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WASTE LAND

photographs by
Jasper Doest

With their habitats disappearing, thousands of white storks are nesting at landfills in Europe. Now the birds face a new threat—junk food is disrupting their ancient life cycle

by Kim Todd



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European white storks forage at a landfill in Portugal (below), where thousands spend the winter instead of flying to Africa. Others alight in Alfaro, Spain (right).



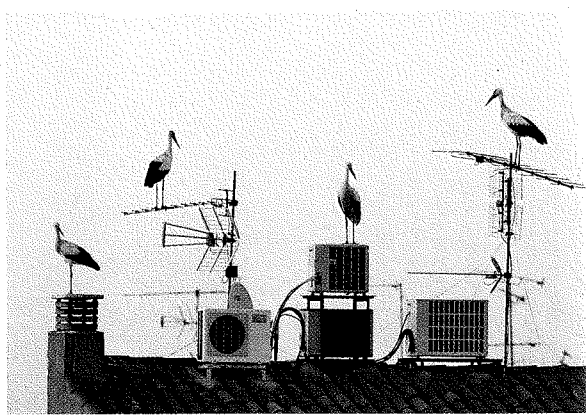


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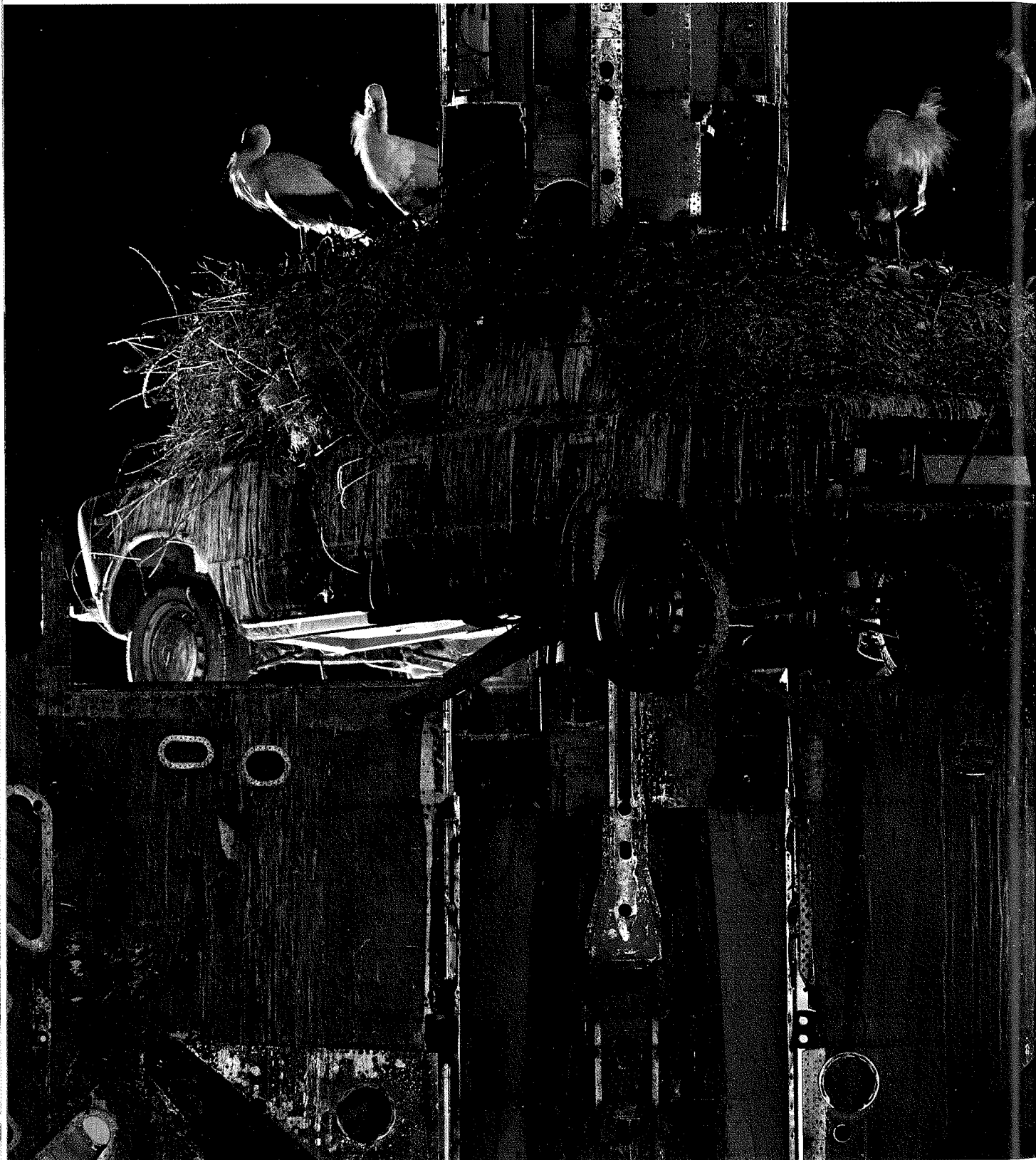
HE PALE BIRD

