

Review of Wasteland

by Peter Brown

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Book Info:

Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape

Photographs and Essays by David T. Hanson

Preface by Wendell Berry

Afterword by Mark Dowie

Additional Texts by William Kittredge, Susan Griffin,

Peter Montague and Maria, B. Pellarano

Terry Tempest Williams

New York: Aperture, 1997

100 four-color photographs

160 pps.

Hardcover

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In these pre-millennial, harried, humdrum days, the primary way that we have come to experience our Houston landscape seems less involved with seeing, feeling and thinking, than with motion: the simple act of transporting ourselves, our families and friends from one familiar spot to another by car. Apart from vacation times (those bracketed circumstances in which we are primed to see and "experience") we normally just hop in and drive, keeping an eye on the road, attending almost unconsciously to the other drivers. We'll listen to the radio and become lost in thought or conversation, and as the land rolls by outside as backdrop, the bulk of what we see drifts into haze, into a visual muzak, into a landscape that has become so familiar, that it tends hardly to register at all.

We may notice differences - little blips and occasional disasters will wake us. We're aware that a new subdivision is beginning to emerge from a pasture that we think is owned by the Catholic Church. We're brought to emotional paralysis by the sight of a bulldozer slamming into a good sized live oak. We'll be energized by late afternoon light streaming through a rain washed Texaco. A flock of migratory geese will bring visions of Canada, thoughts of clarity, the idea of prairie - when suddenly: heading home from a long day, tuned in to local news, tired, and for once complacent - an unbelievably acrid smell will work its way through our air conditioning, into the home ground of our car, and zap us.

What in God's name is that? We'll glance over at the collection of buildings on our right, wondering what Celanese is and what those strange containment mounds have been built to hold. Having no idea, driving fast, and unable to get a good look through the chain link fence, we'll take a deep breath (is this wise?), turn the air to max (sealing off the intrusion, we hope), and step on the accelerator, suddenly reminded of too many things, and just a little worried.

And even if we could see, even if we had a tour of that plant, what would it mean? And what would we know?

All of us know a comforting landscape when it surrounds us - or so we think, and all of us are appreciative of unexpected beauty - and appalled by its opposite. Yet as we watch the traffic and try, in clumsy, episodic ways to take in the geography of our neighborhoods and country, we travel in a cloud that combines a befuddled innocence with an ignorance that seems resistant to enlightenment. We're not sure we want to know that these plants, pits, waterways and storage sheds are as dangerous as we think they are.

David T. Hanson has worked hard to assure us that we do need to know, and his book Waste Land can serve as a primer for the miasmal plagues that lurk in the back yards and storage dumps of so many companies and government agencies - so many located so near to our homes.

Hanson grew up in Montana and lives on the east coast, but his photographs have taken him throughout the United States. This work, ten years of it, is collected in Waste Land - color images that as Wendell Berry succinctly points out, give us "the topography of our open wounds."¹ Waste Land, even granting such an assessment, is a remarkably compelling book. Hanson is a talented photographer and even on rudimentary levels these pictures are put together well. (One notes the abstract and abstracted influences of two of Hanson's teachers, Minor White and Frederick Sommer.) Yet Hanson's photographs are his own. His use of color is seductive, and although, as Berry points out, we notice the beauty of this work at our peril, part of its power resides in the fact that we *want* to pour over these images. There is a rigor to their construction that makes ransacking them for information a guilty pleasure.

I do have one quibble with the format of the book however. Given Hanson's art past, each of these projects initially existed as a set of photographs to be viewed from a wall. The book, in a way that seems unnecessary to me, first presents them as such: a reproduction of the piece to be installed, information on the etched glass, the rare type, etc. - all of which tend to raise art object questions that are disruptive. We are engaged, yet are suddenly informed, in an odd way, that we are not getting the real goods. The genuine stuff, it seems, is dressed up, and headed off on a guerrilla raid to gallery wall - which is legitimate. It just seems foolish to stress this in the midst of an argument that in the best ways, transcends the insularity of the art world. The work, to me, seems very much at home in a book.

And the book is made up of four sections: the first on Colstrip, Montana, the home of one of the largest strip mines in America, the second on the Minuteman Missile sites housed under the Plains, the third on the Superfund hazardous waste sites that appear with randomness throughout the country and the fourth on the endangered animals of Montana and their shrinking habitats.

