





Toyota Carova Equus Ocracoke
Jennifer Lauren Smith

On a clear day, from the air, when the water is still (this happens never, or maybe in late summer, which certainly isn't now), you can see the shipwrecks speckling the shoals, nestled in the seabed like sleeping ghosts. Any time else, the collision of opposite ocean currents produces a fourteen mile roaring beast—black water crashing white and bursting in spumes, sands shifting in massive fang-like shapes, merciless winds tearing at each other and anything unfortunate enough to intercede. Its is terrifying even from the shore.

I had to know the fury here.

Escape, and displacement—these things offer something art can only struggle to approach: closeness to an untidied essence, a meeting with raw majesty. A slow crystal forms in the cycle of leaving and returning to a place, growing with each transition between home and away. Isolation in a foreign environment is an experiment in chemistry, maybe, testing combinations of feelings and places, and recording reactions undergone along the way.

The first trip was brief, from one dusk to the next. Brevity is an attempt to preserve the mythic newness of a place, staving off the inevitable ho-hum of familiarity. How to pick the moment to introduce oneself to this newness, it being an unresponsive expanse of surf? A lone openness to possibility, feelings unfettered by plan, honesty connected to the gut. That fragile, initial moment—the greeting—is when curiosity is at its purest and no detail goes unnoticed.

Slowing down, I found myself in a place named after a pirate trick, according to locals' lore: on moonless nights the pirates hung lanterns on the heads of wild horses to create a mirage of ships in the distance. Sailing straight into the beach, the marauders were upon them, holds plundered.

Get out of the truck! I sub-commanded myself, thinking of the setting sun. I parked at an empty inn outfitted in turquoise reflective windows that, in the last of the late afternoon light, cast a sick teal glow over the sand and the debris. A plush resort town? Maybe in late summer. The wreckage isn't just ships, but entire swimming pools, staircases, stilt homes, boardwalks, beach chairs, and gazebos. Nothing is right; everything is over-turned and torn. Many coincidences and unlikely collisions, messes evincing brute force.

Driving and searching, petty self-doubts dwarfed by grander doom. The gale is so strong I'm too frightened to traverse a bridge arching over a long inlet. I wait nearly an hour for another vehicle to pass to assure me I won't blow away when I get to the top. Stunned by the water encroaching on the land, I wonder how they live under such constant threat. The inlet was formed by a monstrous storm and creeps southward gradually, about sixty-six inches a year. The bridge is very long. On the other side, full night.

There's a room for me at the Cavalier. It is warm and dark and huge and can I just tell you, there's nothing like sleeping to the sound of crashing waves, weather channel on mute.

rhadamanthys: awake?

it is very dark on the rainforest floor.

when in a primary tropical rainforest
a flashlight may be more useful than a
machete.