wades into the pond on bright red legs, waits for the water to still, plucks out a soul. He drops it, or maybe a whole child, down a chimney like a stone. Enemy of the serpent and king of the frogs, he is fierce. He is devoted. He takes his aged father on his back and launches into the air. He might be a deity in disguise, or your bad son. He tucks a stick into the monstrous nest he's building on the roof, a bit of luck.

Legends like these spurred Jasper Doest, a Dutch wildlife photographer, to turn his lens on the white stork. "It is so gentle," he said. "The way it is



White storks nest on a sculpture in Malpartida de Cáceres, Spain (below). A rescued chick in Alsace, France, will later be released into the wild (right).





building the nest, the way it is preening. It's like watching a ballet." Doest tracked storks along the western migration route that leads from Germany, the Netherlands and other nations to the Iberian Peninsula, across the Strait of Gibraltar, then over the Sahara to wintering grounds in West Africa. In Spain, hundreds of storks wheeled overhead, the largest flocks Doest had encountered. He rushed to where they landed, only to find them circling a sea of rotting meat and ragged plastic. "I ended up on a garbage dump," he said.

Doest found himself in the midst of an ecological tangle. Vast landfills tempt storks with heaps of chicken heads and expired sausage. Ursula Höfle, a researcher at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, has found nests lined with diapers and littered with toys including, once, a Mr. Potato Head. Lured by easy calories, fewer storks are bothering to migrate. In one study in Portugal, more than 10,000 spent the winter instead of heading south. It's a gamble. Storks that stay risk being contaminated by heavy metals or choking on rubber bands. Researchers are studying whether a "junk food" diet shortens their long life span of 25 or 35 years. But 21st-century migration is also dangerous. Höfle's team radio-tagged ten birds, and the two that migrated died in



A black and white photograph showing a white stork nesting on a dark, craggy rock face. The nest is built into a small cavity and contains two white eggs. The background is a misty, mountainous landscape. The text is located in the bottom left corner of the image.

As a wading bird, the white stork prefers low-lying wetlands. But a resourceful few are homesteading on abandoned osprey nests in Cabo Sardão in Portugal.



Both male and female white storks brood on newly laid eggs, which hatch after about 33 days. Chicks, like these in Alsace, France, generally will fledge after two months.



