has to *see*.

Only now, a decade later, do I understand my father's fascination with the world that summer. About a year ago I purchased my first camera. It was an old Pentax, with very few features. The only lens it came with has been attached to the body ever since I bought it from my roommate Phokham. I remember the first time I tested it out. It was a late winter afternoon. It had been raining a lot then, but that day was bright. Phokham and I had set out in his Miata, speeding down backcountry roads looking for a good place to take some pictures. I hadn't been able to wait. The blurred speed of the spinning wheels and the subtle curves of the well-designed car gave me inspiration for a photo. Unfastening my seat belt, I started to lean out of the convertible, firmly grasping my new camera. Phokham seemed appalled. "Don't drop the camera" was all he sputtered as half my body hung out of the car. The blacktop rushing beneath me was of little concern, except that I had to predict how much it would blur for the camera.

I had seized a moment; I saw a wheel anew. Never before had I found a wheel more interesting - all because of the camera. It was liberating. Through this camera things seemed different; they no longer held any symbolic value. Everything was simply visual - combinations of shapes and colors, patterns and textures. A wheel was no longer a wheel. It had become an image, a potential photograph. Mountains were no longer mountains; they were subtle curves and shapes. I was fascinated by everything I saw. The world had become foreign; it had become world without symbols.

Percy says that the wonder of the canyon arose from "a progressive discovery of depths, patterns, colors, shadows, etc." This is exactly what a camera does. It forces you to see the patterns, the colors, and the shadows. Seeing these things is the essence of photography. It is a capturing of what is, not what is imagined. Photographs don't lie.

This is what Percy did not realize. Although there are people who photograph with their symbolic complexes intact (some are my relatives, and I have had to sit through their unbearable slide shows), they can hardly be called photographers. This is one of the most basic photographic pitfalls. In order to take pictures - and by pictures I mean good, interesting pictures - one has to see what one is looking at, just "as one picks up a strange object from one's backyard and gazes directly at it."

"How can the sightseer recover the Grand Canyon?"

To Percy I say, buy a camera.

Preferably not from a gun shop, though.