

The Paradise of Bombs, by Scott Russell Sanders. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. Pp. 176. \$12.00

Violence pervades the eleven essays of Scott Russell Sanders' *The Paradise of Bombs*. Generals slaughter deer on an Ohio military reservation in a hunt straight out of the Raj. Bombs detonate at dinnertime. Owls see us as kindred spirits—fellow killers. The natural world is ravaged by “unaggravated violence” (60): toxic waste, clear-cut forests, bullet-ridden trees. Wanton gunplay marks several essays. Mayhem seeps into the basement during a remodeling project, through a radio broadcast. Soldiers at rest are at combat with boredom. Men appear to have two primary paths to follow—kill themselves with work or work to prepare themselves to kill others. Citizens are sent to war then locked away when the confusion and bitterness they inherit as a result spills messily over into the public sector at home. Violence surrounds us at the supermarket in Sanders' essays, from the tabloid racks as we are waiting to check out to the gun racks in the pickups we've parked next to. Sanders' son, denied toy guns at home, nibbles his peanut butter sandwich into the shape of a revolver and splatters the family. To Sanders, “we've declared open season on our own kind . . . Humans are the last plentiful big prey” (118).

This consolidated and foreboding litany, however, does little justice to the essays collected in this volume. As Sanders notes in his introduction, the essays are not as much about ideas as about “the concrete and the particular” (xiv). This is the collection's saving grace and what rescues *The Paradise of Bombs* from becoming a polemic. Every horror perceived by Sanders in his observation of human folly seems counterbalanced by some degree of wonder at the bounty of what seems on the surface mundane and unexceptional—the beauty of quarried limestone and the work of quarrying itself, the dignity of both manual labor well done and the tools needed to accomplish that work, a short hike into and above the clouds with an infant beginning to make connections between objects in the physical world and their names, the random but profoundly informing wanderings of young boys in the woods. The strength of Sanders' essays lies in the unresolved tension between his preoccupation with the

violence men do and his love of the world in which that violence is done.

The initial essay in Sanders' collection, "At Play in the Paradise of Bombs," illuminates the dilemma which Sanders sees as our modern condition. The essay chronicles Sanders' move at the age of six from his family's Tennessee farm to a northern Ohio munitions plant and his subsequent childhood and adolescence there. The "Arsenal," as Sanders refers to it, is an expansive patchwork of farms recently repossessed from long-term and frequently reluctant tenants, one of whom had waited until the wrecking crew arrived to demolish his home to hang himself from a barn roof beam.

Sanders' family arrives at the Arsenal at the height of the Korean War. Munitions production is flourishing, and the reservations' stockpiles ever-expanding, but what Sanders recalls most strongly is the Edenic quality of life in the Arsenal. Wildlife in diversity flourishes, herds of deer roam the surrounding forests, protected by the forces of destruction which have cordoned off a new wilderness. Sanders describes his Huck Finn existence, but just as the cloud of slavery at first runs beneath then bleeds to the surface of Huck's world, so does the engine which drives the Arsenal begin to stain Sanders' boyhood. A herd of deer dies in a wildfire, pinned to a high chain-link fence. Accumulated waste begins to poison ponds, fish floating to the surface. The inconvenient beaver population is exterminated in a single winter. The family's dog takes to running with a pack of domestic house pets rediscovering their feral nature. The dog is shot. An Army doctor drives into the suburban circle where Sanders lives, the rumored, magical albino deer which the author canvassed the woods for months in search of strapped to the hood of his car.

Sanders confronts the Cuban missile crisis. While living at the Arsenal, he realizes profoundly what he has known for some time: his Eden is a target, and men can annihilate other men with a thousand times the efficiency Sanders has seen them thus far reserve for other species.

This essay sets the tone for *The Paradise of Bombs*. Sanders ruminates throughout on the origins of violence, with special effectiveness in his meditation on his three-year-old son's fixation

on fantasies of war and Sanders' own childhood career as a make-believe combatant. Sanders considers the level of violence we tolerate in our society and implies in a number of these essays that this propensity toward violence is deeply and culturally ingrained. His narrative of sitting as the alternate or "thirteenth" juror in a trial which sentences a Vietnam veteran to a potential 54 years in prison for a \$40 drug deal which may have not even occurred is an especially powerful indictment of our collective ability to rationalize destruction: of the landscape, of life around us, of each other.

Sanders refers to himself as "a marginal Quaker and Wobbly socialist" (136). The surface of these engaging essays does not have to be scratched aggressively to reveal these sentiments throughout. Written over the better part of a decade, from the late 70's to the mid 80's—the book was originally released and won the AWP Award for Creative Nonfiction in 1987—the essays at times display the slightly manic frame of mind provoked in individuals of Sanders' political leanings by the global and national policies of the Reagan-era. Nonetheless, the dissolution of the monolithic and adversarial Soviet bloc has not been the balm of Gilead that many had hoped it would prove. Sanders' concerns about violence at home and abroad and the ongoing denigration of our physical environment are hardly period-piece issues. But the pleasure derived from reading Sanders' essays resides less in his abstract concerns than in what he allows us to draw from his description of the world. Sanders' vision as an essayist is situated somewhere between the elegiac observations of Edward Hoagland and the fly-in-the-ointment, curmudgeonly activism of Edward Abbey. He speaks meaningfully to anyone willing to consider the current dilemma arms and attendant violence have brought to humankind, while marveling at the paradise we have not yet managed, despite earnest efforts, to fully destroy.

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