

## Roadside South

**David Wharton**

**Steve Yarbrough, Contributor**

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David Wharton's evocative photographs capture defining aspects of the American South, documenting haunting farmlands and wild landscapes and edgy juxtapositions of human-made and natural details, both beautiful and ordinary, "off-kilter and occasionally funny."

Wharton's thoughtful commentary acknowledges the South's complex, "retrograde" view of its history, as well as the enduring effects of racial inequity, poverty, and the removal of Native American people. His images depict this "gap between the ideal and the actual," as with an ironic shot of a kudzu control sign in Mississippi, itself overrun by the relentless invasive. The boldness of the sun-bleached sign in Perry, Florida, advertising Gun World is diminished by peeling paint and adjacent weed-choked train tracks.

Wharton's rich visual iconography is festooned with pigs, fake lawn deer, hand-lettered signs, churches, and abandoned vehicles. A singular sense of place forms; Wharton's view of an eclectic rural Southern identity is conveyed with aplomb. Many of these black-and-white photographs highlight texture and play with strong shadows and light, as with images of hay, cotton bales, weathered armchairs, and a decapitated deer head viewed against stark empty fields and packed dirt lanes.

Mississippi native Steve Yarbrough's concluding essay shares his dichotomous, nuanced appreciation for Southern culture, too, rhapsodizing about its neighborliness, insect "music," tasty food, and vernacular architecture and rejecting its culture wars, evangelism, and "willful ignorance."

*Roadside South* encapsulates a personal vision of the rural South; it is an engaging armchair road trip through the region's unique byways.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2022)

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