

Spring, Stripped-down

I love these dreary seaside fish towns before spring really takes hold. Before the rough plywood shutters come down. Before the sound of hammers, power saws and nail guns fill the clear air. Before the hourly summer workers — old men and high school kids mostly, a few drunks — slap another coat of paint on peeling walls and window trim (a losing battle if ever there was one). Before the chains and wire cables blocking sandy parking lots are removed and replaced by slumping teens in sunglasses. Right before the fish arrive.

I love these ghost towns for their shabbiness, their stripped-down, ridden-hard-and-put-away-wet feel. I drive slowly past empty batting cages, a merry-go-round with its painted horses still slumbering in some dark corner, boarded up fast-food stands and what used to be a pinball arcade. Christ, how many quarters and how many hours did we spend there? Signs for fried dough, clam cakes, suntan oil and \$40 parking are weathered reminders of the noise, smells and crowds to come.

The road is in bad shape. Flooding, freezing and town snowplows have taken the usual toll. My truck weaves around the winter ruts and holes and floats over the frost heaves. The crumbling little strip of pavement reminds me of an expression you don't hear in the Northeast: rough as a cob. That's what a Chesapeake waterman shouted to me over the engine noise early one spring as we pounded across a steep chop on our way to a fish trap. I felt that run in my bones.

The winds have been busy; where the dunes are low, sand has blown off the beach face and formed small ridges along the roadside; in other spots, the finest, lightest sand is piled up against shop doors that have been boarded up for months.

I stop my car in the empty street and catch a good whiff of the wakening sea. The parking lot across from a salt pond is filled with broken shells. Herring gulls and great black-backs — “minister” gulls, they used to be called — drop from three stories high whatever shelled creatures they can scrounge up and peck wildly at the meat inside. Tough survivors of the long, hungry season.

These lonely little beach towns have their own peculiar rhythms, their own unwritten rules. One set of dos and don'ts for locals,

another for tourists. If you grew up working and fishing in one, you have something of an edge over those who didn't.

You should be able to roll into just about any sandy hamlet from Cape Cod to the Carolinas and read it the way you would a stretch of shoreline you've never fished.

If you've learned anything, you've learned to sniff out the back roads, shortcuts and rights-of-way, the little places where you can stick a car or truck and get to the water. You carry with you a knack for sneaking into places where the locals fish, for slipping past the attention of hometown cops, for scoping out places where it's safe to sleep in a car or van, for avoiding tickets and tow trucks.

It's another skill, like reading the water, laying out a big streamer in a fresh breeze or finding a school of bunker in 40 feet of water. And you at least have a shot at talking to the locals because you come from the same place, even if it has a different name.

You share the same dreams, same frustrations, same passion for the fish. Same sharp eye, too. You know how to blend in and pull out some little bit of information without sounding as if you're asking questions. You let people talk. You glean a fragment from here, a scrap from there, and you start to put the pieces together. If nothing else, you get yourself pointed in the right direction. Maybe.

And no matter whose town you're in, both of you know how it feels by late summer, when you are sick up to here with the hordes of vacationers and the traffic, and you wish they'd just all go away.

The smell of cold surf blows in over the dune line. Shabby and forlorn, the ghost town barely stirs. The fish will be here soon enough. You don't really want them just yet, anyway. You've still got plenty to do on the boat. Soon enough.

I walk to a cut in the dunes. Fill my lungs, breathe it all in. 