

When Jonathan Raban visits the Badlands of Montana, the vast, almost desert, landscape of the Arizona plains, he's overwhelmed by the distances and the far horizons but, as a sailor, he feels at home – he knows how to see it and to navigate his way across. And he appreciates it with a photographer's eye, admiring the work of the nineteenth century photographer, L.A. Huffman:

*In Huffman's Montana pictures, you see immediately a man who is comfortably at home in these landscapes, as he is at home with his camera. He instinctively composes along a horizontal line. He puts the horizon itself quite high up in the frame; in the middle ground, a long string of buffalo, horse or cattle trails and is parallel with the horizon; the foreground, of bare earth, grass and sage, occupies a space that matches the strip of empty sky. (p.77 Bad Land)*

You get the picture. Landscape forms us, but is also formed and informed by us. Jesus enters the desert landscape of our lives but, unlike Adam and Eve, retains his innocence and, paradoxically, can see evil for what it is. He doesn't have to taste it and learn from bitter experience. No, his experience is one of being so completely at home in his skin, in this human landscape, that he can see clearly how to navigate his way through. The paradox is resolved, by a childlike trust in another to guide him. He's in a Bad Land but sees good. And the devil cannot tempt him from this vision. In Christ, we have the chance to recover something of this original vision for ourselves. It's gifted to us first in baptism but has to be worked at, just as with Adam and Eve, throughout our lives: through prayer; a surrender of self in the service of others; a willing acceptance of the presence and prompting of the Holy Spirit and that vital viaticum of bread and God's word. And then we too can become comfortable in our skins and able to navigate our way through this wilderness and it becomes, not a forsaken desert, but a place of wonder and beauty – a way to God. And the people too, those irritating obstacles to our progress, become part of this viaticum, teaching us, in their resistance, how in turn to resist the wiles of the evil one or, as the journey goes on, teaching us something of God's love in the most impossible of people and places. Jesus will take this hope with him to the cross and drink the dregs of our bitterness so that we have no need to be bitter any more. This is, indeed, a landscape of far horizons – and he will take us there.

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