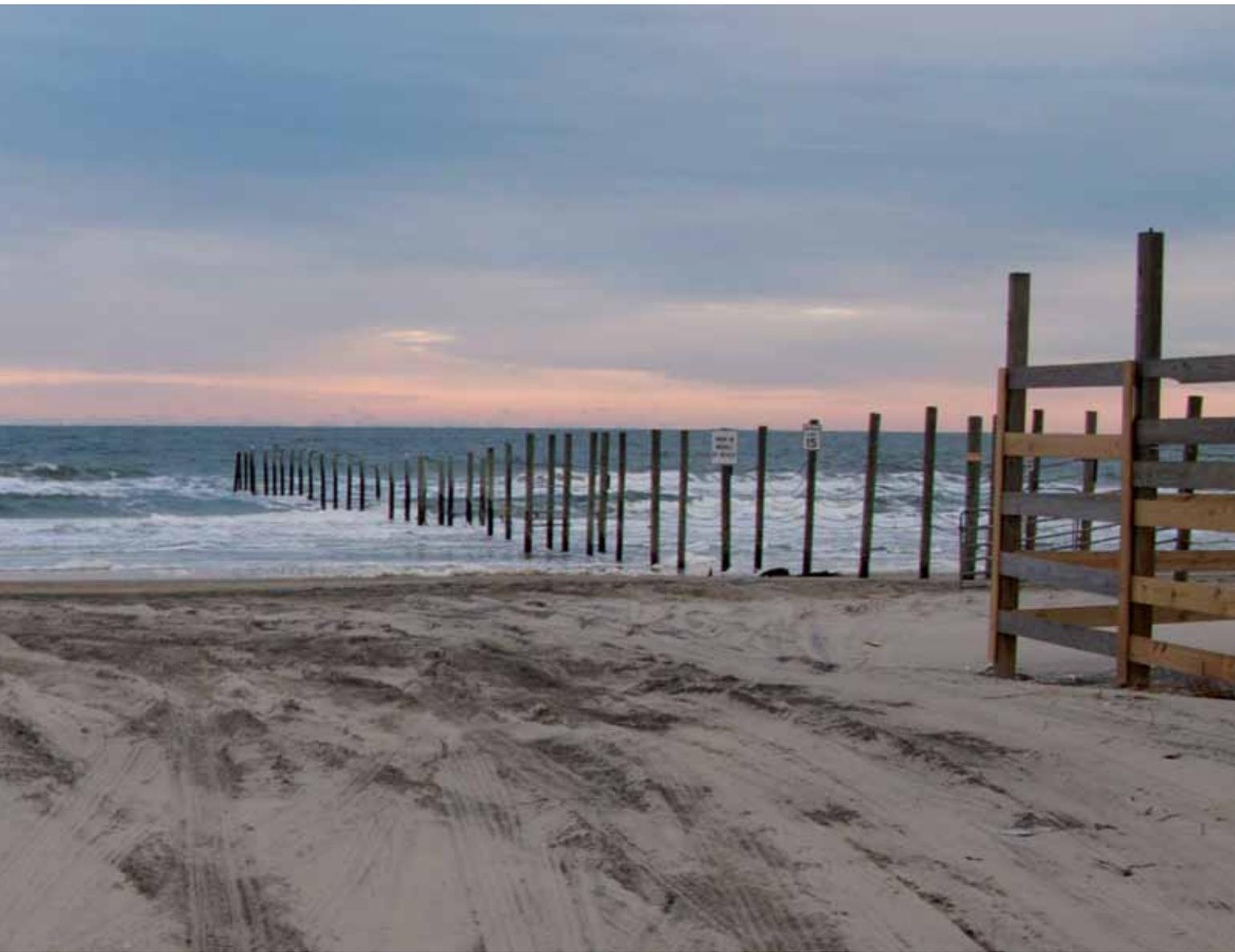
norma: i'd rather swing blindly than see
the thing that is about to attack.

did you pack your camera?

yes, i have them both.
doing?

blissfully nothing.
waiting for the snow.





Waking with the sun, coffee as black as the river Styx, I follow another truck off the highway and toward the dunes leading out to the sea. Driving the winter shore, this notion excites me. Halfway up my first sandy mound my pickup shudders and stalls, and stupidly I spin myself into a hole. Do I have a rope? asks a bald man who appears with a chocolate Lab. Disentangling a piece from the nautical detritus on the beach, the bald chocolate team hauls me out from behind.

Obstacles. Are they not our primary sources of inspiration, for each act, even each thought? There's more to the visit than meeting the angry water. Someone at the bar suggests I head north to where the road ends, and to just keep going. Asphalt turns to sand and leads dead into the water. Keep to the harder pack, and he bets I won't even need to shift into four wheel drive. A weak solution, but a start.

Things I see on the way: an electrical box disguised as a cross, draped in white nylon or bleached burlap. Decorative cabbages and windsocks everywhere. A skeleton driving a backhoe, swans upside down in the salt marsh.

The strip of land is so thin, itself disappearing despite its notoriety for disappearing other things. I'm surrounded by sentiments I'll never comprehend: thousands of ill-fated voyages, desperate moments on breeches buoys, woebegone tribes, their anger and fear, a colony that vanished without a trace, the love stories of braves and English girls. The wind is loaded with ghosts.

Led Zeppelin plays on the radio, then John Cougar. Banging the steering wheel I think gosh, how much easier it is in music than in art to bend the notes, introduce silences, move people.

norma: what's different about music is that you can either play or you can't.

rhadamanthys: you can't fake it in music.

what sustains me with it, is that i can spirit myself away inside the sounds.

it's intensely hermetic and universal at once.

if I play an A flat it will always be an A flat, yet most of the time I am the only one listening.

The trick is to be alone without feeling lonely. Isolation in a place, made gradually familiar and accessible, becoming an A flat or nothing special, but finding an intimacy. This is where something might start to happen.

Several sandy miles beyond the end of the road there's a dune buttressed by a thick, black dolphin, drying in the sun, petrified in a scream. It is my spot. Wild horses sulk past, uninterested in the carrots I throw in their direction and a black Jeep pulls up. With the usual fear of silence in the face of real human company I rapidly explain what I'm doing with a thousand pounds of clay in the tall dunes as if I knew. His name is Robert and he is a retired firefighter. We talk about oysters and Valentine's Day and hearts and guts and about them being strewn and with that I have an idea. He leaves me with an icy Miller High Life which I open at the end of the day and drink in the truck with the heat and music both on full blast.

