



P L A C E S

Off-Season

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Famous for beaches and boardwalks thronged with summer renters and day-trippers, the Jersey shore is an unlikely place in which to depict landscapes that are still, quiet, unpopulated. Winter is coming, and the fake palms are wrapped in plastic.

Last summer, this assignment seemed so promising. Comfortably within my writerly wheelhouse and keyed to my present circumstances, producing a text in response to the New Jersey photographs of Tyler Haughey checked all the boxes. I'd been "staying at home" on the North Jersey coast since early March, when the lockdowns started, and had just finished teaching in the stressful pivot-to-remote spring semester; and once I spent time with *Ebb Tide* and *130 Miles*, I knew I wanted to write about these photographic projects, a decision that a long and satisfying phone conversation with the photographer confirmed. Tyler and I talked about boardwalks and motels and other commercial vernacular buildings from the middle of the last century, all of which turn up in his pictures, along with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and Stephen Shore and John Margolies, all of whom influenced his pictures.

Yet for many months I struggled to write the text — this text you are reading — that I thought would come so easily. Which is to say I struggled against the combined and cumulative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, which together produced a profound dissonance of place and time — a peculiar form of seasonal effective disorder. That's not a typo; I don't mean that I was suffering from the mood-altering ailment known as SAD, even though, no doubt like nearly everyone reading these words, bouts of anxiety and depression were (and remain) all too frequent, and the lousy coastal weather (so much rain) hasn't helped. Rather, I mean that the effects of the season, on my town and on towns up and down the shore, were completely out of whack, and had been since the shutdowns began a year ago, in March 2020. Off season was like high season; winter was like summer. This wasn't a simple reversal; it was more like a warped reflection in a funhouse mirror.

It happened slowly, as winter gave way to spring; in our town of Asbury Park, lights were turned on in the summer houses and cars were parked in driveways all week long. Population density seemed to determine the order of arrival: first came the folks from Manhattan and Brooklyn, then Hoboken and Jersey City, and finally Staten Island. Our year-round neighbors were suddenly more

present, some working from home, others furloughed. The airline pilot down the block was usually brisk and business-like as he strode by in his uniform to catch the train to Newark Liberty; grounded, he now ambled by in sweatpants, with a morning cup of coffee or an early evening beer. The local distillery, with on-site consumption suspended, was giving away house-made hand sanitizer with every curbside purchase of gin. The fishmonger, which usually operated only two days a week before Memorial Day, was now open five days, long before Easter. On weekends, locals and visitors crowded the ocean front, many in flagrant violation of the governor's Executive Order No. 104, which imposed "aggressive" social distancing measures to stop the spread of the virus. Typically, in the off-season, walking the beach and boardwalk offered a kind of glorious solitude; suddenly, it was a grim exercise in dodging the maskless. Early on, the city limited access to the beach and closed the entire mile-long boardwalk, removing the benches for good measure. When police tape proved an insufficient deterrent, the chain-link and steel safety barriers arrived. All this, while temperatures hovered in the 40s and the sun was barely visible through the clouds.

These restrictions had eased somewhat a couple months later when I started to pore over Haughey's photographs; but there seemed to be no way to reverse the mental and emotional impact of the topsy-turvy seasonal effects. Though I didn't understand it then, those effects were coloring my impressions. That's imprecise — those effects were *filtering* my impressions of his pictures, not unlike an Instagram filter that changes the mood of an uploaded image in odd and unexpected ways. The more I looked at the photo portfolios, the stranger they became, as in strangely familiar and uncanny; utterly recognizable but still somehow ineffable.

Quietude is not a quality or condition typically associated with New Jersey. The most densely settled state in America is known more for its rumble-and-roar, from the din of traffic on the massive multilane Turnpike to the assertive voices in the subdivisions and shopping malls. And when anti-sprawl activists use "Jersey" as a verb ("don't Jersey Vermont"), the perceived noise is visual as well as aural: brash billboards, big and bigger boxes, gaudy casinos, roadside structures and signage in varying states of upkeep and decay. Nonetheless, quietude — that condition of being subdued, reserved and not loud — is precisely the quality that suffuses Tyler Haughey's New Jersey photographs. This is not, to be sure, a Thoreau-in-the-woods kind of contemplativeness, though the Garden State does possess landscapes that rival Walden and Katahdin.

But Haughey has not trained his lens on the rolling hills of the Delaware Water Gap, or the forests of the Pinelands, or the cliffs of the Palisades. Now based in Brooklyn, he was born and raised on the North Jersey coast, and "down the shore" (in tri-state patois) has proven to be his abiding photographic subject, one explored along the entire 130 miles of Atlantic coastline, from Sandy Hook in the north to Cape May in the south, with a particular focus on Atlantic City and the

Wildwoods, those very different beach towns perched on barrier islands that epitomized seaside New Jersey in the mid-20th century.

Given the outsize cultural stereotypes — beaches, boardwalks, and amusement piers thronged with day-trippers and summer renters strutting in bikinis and board shorts, their ombrés and extensions in full plumage — the Jersey shore might seem an unlikely place in which to seek, and depict, landscapes that are still, quiet, unpopulated. Indeed, these pictures defy expectations, which is what makes them feel at once poetic and prosaic. Haughey is not pursuing the “decisive moment” of Henri Cartier-Bresson or the “snapshot aesthetic” of Robert Frank — though both approaches would capture the intense summertime interactions of beachgoers and their environs. Even as his photographs embrace the expected iconography of seaside resorts, from sand dunes to plastic lounge chairs to mini golf, they are hauntingly de-peopled.

