

I'm still not sure exactly how to situate myself on this page or back home. I'm not situating myself: I'm situating words and an image, which are then mailed to you. Today in the warmth of the afternoon sun I finished reading *On Being Blue* by William H. Gass, which is a lovely weird book, a reminder that a book can be anything if you want it to be, and that words are not what they signify, that the tongue's movement in the mouth changes what is said, that writing should feel more erotic than it does, that sex does not have to be described so mechanically. I feel a bit lost without using the random number generator to select a drawer for me, but the NYPL's collection doesn't have drawers, and the binder full of subject headings doesn't have page numbers. I am resorting to my intuition instead, which I feel distrustful of this month. I first looked for images about exits, but no such folder exists; then *Escapes*, some of which were delightful and some very sad, and a picture in there (I don't recall which) led me to *Cliffs*, where I found this picture of houses on Tonnelle Avenue in North Bergen by George Tice (fig. 1), who photographed New Jersey over the course of his life. As we unload our moving pod into a storage unit on Tonnelle Ave, my mother reminds me that it's pronounced *Tunnel-ee*.

I live on the Palisades now, I live on a cliff overlooking New York City. I live in New Jersey, I explain to people who ask, *on the other side of the Lincoln Tunnel*. At the Motor Vehicle Commission, every agent looks up my name and apologizes that my married name is not reflected in their system yet. They are only doing this because my spouse and I are there together, registering the car; if I were alone they would not care. My commuting time is spent on a bus beneath the Hudson River; in Port Authority, dodging suitcases and people filming themselves performing for TikTok; and then on the A/C/E downtown. To get to the Picture Collection, I walk three avenue blocks over through Times Square. Every time I enter the city, I have to look at the giant ugly logo of the *New York Times*. We live in New Jersey because we could not afford to live in New York; what I'd predicted five years earlier was true, that we wouldn't be able to return. Even the "nice" "artist" landlords on Listings Project didn't want two tenants without income. Instead an actor has rented us their furnished apartment for a year; it feels like living in a cheaply decorated Airbnb.



fig. 1. From
Urban
Landscapes by
George Tice,
ICP in
association
with W.W.
Norton, 2002.
(#27281)

I've been stuck with this picture of the houses on Tonnelle Avenue, how suburban they are and how each home has windows in the same spot, overlooking the short drop and presumably the Meadowlands. Tice was adept at rendering New Jersey's oddities in a tender way; the state's industrial history and present loomed in his pictures, and its wildlife, its nature. His most famous image shows a water tower hovering in the dark behind a Mobil gas station, but the one I love most and can't find online is of a picnic table in the backyard of a house in the shade of the highway's sound barrier. There is a deep sort of affection I have for people who love New Jersey, because I love New Jersey and now I live here again.

The bus from the city lets me off at Boulevard East. When we round the corner and the city looms large on my right, I pull the cord or press the small red button. The bus trip feels like an amusement park ride: loaded on at one of the many glass gates in Port Authority, handing over a ticket or showing the bright blinking screen of my phone, speeding around a curve and down into the tun-

nel and then emerging, coming around a steep bend that I used to associate with *The Sopranos* and Greyhound buses, where for a few weeks someone had paid for a billboard in honor of their dead father. I wondered every time we passed it if I would like a billboard upon my death, but I've requested no headstone. The memorial billboard has been replaced by one for an SUV called the Defender.

Often it is dark when I leave the city — as it mostly is now, dark all the time — and the doors open to deposit me there, the city framed by the wall made out of rock. I've already stopped taking pictures of it, though I am trying to figure out the skyline's mood each day. One morning it was hazy and the craggy buildings, the ones that seem to be topped with pyramids, were hardly visible, thin grey outlines.

There is a metal staircase winding down the cliffside that looks like a cage. I feel preoccupied by the idea of the cliff at large, and so I walk down the steps, a descent into the trees themselves, red and orange and yellow leaves spread wide, dead gray branches, arches cut into the wall, graffiti and trash and ginkgo leaves swept into corners by the wind. Nothing happens when I walk down but dizziness. I want to reach out and touch the rock, I want to brush my fingers against it, I want to feel the weight of its age and the leftover warmth of the sun. Instead I sit by the water for a while.

Each year on my birthday I make a self portrait, a tradition begun seventeen years ago that I still tend to. I wanted to take this year's with the skyline, the view I spend each day with. Last year I went to the Central Library in San Diego and photographed myself with the Picture File. This year I took my camera and tripod to the park on the waterfront and set them up next to a couple on their wedding day frolicking in front of an iPhone's lens. I like the physical routine of the self-timer, the whirring noise it makes as it ticks down and how quickly I have to arrange myself into space. It felt like a return to an earlier way of picture making, one where I am out in the world and visible to others, one where I feel slightly silly and also experience relief. I posed on the ground facing the skyline, looking away from the camera like the titular Christina in the painting *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth, but it was wrong. It's been years since I've fit my whole body into a self portrait; I remain distrusting of the body as a whole and whatever it's hiding in there. In the picture (fig. 2), the skyscrapers are smaller than me, or I am nestled among them. I am thirty two now. The doctor called on my birthday to let me know I have kidney stones. My mother baked a cake. My uncle called. The garage door opener broke and I photographed myself stuck there while we waited for the contractor.

fig. 2. *Birthday self p*, November 14, 2025. Weehawken, NJ.