The newspapers are soggy at the Jolly Roger and cover stories of natural disasters the world over, as well as the Olympic games. I feel futile so I compose tidy piles of neatly-written notes around my beer, and imagine all my work being done. A former coast guard offers to take me for a fly in his chipper red Cessna before he goes on a relief mission to Haiti. Later, his wife sends a card wishing we could've spoken longer.

Robert emails his phone number and with it, a stunning pencil drawing of a ghoul in a tribunal. He urges me to call next time and to simply say "I'm here," promising he won't try to have a conversation with me over the phone. He can't text because his thumbs are too damaged from the fire.

My nostrils are chapped from snot and strong wind; the oysters are so perfect and so fresh. Five bucks for a dozen, I can never believe it.

rhadamanthys: what strange prehistoric forager dared to crack the first oyster?

norma: there is an immense shell midden nearby, left behind by the ancient Croatan.

they probably survived entirely on shellfish, fish, and fruit.

is there a diet more healthy, more delicious?

I would add shaved fennel, but other than that, no.





Another week panics past and I return to the shoals for another siege. I miss an entire pretty day due to a romantic morning at home but greet the swans by four. My driving skills are improving and I'm less terrified of the pea gravel pits and soft sand. Dodging rotten hulks and dead animals, I drive beyond my usual outpost, the ribbon of land getting thinner, the sand getting softer, the sky getting darker. Soon I'm bereft of any hard pack at all and take to driving at the waterline. Overworked, the truck gives up, sinking into a wet spot near a troubled knot of flotsam. I begin to cry as the tide crashes closer and closer. What can I say to calm myself?

The afternoon is gorgeous, flooded color. The Atlantic, the winter blue that reminds me why I live on the East Coast, squeaky dolphins showing off, seagulls probably squawking, and in the distance, a merchant ship inching along a rough horizon. Left, right, nothing else. I turn on the radio.

rhadamanthys: did i tell you that i have
two 5 gallon poly-vinyl containers of
distilled water in my closet?

norma: in case some shit goes down?

I am building my survivalist cabinet.

At last, a pair of mustached angels in camouflage pull up in an air conditioning repair truck reading "Stone Cold." With the lucky rope that I now keep under the seat, they rescue me, then take my tires down to 8 psi, assuring me that I'll have "no more troubles." Could deflation end all of our troubles? Pressure has never caused anything but chaos, look at the water.

Someone, someone like Rimbaud wrote it down somewhere that the best artists are only very clever thieves, never getting caught for plagiarism by way of contortion and disguise.

I just want to gather things and then do nothing with them. *Nature morte.*

It's raining so hard and for so long I'm trapped inside either a café, the Cavalier, or the car. Sand and snow destroyed both cameras in the morning. The weather, while being exactly the reason this place holds so much power, is miserable. I'm anxious about wasting time and feeling all the wrong pressures. I know that the worst days are always the best ones in retrospect, but my god, the melancholy.

Somewhere almost to the southern end of the road (I volley between the north and south termini now) I find a space-ship in perfect condition. I creep myself out knocking on the window, half expecting an alien or at least a tie-dyed stoner to emerge. Inner space, outer space, the fright of being alone in the rain.

I kill some time riding the ferry around, then eating blackened grouper in a damp tavern. The storm calmed down enough to let the sun in for its usual colorful set, but the sea continued to pound the beach, frothing over the dunes and spraying the highway, which isn't really one—a narrow strip of asphalt that doesn't matter in storms.

Wipers sloshing salt water and snow, I wonder what does matter. The survival of classical humanism, modern behavior that is clear and natural. Love. There is little else.

I leave that night, the storm and the ocean still going on.

norma: rhythm is a visual thing.

rhadamanthys: it can be. I mean, that's why you have conductors.

you can't keep a beat with a flute.

you can, just not in an ensemble.

look at this simple depiction of a wave, and understand it. what it does, how it works.

It's weeks later and much warmer and I'm numbing to the beauty. I film a little, taping the camera to the bumper, hitting the button and driving in circles. Dune-ocean-dune-ocean-dune-ocean. My favorite broken boat, a small 19th century cutter covered in green mossy algae, has shifted and is barely visible. Today its so close to the dune-line its almost like its sailing in its own slow underworld, eventually to end up in someone's basement.

I don't take the superfluous picture, respecting its metaphorical ballast and warm company. I wonder instead about the boat of the mind, the agony of progress, the aching heart of the sea-farer facing doom.

rhadamanthys: Speak softly

the counterpoint happens between
things, not within them

norma: the work needs to continue for a
long time.

you've found that many things can end
abruptly.

the gull is dropping an oyster from a
great height.