To some extent this is a calendric effect: taken before the pandemic, the photographs do not show the Jersey shore of the high season between Memorial Day and Labor Day, nor even the “local summer” that extends until Columbus Day. In these photographs the atmosphere you sense is not the ocean breeze; it’s a wind chill. Winter is coming, and the fake palms are wrapped in plastic. Winter is here, and the tiki umbrellas and drained swimming pools are dusted with snow. “Sorry Closed See You in the Spring” reads the sign in a plate glass window. Another sign, “CLOSED,” with a steel chain securing a dirty revolving door, suggests more stinging realities, and this pre-pandemic picture feels particularly poignant given the economic toll of the coronavirus on so many seasonal seaside businesses.

The group of photographs that Haughey has titled *Ebb Tide* offers an especially nuanced exegesis of the subject. In oceanography, ebb tide is the retreat of water away from shore and towards the sea. It is almost too obvious to draw parallels between the tidal current and the seasonal flow of urban and suburban visitors to and from the beach resort. In figurative terms, ebb tide also suggests decline; but in some photographs we can detect movement in the opposite direction — *flow* as well as *ebb*. At the Golden Rail Motel in North Wildwood, we see an assortment of bulky televisions sets — the old cathode-ray-tube model — in the undercroft beside the motel office. They’re the victims of obsolescence, discarded to make room for sleek flat screens; the photographic frame extends to the discarded boxes in the adjacent dumpster. Despite their stillness, then, these pictures are not static: here the flux and reflux of consumerism are as predictable as Atlantic currents.

The constancy of change is more explicit but less straightforward in the photographs of Atlantic City. In one image we see a postmodern casino from the 1980s alongside a grand old hotel from the 1920s, and, in the foreground, a cluster of wood-frame houses. Here, the contrast of old and new suggests the accidental urban scenography that has defined the “queen of resorts” ever since New Jersey voted to legalize gambling in the mid 1970s. That move that was soon followed by the

opening of Atlantic City's first casino, Resorts International, in the refurbished Haddon Hall Hotel, a beaux-arts pile constructed just before the Great Depression. In Haughey's photograph, the upper stories and crowning pavilion of that now whitewashed hotel occupy the dense middle register of a scene otherwise framed by emptiness: an overcast sky, an asphalt road, a weedy stretch of untended grass. The image can be seen as a compact collage, with the foreshortening of the camera and the carelessness of the free market combining to confound our perceptions. The patchy strip of green was, we realize, the result of bullish demolition followed by unexpected decline. The houses are a mix of so-called "taxpayers" — real estate parlance for small structures built cheaply to pay the property tax on land the owners anticipate will attract future big development — along with boarding houses that may never have seen better days. Now they are dwarfed by the casino towers. Capturing demolition, deterioration, renovation, and construction, Haughey has left it to us viewers to sort out the death and life of Atlantic City. But in two other Atlantic City pictures he is more pointed.

In a photograph taken one block south, we see another glimpse of Resorts International; here it's the Rendezvous Tower, completed in 2004 and festooned with neo-art-deco appliqués and a crowning pyramid. The pomo edifice stands in marked contrast to the two-story storefront that fills the rest of the frame. A pair of bay windows and a pronounced cornice hint at an earlier and more domestic occupation of 137 South New York Avenue; but now the bays are boarded up, and the ground floor sheathed in a discordant stone veneer. This is not, however, a derelict structure; the blue paint is fresh and the security gates look recent. The blue is vivid, almost celestial, and it was likely chosen to match the signs that hang above the entrance door like a marquee and feature female pole dancers and tell us that the place is called Dreams Atlantic City. Much like casinos, strip clubs keep the action on the inside, and the street feels desolate. On the sidewalk there's a lone white guy in jeans, sweatshirt, and work boots, slightly hunched over and carrying a plastic sack from a discount grocery. No dreaming here; just down-market reality.

The tension is even starker in a photograph taken a mile north and a stone's throw from the ocean. Here we confront the behemoth of a sleek casino looming over a ramshackle shingled cottage. Our vantage point is an empty lot adjacent to the house; the slightly oblique angle makes the scene feel off-kilter. The outline of the old gabled roof smacks, visually, into the canted molding that separates the casino's lower floors, with their stone-like cladding, from the glass-walled upper stories. It's hard to resist seeing this picture as a clash between the past and present of Atlantic City; its evocation of a continuum of persistence and novelty reminded me of the crowded scenes of Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*; but it also calls to mind the zoning free-for-all of late 20th-century Houston.

Nonetheless, this is 21st-century Atlantic City, and the photograph is anchored by the specificity of time and place. The casino is the Revel; it was designed by the high-profile firm Arquitectonica, and its opening in 2012 was accompanied by breathless predictions that it would reignite the

resort city's failing fortunes. Just two years later, Revel declared bankruptcy, and, for almost four years, the 5.5 million-square-foot complex sat empty (it's now owned by another casino developer). Can we read the muteness of the facade in Haughey's picture as a reflection of abandonment, of bad luck? Across the street, in contrast, the old house bristles with signs of life. Stacks of wood pallets, a discarded treadmill, a tattered American flag, life preservers and old tires painted to look like life preservers — these are evidence of tenacious, albeit weary, habitation.

That's an apt way to describe how so many of us are feeling now, one year on, ragged around all the edges but determined to cling to the simple act of dwelling, of residing in some place we still recognize, despite the dissonance. Tyler Haughey's photographs may have captured the Jersey shore before COVID-19, but the pandemic has deepened and amplified their meanings. In their commitment to the mundane — to dunes and beaches and motels and AstroTurf and casinos and cottages — these images are extraordinary.