ROBERT HOWER

Places in the heart

Robert Hower's photographs show us why we call the Midwest America's heartland. The factory towns he depicts are as organic, in their own way, as the amberest wave of grain. Train tracks are their sinew, steel girders their skeleton, and miles of graceful piping their veins. It is left to us to speculate about what runs through those veins—and about the health of the organism.

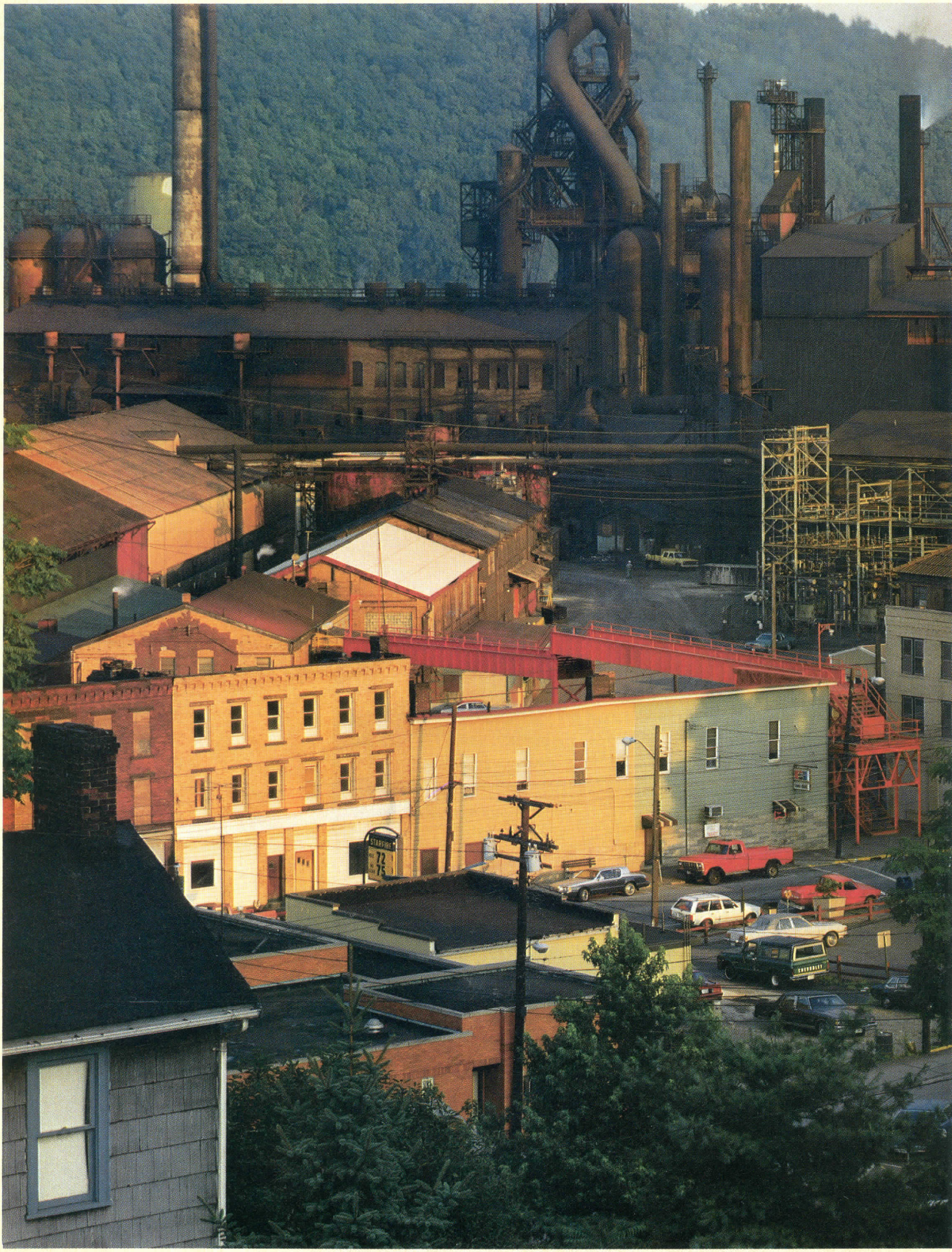
It is left to us because Hower refuses to make his photographs overtly political—to comment, as photographers of such subjects are inclined to do, on environmental havoc and America's declining industrial vigor. Hower doesn't resist the unexpected beauty in his subjects; he won't make an ugly picture to promote a political view. "You have to seduce people with photographs," says the Louisville, Kentucky-based photographer, "because if you don't, they won't look at them." Yet Hower's pictures never lapse into an empty formalism. His unabashed respect for his subject matter is apparent even in his technique: He uses a 4×5 camera to render minute detail and keep lines plumb, and he enlarges his negatives to 20×24 to hint at the grand scale of the scenes.

A transplanted easterner, Hower fits his photo trips between commercial jobs for clients such as GE and *Fortune* magazine. Most of his subjects are within a day or two's striking distance of home—often along the Ohio River valley. "The temptation is to think, If I were only a hundred miles farther away, I'd get better pictures," he says of shooting on the road. "But you learn in the course of driving that hundred miles that what you've got to do is stop, and dig a little deeper where you are."

—RUSSELL HART

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT K. HOWER

"I've always photographed things that are on their way out. There's a need on my part to see them before they disappear."


STAFFORD
72
75

"In some respects it's easy to make a picture political. I'd rather leave things complicated, which is the way they are."