

# Afterword to On the Plains

by Peter Brown

## Book Info:

On the Plains

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When I was thirteen my family moved from New York to California. Despite this change, we drove back and forth across country for many years, returning each summer to our vacation home in Massachusetts. Well into one of the first of these trips, somewhere in western Kansas, my father pulled our big green Chevy Carryall off the Interstate, and headed for a small town. Victoria it might have been, or Mingo, Catharine maybe, perhaps Grainfield - anything to get off that road.

My little brother and sister were up front with my parents, and my brother Mark and I were in back, sprawled across a matted platform that my father had built earlier that summer. We had spent most of the afternoon it seemed, nudging apple cores back and forth between us, grinding our elbows into the remains of Triskits, gulping down a mixture of tea and Tang that my mother had invented, and craning our necks until they hurt - hypnotized by the dipping telephone lines and the musical roar of the wind.

But we'd had enough. Looking out over those endless fields, following the zinging birds, nodding as the occasional tree blurred by, bouncing around the back as we moved on and off the still incomplete I-70, even trying to read the old Burma Shave ads on the smaller roads (always missing that crucial line) seemed stupefying work. We felt flattened by the heat, by the monotony of the landscape, and by everything else on that wide black road beneath that blank blue sky.

My father worked his way off the ramp, through a grid of wheat fields and onto a shaded Main Street. He parked outside a small white-framed grocery store, and with the engine clicking in the heat, wiped the sweat from his glasses and told us to hop on out. We plopped down into the dust, pushed through a screen door, and with sudden recognition, headed for the Coke cooler.

As we fished around for bottles of pop (soothing our hands in that cold water and flicking it into each others' faces as we looked for Birch Beer or at least a Fanta Orange) a crew-cut kid of about ten appeared at the door with his little sister, both of them barefoot and framed in the afternoon light. The boy wore blue jeans and a white t-shirt and held a small cardboard box. His sister, who was shuffling quietly from foot to foot with her head tilted to the side, carried an empty milk bottle. She was wearing a simple dress and she was humming.

The boy was quiet, cool, and tan, utterly at ease, and oblivious to us in a natural way. Immediately, I pulled myself up into my age and tried to ignore him - but I couldn't. The little girl finished her dance and the two of them entered the store almost noiselessly, floating on light it seemed. They nodded their heads and smiled at the store clerk in greeting, and the boy said that his mother had sent him

out for eggs, but that she hadn't been able to find her basket at home, so would the woman fill up this box instead?

The woman behind the counter, smiled, nodded, called him by name, took the box, asked him how his mother was doing - if she were any better - and handed him back a wire basket, the likes of which I had never seen. Then, reaching into a straw-lined wicker container on the counter, she carefully plucked up one beautiful brown egg after another, and almost tenderly placed each in the basket's mesh.

When she was done, the girl, who was maybe four, rolled her milk bottle onto the counter with a grin. The woman took it, filled it from a stone pitcher from another cooler, capped the bottle and gave it back to her. The children thanked her, talked about a catfish that they had caught that afternoon and promised they'd return the basket the next day. Then they pushed through the screen door into the late afternoon light, padded through the dust, out under those cottonwoods, and walked down the street talking quietly, hand in hand.

In a way, my work on this book began at that nostalgic moment - as an envious tourist peering into a world he knew nothing about. Here was something as quietly beautiful as anything I had seen in my life, and to me, an Easterner still, utterly exotic: an America that I had been taught to believe was ubiquitous, and yet an America that I had seldom witnessed. That small town in western Kansas seemed utterly foreign to me.

Our family's cross country trips continued. Each summer we would take a different route, but twice each summer we would cross the Plains. There's no avoiding them, and they drew me in. At first it was an appetite for scenes like the one described, but soon the space, the color and the light made their impressions as well.

On the road, my parents would wake us up each morning at five and we would drive a hundred miles or so before breakfast, and as we snoozed in the back, dawn would break around us. The color would spread across the horizon, my mother would pop open a red and silver thermos, and the aroma of coffee would fill the car, as the car filled with light.

We picnicked at rivers and on open land, and at night we would often camp and I would fish. And through it all, my imagination would take me back in time, through the books that I had read, to the settling of the west.

In my later teens, my friends and I began to hitchhike across country, and after we had cars, we began to drive - and so through college and eventually graduate school, where I took photography seriously, most years included a trip through the Plains. For two summers after college I worked on a cattle ranch in Wyoming, but it wasn't until I moved to Texas in the late seventies to teach photography that I began to explore this country in a north-south direction as well, first with a medium format camera, and then, by the mid-eighties (by which time I had committed myself to an idea within this huge space), with a large format camera and color film.