¹. David T. Hanson, *Waste Land*, New York: Aperture, 1997, p.3.

Hanson approaches Colstrip slowly, presenting it first from a distance and in a variety of weathers, then in more intimate closeness (the homes of workers and the inner workings of the plant), and finally, from the air. These aerial photographs give the work geographical context, and allow our eyes to take in more than we have been given previously. The view also is new: few of us have spent time in small planes at low altitude, and fewer still have looked out a window onto a strip mine and the waste fields that surround it. And the view is startlingly strange - an unearthly landscape ruled by gigantic machines and incomprehensible architecture.

Hanson's grounded vantage point disappears in the three aerial projects that follow. Yet human touch is continued, in a wonderful way, through the writing of William Kittredge, Susan Griffin, Terry Tempest Williams and a joint essay by Peter Montague and Maria Pellerano. These short pieces bridge the gaps between Hanson's projects, and each has a particularity that drums home all that we are risking. Along with the animals, the ground and the water, we'll lose ourselves as well: sentient, vulnerable, and, as these pieces indicate, sweet, whimsically brilliant people.

Hanson's second project concerns the Minuteman missile silos, thousands of which were dug throughout the Plains, and many of which are now decommissioned. They are utterly innocuous from the ground - and from the air seem plopped into pastures and wheat fields with military precision - the same size, the same look to each site - each missile at one time packing a bomb one hundred times the power of the one dropped on Hiroshima. And there they are: almost pathetic, looking like small sanitized feed lots, nothing more.

The bulk of the book, and to my mind the most interesting section, follows. "Waste Land" shows us the worst forty of the more than twelve hundred Superfund toxic waste sites - even this a condensation of the more than four hundred thousand sites that exist in the country. Hanson presents them in three ways simultaneously: first with a geodetic survey map, then with a short EPA description of the site, and finally with a color photograph of the site itself. One can bounce back and forth from the map (which shows the proximity of the site to towns, waterways and cities), to the EPA governmentese that describes the history of each place (a language again countered by the essays already mentioned) and then the photograph, the location of which can be found in the map, and an image of interest in its own right.

Altogether, Hanson's method makes clear what otherwise would be difficult to grasp. We are given the location, history and appearance of the worst sites in the country, with each site being particular. And each has its own sad, greedy, neglectful story. While many look as one might expect: weird colors, dissolving drums, dead trees, crusted over earth - others are deceptive. Love Canal, a place that we are all familiar with, now looks like a large football field. One of the worst spills (my favorite for insidiousness) is nestled beneath the Miami International Airport. More than a million and a half gallons of

Versol, a petroleum solvent, float on top of the Biscayne Aquifer, locked in (one hopes), since the leak was discovered over thirty years ago.

Hanson's final section (one that would be most effective on a wall) describes habitats of endangered Montana animals. It is entitled with an ironic twist, "The Treasure State": Montana 1889-1989". Aerial photographs of various animal habitats are shown in framed glass boxes, with the name of each animal etched into the glass. This lettering then, with the addition of gallery light, produces an epitaph-like shadow of the animal's name directly on the land. In the book these names are difficult to read, which in a way is appropriate. But the names and the images that they conjure up are wonderful: Least Tern, Leopard Frog, Harlequin Duck, Bull Trout, Paddlefish, Whooping Crane, Pallid Sturgeon. At one time we cared enough for these animals to name them with precision and affection. And their habitats are now the dammed rivers, oil refineries, pulp mills, smelters, subdivisions, air force bases and the like that will no longer accommodate them. Again, the photographs are worth considering simply as pictures - and once again, Hanson's ideas are clear. Through them, one sees that the land, as ravaged as it is, is still a treasure - as vulnerable as the dwindling populations of animals that fight to remain on it.

Hanson writes well, and both his introductory essay and notes answer and provoke questions. Wendell Berry's taut preface has an eloquence that might be chipped from stone and Mark Dowie's afterword puts Hanson's work and American conservationism into historical context with unusual clarity.

Waste Land is moving, alarming, and eye opening, a consolidation of appalling news that needed to be collected and delivered. David Hanson has done a difficult job remarkably well, and he deserves our thanks.