

LANDSCAPE WITH LIGHT

ALSO BY JON THOMPSON

POETRY

The Book of the Floating World

ESSAYS

Fiction, Crime and Empire

After Paradise: Essays on the Fate of American Writing

JON THOMPSON

LANDSCAPE
WITH
LIGHT

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To my mother, Claire Thompson
To my sisters, Sara, Elizabeth & Megan
To my wife, Suzanne
And to my daughters, Zoe & Sofie

What I am interested in now is the landscape. Pictures without people. I wouldn't be surprised if eventually there are no people in my pictures. It is so emotional.

– Annie Leibovitz

Letter to Jim Jarmusch

(Broken Flowers)

What they'll know of us in future years: the large interiors of our suburban homes were designed by others & lacking in the slightest trace of individual taste. Were cavernous & costly & sterile, mausoleums to the fashion of the moment. Lives were lived in them, but not so they'd disturb the silk cushions on the crushed velvet settees. The air in them was still & muted & old, as if marked by a recent death. Outside, away from the cul-de-sacs, the highways would buzz with traffic, particularly during the morning rush hour & the tired evening commute. Whizzing along, motion is a green forest bordering the sharp bends in the road. To fly, they'd take themselves to airports, with even more cavernous spaces and roofs that were wavy with no feeling in them, but were said to imitate the topography of the land. When not running panicked, people would saunter in them, tourists of their own lives. Indifference & consumption like muzak, everywhere. Once in the air, mall-life was brought to them, tranquilized at 25,000 feet with sunlight scintillating off polished airplane wings. Night was chain hotels with fake everything. Looking through a hotel window at a mass-produced, urban morning, you could see the way highways would wind in and out of gas stations and signage, like some long, slowly-dying hope. But thanks for giving us another Lolita, concupiscent in the buff, hot for her Humbert Humbert. And for all the road-trip emotions, the different shadings of feeling as the car nosed through the countryside (or was it the past?), under tree-limbs dappled with sunlight or into stricken suburban streets. Thanks for showing the poignancy of airport parking-lots. Poignancy of missing people; arrivals; departures.

Snow As Versions of Different Things

(*Fargo*)

DESIRE

In the flat uninhabited spaces, snow falls from an empty sky. Here and there, the bare branches of an oak are black against the steadily-falling flakes. When the air is thick with them, it's not white, exactly, but a glowing bluish-white, shading to grey as evening comes on, darkness in tow. Snow accumulates like loneliness, one snowfall covering the last one, layering into snowdrifts that become the landscape.

NAÏVETÉ

The landscape is cruel in its monotony, in its lethality. Cleverness here can lead to intolerable frustration. Better to cultivate a good-humored disposition to living in the here-and-now, becoming a connoisseur of the quotidian. Naïveté may be thought of as a form of regional loyalty, in which a seemingly-naïve individual elects to embrace a culture lacking in prestige. It's possible that a naïf may be best suited to interpreting signs; it's possible that those regarded as naïve may evidence genius.

SILENCE

Genius of the winter sun is that it makes the cold white expanses theatrical. Every sound happens between silences; silence is the default condition of the land. Sudden noises, mechanical noises, appear to violate something like a primeval natural compact. For many, the long silences punctuated by soughing winds, are unendurable, a Nordic torment that goes with the long darkness, the deep cold. In a land defined by long silences, there are no successful lies.

DEATH

Lies, unworthy of the earth, lie buried in the snow, intact until snowmelt. The fields, the trees, the sky, the heart-clenching cold – even the ice sheeting the highway blacktop – exist as a reminder of the imminence of death: domain of the high, shiny, blue-black, earth-scanning things. Death makes us statuary. Though few seek it, everyone finds the white gift of oblivion. Everyone forced to forge new paths of exile through an unknown land.

A Panic That Dares Not Speak Its Own Name

(*Somewhere*)

Sapphire-blue pools & palm trees;
stillness of the strictly pacifico.

Luxury like a pill-whitened
loneliness.

Freeways that spaghetti the city
are one way

of easing it.
Watching the low smooth mountains

take the afternoon light
is another.

Fragment of an Unpublished Memoir by a Cinematographer's Assistant

(No Country For Old Men)

“...riches of the world receding.

The desert was a landscape of mutability in a world of immutability: I remember aimless cloud-shadows, slow-dragging across the desert floor; high peaks of mountains further off; light leaking from uninhabited heights. I remember expanses dotted with mesquite & creosote, wind rustling through them, the dry lilt of a back-country song. Everything there & half erased. Mostly, I remember the wide-open emptiness, with the yellow dividing lines going through it. And a phrase from somewhere – terrible lie– ‘Suffering is so beautiful & sad...’”

Blue Is the Color of a Knowledge That's Continually Unfolding

(25th Hour)

Where to put the regret,
the loss? Night
falls on the world's
most famous skyline,
Manhattan lit up –
splendid excess –
laid out behind Brooklyn
Bridge's necklaced
elegance. Blackness,
the invisible beauty.
You want
restitution. In place of
it, blue beams,
“the twin towers of
light,” ascend upward,
astrally, piercing
the darkness. So much
distance to defy.
What was, invisible.
Absence most
visible.

You Think It's You, But It's Really Not

(Training Day)

The endless need to begin again. A white sun
ascends a desert sky. Perfect sheen
of brightness on sun-drenched streets. This
is the final recompense for the desire for paradise:
street after street of tacky shops & borderline lives
hawking some other nation's trinkets. Blare of hi-fi
car stereos & car horns. Terror from anywhere. What
perfect brightness, what peace, we've made with it.
Streets lead to other streets, railroad tracks,
intersections, shimmer of heat & commerce &
a hopelessness that cannot be allowed full expression.
Trains fly down their tracks, clacking, rickety, loud
in their self-regard. In the distance, L.A.'s skyscrapers
await the time-lapse, white clouds. Once the sun re-establishes
its pre-eminence, the city returns to its trades & exchanges,
its sovereign illegalities & illegal remedies. The future, brought
here, goes
everywhere at once. Bewildered by too much, the city changes,
grows, becomes strange to itself. Highest noon is above,
unmoving.

Letter to Martin Scorsese

(*Casino*)

1.

When did flatness become a fabulation of futurity?

2.

Do we still worship the old god of beauty, or have we created a new one, a divinity brutal as the desert, with a garishness as unrelenting as desert light?

3.

Every morning dawn hits the ochre desert with the force of a lost ideal. A wispy lavender rises off the desert floor, gauzy & ethereal, until the sun burns it off, leaving behind the the day's hard edges.

4.

Symmetry calls for harmony and the idea of harmony haunts a highway-edged land, semi-happy in its dissonance.

5.

Was the arterial pulse of neon signs a kind of paradise? Desire lived there, signified by flamingo pink & lime green strips pulsating insistently in the night.

6.

From the sidereal point of view, at night the city is a flat grid, a blackness twinkling with celestial lights. A vast & intense brightness – electric, empyrean.

7.

It dazzled and it blinded, its vast radiance shone clearer than stars.

8.

It was also this: a dark defile, a descent, in which people died needlessly, pointlessly, painfully in the unrestricted emptiness of a sun-struck day.

9.

All the glitz, the glam, the flash, the blam, the book, the vig, the rat, the skim, the take, the heat, the hit, the juice, the mark, the piece, the pinch, the tail, the whack, the wire, the wiseguy, the war the war the war

10.

*Measured against the immeasurable universe
no word spoken brought light*