

AFTER THE AMERICANS By Robert Frank

Ken Smith

—despite Jack Kerouac

There is nothing in this room
as beautiful as the face of this child
held in the arms of a nurse
on an avenue in Charleston in 1956.
There is no one here like the nurse,
no one who can wait as dutifully
for the bus, holding someone else's child.
There is no child here with fine eyes,
brows articulate and dark, and simple mouth.
There is nothing so beautiful or wise
in any corner of this room. To surpass them
I will have to walk into town,
turning each corner as if it were
the most likely place for beauty,
aware of nothing so much as the strangers
whose time it is to pass the odd monuments
we have constructed to ourselves:
the brick faces of apartments,
the screens that guard the windows,
the sills where insects gather.
I will not have to ask
the characters who bother bus drivers
to tell their pathetic stories,
for they will do so again and again.
I will cross this state by back roads,
turning off in towns where
the nurse and child might have gone
these twenty years, and left some sign.
There will be someone like them there.
There will be people I will look at
for the next twenty years, people whose beauty
may be more harsh and elusive.
There is nothing that can be done about that fact,
except to leave this photograph and walk
out into the world where it was taken.