Initially, I simply wanted to come to terms with the remarkable flatness of the Texas Coastal Prairie, my new home, but as the photographs moved northward, the scope of my work grew, until the subject became the entirety of the western Plains, a thing of daunting size. In fact, I often have felt like an immigrant farmer from the

1860's: truly overwhelmed by the dimensions of a landscape, the size and power of which are far greater than those bargained on.

My idea, which this book describes, concerns a trip through the Plains - from open country to a small town, through this town, and on to a larger one, and then out again into open space and sky. A simple idea, but one that's occupied me for over a dozen years and for many thousands of miles, and one that's allowed me to photograph anything of consequence on the land.

The land, of course is one of extremes: great heat and droughts, more than occasional floods, biting cold and killing blizzards, tornadoes and other storms that can, in an afternoon, wipe out a season's, or indeed a generation's work; there are even plagues of locusts that are Biblical in dimension.

Yet all is housed within a space, that once one is accustomed to it, is as beautiful as any mountain range or ocean, and in its detail, as intimate as a backyard. The colors of the Plains don't leap out dramatically as they do in other landscapes, yet they have remarkable variance within their spectral bands - greens, browns and blues, with the greens seeming to have the reach of an entire rainbow at times. There is the light, a light which moves from the softest and gentlest, to celestial beams of illuminating brilliance, to a blast furnace of noonday sun that subjects anything under it to a microscopic scrutiny. There are towns that may appear crippled for economic reasons, but open like books, and hang onto life with a tenacity and humor that is inspiring; and there are people - as varied as people anywhere, but taken as a whole, more than normally curious, approachable and friendly.

The region has problems, of course, verging from a prevalent absentee ownership, to a transient population that for centuries has tried to make a living without success; from the overuse of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, to the one-crop economies that these tend to foster; from an American Indian population that has been dealt with harshly, to the local politics of any of these towns, which at times can seem both petty and brutal.

But the space is vast and meditative; the seasons are real, complex and ever changing; the families are often more stable than their city counterparts, and the housing is cheap, the schools surprisingly good, the air fresh and the country still open and unexplored by most Americans.

A final story: in the summer of 1993, I returned to Rapid City, South Dakota after a week of photographing the flooding of the Mississippi River, an unusual subject for me. I was exhausted and slept fitfully for a day and a half. Homes slid into rivers in my dreams, and I saw the lives of families I knew washed away in moments.

I left Rapid City the next morning, and drove south, down toward Chadron, Nebraska, happy to have wide spaces to fall into, and happy for the peace. I cut through Wounded Knee, the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations, drove through Chadron, down to Fort Robinson where Crazy Horse was killed, up into the Oglala Grasslands at dusk, and found my way onto an old white ranch road.

I followed it until it veered south, then got out of my car and started walking northwest with my camera over my shoulder, walking out into open space, to see what I could see. I walked and walked through that rolling countryside, past the remains of dugouts from the last century, past the ruins of wells and windmills, past coyote dens and badger tracks, and out into fields of cheatgrass, bluestem, and

Jimson weed. Hawks circled above me, soaring out over those low hills, and I walked on until I began to feel like one small dot on that vast sweep of plain.

As I went further, thoughts began to come to me, verities really, but oddly reassuring thoughts nonetheless: that life, like these Plains does in fact roll on, that time will not stop, that love is eternal. And more locally, that despite the blood that had been shed on the ground on which I walked, despite the sad fact that few grasslands like it remain, despite the buffalo, elk and indeed native people no longer roaming freely, despite a sad and troubling history, that these Plains were beautiful still - and continue to live with promise. That even with a record of siren-songed and dubious welcomes, one thing at least could be believed: that exultant, if short lived peace would be known here, again and again over time.

The peace that I was feeling that evening quickly dissipated, for as I surveyed the horizon, I saw that gigantic thunderheads had formed in the east. Mountainous blue black clouds were already flashing lightning in the distance, and with night rapidly falling, and this storm approaching, all my vague spiritualized thoughts vaporized, as it came to me (like a bolt from the blue), that I was the tallest object in this glorious space, that I was carrying a metal tripod and was packing a bag of anodized lenses.

So I stumbled back, like so many before me, to a place of safety, in my case, back to my car and a skittering ride down that ranch road to a motel - rather than to a house in open space, or a snug home in town, or, as many have chosen after one surprise too many: to a new place - somewhere more predictable and stable, somewhere more economically viable, but somewhere certainly less compelling, vast, beautiful, and wild.