

"I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel."

Henry David Thoreau wrote these words in 1854, in "Walden, or A Life In The Woods". In this flagship work of American literature, the author chose a life closer to nature, and imparts criticism of the Western world.

Today there are people who hear the call of Thoreau, and see a possibility of leading a less consumerist life. Thus, these Americans, photographed by Adrain Chesser, live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the western United States. His images are collected in the book "The Return." The photographer's adventure began in 2007, when he attended a Native American dance ceremony, "Naraya," in Tennessee. There, he met nomads -- Non-Native Americans -- who live between Nevada, Utah, Oregon, and California in the Great Basin, an area of mountains, high plateaus, and sedimentary basins. On the west coast, where he lives now, he says his own life is "very complicated. I longed for something else, for something simpler."

The time is current, most notably, Phoenicia, a middle-aged woman. "She is very virulent and impressive. I went straight to her and the link was instantaneous. I fell in love with these people. I was attracted by the beauty and completeness of their gait, which is in harmony with nature and which is, in this sense, deeply spiritual." These men and women share a common vision: surviving by consuming as little as possible. For example, when they harvest plants and berries, they replant seeds as much as possible.

Very quickly, Adrain Chesser decided to follow them in their travels. Peregrinations, which can last for weeks or months, are the rhythm of the seasons. Gathering, aided by the knowledge of the native flora is complemented by hunting and fishing. "I grew up in the countryside, on a farm, but I was wary of nature," says the photographer. Today, I feel comfortable in the wilderness."

The idea of leaving everything does not phase Adrain Chesser. "I have another vocation," he smiled. When we spoke with him, he was returning to Kosovo, where he is working on a new project. He is HIV positive, and needs medication daily. But the experience marked him forever. "You become aware of the energy of each choice you make. This life can seem so insurmountable, but for me it remains an ideal." He keeps in touch with many of those he photographs. "They are part of my family."

The images in *The Return* are accompanied by text from Timothy White Eagle, a Native American ritualist. "The subjects in "The Return" are predominately not indigenous," writes White Eagle. "Most are poor, some are queer, some are transgender, some are hermits and some are politically radical. And all are willing pioneers, stepping off into uncertain terrain searching for something lost generations ago." Many have links to civilization, traveling only in certain times of the year. "Some are nomads when they can be," explains Chesser. "But in all cases, they are increasing in number, and mostly young people.

How are these marginalized people perceived? "I do not think mainstream America is even aware of their existence," replied the photographer. But the images of *The Return* are fascinating. "This fascination reflects, I think, the discomfort felt by many of our contemporaries. They too aspire to this freedom, this detachment from material things. "

In recent years, the photographic works on the subject are increasing, especially across the Atlantic. In 2008, Joel Sternfeld published "Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America" (Steidl). In 2012, New York artist Lucas Foglia upset critics with the superb "A Natural Order," documenting americans choosing to live in the most self-sufficient manner possible, whether it's ultra-religious families or neo-hippies. In Europe, as well, some have made the choice to turn their backs on the consumerist society, as we shall show in a later section.