



★ A Salad Only the Devil Would Eat: The Joys of Ugly Nature

Charles Hood

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In essays at once wry and hilarious, Charles Hood shares his delight in the overlooked, obscure, and downright ugly parts of nature. Featuring high on his list are places like California's Antelope Valley, "where old sofas crawl to the ends of dirt roads to die"; plants like Joshua trees that "can't decide if they are small trees or giant toilet brushes"; and sights like the weird, hyperrealistic taxidermy in Alaskan airports' natural history dioramas. "Welcome to Alaska," they seem to say. "Let's get out and kill things!"

Hood argues for the value of landscapes that could feature in post-apocalyptic visions, where rugged plants like bitterbrush, burrow weed, creosote, and jumping cholla thrive, their names sounding like ingredients for a salad fit for the devil. "For most people this landscape looks like it has been hit ten times with the ugly stick and left for dead," he writes. Standing in favor of places, and even people, that are messy, complex, and contradictory, his book makes a convincing, laughter-filled case that they don't need to be beautiful to be an important part of the ecosystem.

With a poet's sensitivity, Hood shows himself to be as in love with words as with what he sees around him. He writes about "what really spangles [his] braids" and, whether he's arguing that climbing K2 is "for wusses," while summer at California's Salton Sea is for real outdoor study fanatics; snarking at birders who would rather cheat on their marriage vows than on their life lists; or declaring the joys of being an amateur ("Charles Darwin didn't know he should have gotten a degree first"), his essays will charm, delight, and bring attention into high gear so that even a walk through an empty city lot will reveal treasures for the mind and heart.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 2021)

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