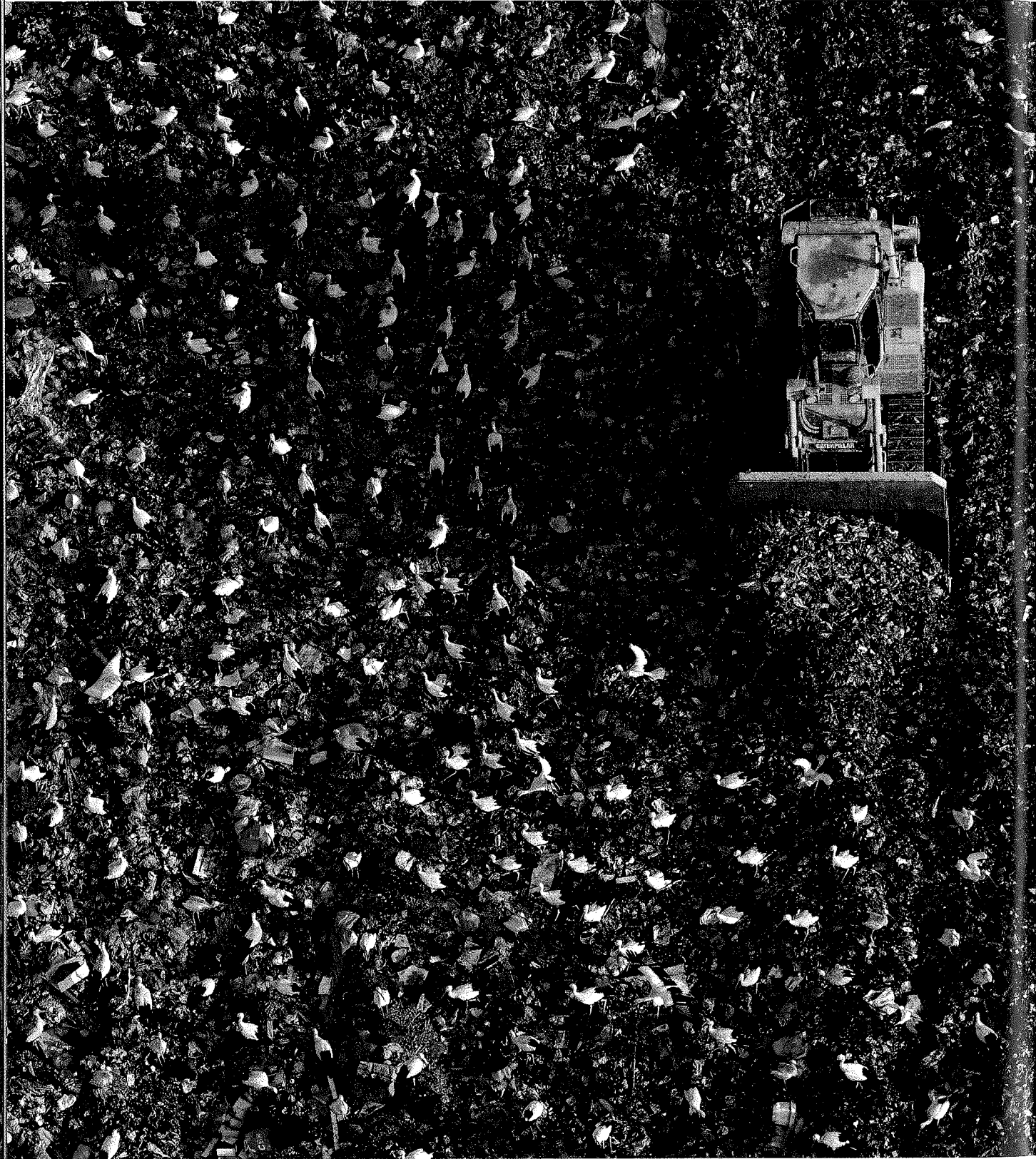


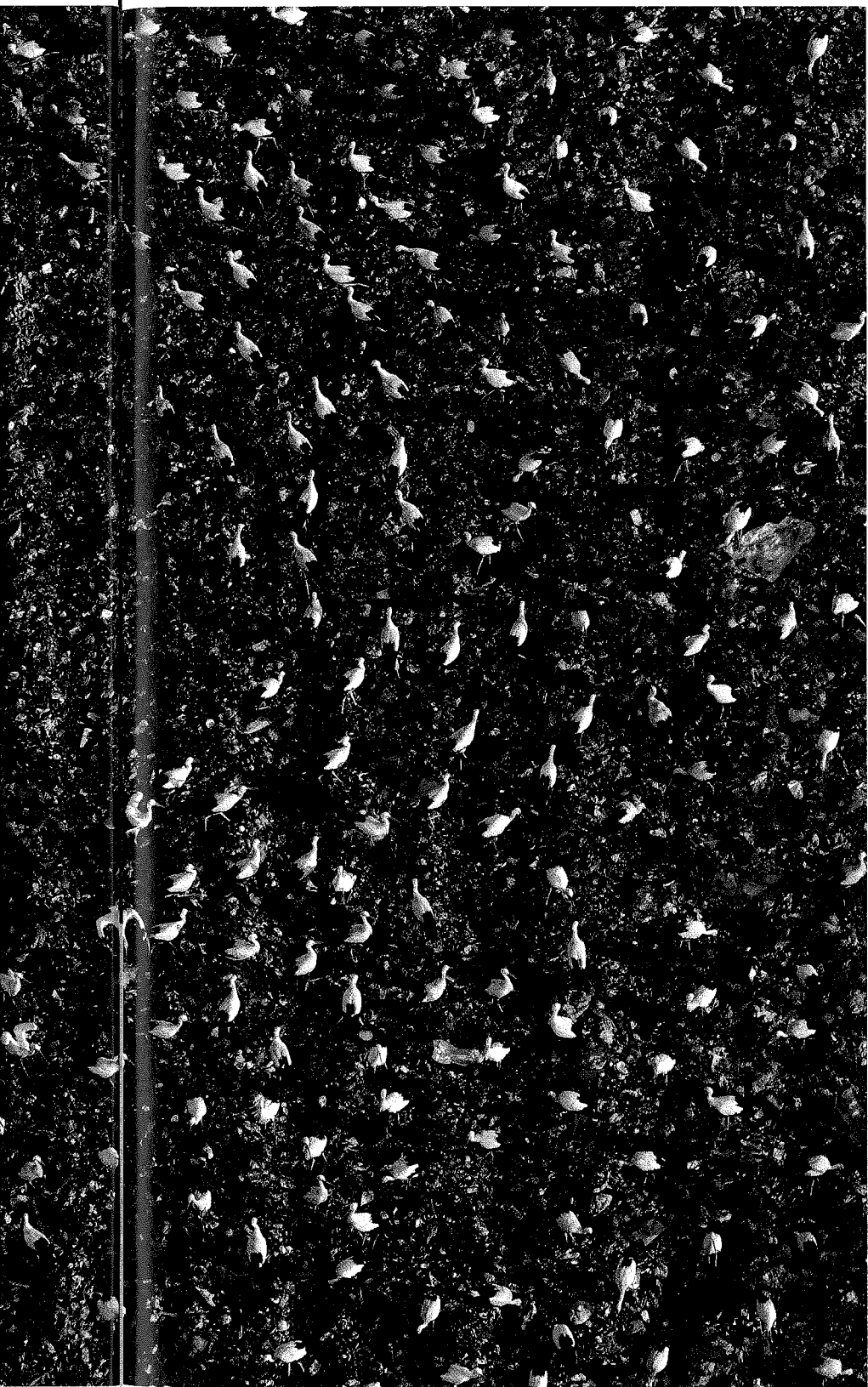
In Spain, a white stork glides by water being sprayed on a landfill to dilute leaching chemicals. Birds at such sites ingest more toxins and microbes than do other birds.





Habitat destruction fuels storks' reliance on landfills like this one in Dos Hermanas, Spain. But humans are also welcoming the birds: nestpoles in Cáceres, Spain (right).





Africa—one in the desert, one by a road.

The landfills pose a quandary. They offend our sense of what's natural and disrupt ancient migration patterns. Yet loss of meadow and marsh breeding grounds caused dramatic declines in many white stork populations in Western Europe in the mid-20th century. Landfills have helped revive some populations. This, too, may be disrupted. In line with European Union mandates, landfills on the Iberian Peninsula are scheduled to be covered and organic scraps composted, and the birds won't have as much refuse to rely on. "We don't know what is going to happen," said José Aguirre, a biologist at the Complutense University of Madrid.

Migration is the heart of stork fables. In Europe, the spring return coincides with the birth of children conceived in midsummer, and with longer days and warmth. Easy to think they bring the babies, the blessing. Finding the storks on the dump, Doest adjusted his expectations and hunkered down in the garbage to document a different story from the one he'd planned. It was sobering to think of the symbol of new life carving a home in human waste. But then the mythological stork was always a euphemism, a fairy tale told to shield us from a messy, complex, biological reality. ○

