

West of Last Chance

by Peter Brown & Kent Haruf

by Chas Bowie

BOOK REVIEW
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In *West of Last Chance*, a striking collection of field notes from Houston photographer Peter Brown and Salida, Colorado novelist Kent Haruf, America's High Plains are equally peaceful and unforgiving lands. Brown's meticulously crafted landscapes depict the sun-bleached desperation of abandoned homesteads and craggy skeletons of long-dead cottonwoods alongside the lulling romantic breeze of wispy cirrus formations, shimmering pools of cerulean surface water, and the reassuring solace of tabletop horizons and infinite sightlines. Similarly, Haruf's written vignettes of history, memoir, and prose poetry, flesh out a complex biography of the land that includes scenes of rattlesnakes falling from dirt ceilings as well as Lutheran church suppers of folding chairs, hamburger casseroles, and Kool Aid. Brown and Haruf met at Houston's Brazos Bookstore in 1999. Brown had just published *On the Plains*, an affectionate but unsentimental portrait of America's fly-over states, and Haruf was promoting *Plainsong*, a novel set in rural Colorado, which read like a narrative reimagining of Robert Adam's early photographs. Recognizing each other as kindred spirits, Brown and Haruf set off to outposts with names such as Wilderado, Bird City, and Idalou—sometimes together, sometimes separately—to create this artistic document of the plains.

While *West of Last Chance* never set out to be an encyclopedic record of the region, Brown and Haruf create a sort of lyric taxonomy in their subjects: hand-painted signs, pickup trucks, superhighways and gravel roads, Walmarts, grain elevators, crosses, high school mascots, diners, swallows, post offices, cattle, and mechanics all coalesce into an ambiguous geography of unequivocal alone-ness. In one lonely Nebraska highway scene, Brown presents a suitcase-sized tortoise camouflaged by the baked sandy asphalt of the roadway he paddles across, a holdover apparition from the Plain's Paleolithic era.

But more than any natural or social history, the past to which *West of Last Chance* refers is biblical. Haruf's tiny

histories conjure up a merciless system of blinding dust storms, drought, and infestation on these endless seas of plains. The neatly farmed rows of Brown's crop photographs stretch out into an almost impossible infinity, like a diagram illustrating the principles of one-point perspective. Like the oceans and deserts of existential parables, the High Plains of West of Last Chance humbly offer themselves as swaths of unadorned absolutism, in which larger truths have the space to reveal themselves.