

## PER FORSSTRÖM

Clockwise from top right:  
*Untitled 7, 2017; Untitled 1, 2017;*  
*Untitled 6, 2019; Untitled 8, 2019*  
Polaroid 669 film, 3.25 x 4.25 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JOE MCAVOY

# Notes from the Edge of an Indifferent Ocean

Observations of  
both tragedy and  
beauty on the coast

*What are you trying to find,  
I don't care, I'm not kind / I've  
bludgeoned your sailors, I've spat  
out their keepsakes / Oh it's ashes  
to ashes, but always the ocean.*

—“The Ocean,” Dar Williams

**T**he beach here in Manzanita, on Oregon's north coast, runs seven or so uninterrupted miles from the Nehalem Bay jetty on the south end to the cliffs under Neahkahnie Mountain north. It can widen to a hundred yards or more at low tide—the sand rippled and adorned with shimmering tide pools, seashells, polished rock, and sand dollars—then all but disappear up to the dunes during high winter storms. The ocean may lay out mirror smooth beneath a lapis-blue sky or froth in a cauldron of roiling disorder under low, dark clouds. Sometimes the crests of waves seem to break both toward and away from the beach at the same time. The strong offshore winds shred them, shaving off wisps of white spray that shimmy ghostlike in the air before thinning and vanishing back into the sea. Enormous tree trunks float hidden below the surface; a combination of logging spills and careless leftovers, but also the bodies of firs, cedars, hemlock, even the odd redwood, here and there, and deciduous maples, alders, and cottonwoods, ripped from the earth, root and all, where the forests grow too close to river's edge and land's end. The southernmost part of the beach, on the approach to the jetty, can become impassable to the day hiker. Hundreds of these felled giants are flung onto the sand like firewood off the end of a truck, stacking up against the dunes in a temporary, tenuous construction. Others lie like beached whales or bounce in the shallow surf. Mounds of kelp, pulled away from their rocky holds on the ocean floor, lie discarded and entangled, salting the air with a thick briny smell, waiting for the sea to reclaim them. There is manmade debris—buoys and plastic water bottles and rope from trawlers, mostly—half-buried under wind-buffed sand. A trek through this obstacle course in bad weather is ill-advised. The enormous trunks glide over the surface like popsicle sticks on a slow-moving stream. You don't want to be caught out there when that happens.

This is the normal here on the north coast. The abnormal visits, as well. A few years ago, I walked north on the beach with my dogs through an early-morning fog anchored to the cliffs where Neahkahnie climbs out of the Pacific at a steep angle. A woman waved her arms to get my attention. At her feet, the body of a man—naked other than running shoes, one side of his head bashed in—lay on the sand. His car was found in the large overlook parking lot up above the cliffs on Highway 101, I read later. On the

beach, someone chances a quick roll or jig on a tree trunk or log in the shallow surf. It shifts under them. They fall behind and under it, crushed or drowned. Rogue waves—“sneakers”—claim unwary victims. One minute they are here, the next minute they are not. Coast Guard helicopters and boats out on the water. Rescue/recovery vehicles on the beach. Red and blue lights whirling. Sirens. Squawks of walkie-talkies. Small groups of people talking in low voices, some sobbing. In October of 2016, a waterspout tornado made landfall just south of the village. It ran diagonally north by northeast through a cluster of homes before skipping up Laneda Avenue, Manzanita’s main drag, inflicting significant property damage. The town lost a third of its trees. There were no injuries or fatalities.

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January 2020: My wife, Kyle, and I watch winter storms lined up in an inverted camber across the North Pacific on the evening news weather report. There are at least three major disturbances heading our way, tracking from just under the Kamchatka Peninsula up through the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska before curving down to the Pacific Northwest coastline. They are strong this year. Tide pools the size of large ponds make for a circuitous, wet hike on the beach. The ocean churns as if there is a massive battle going on just below the surface. There is no discernible symmetry out there. Waves vaporize mid-break. They collapse over each other. One tide washes in over another receding out. The ebb picks up enough sand to create a slurry strong enough to drag one off their feet. There are warnings of anomalous king tides that reach well beyond what we thought the worst sneaker waves could bring.

We seek vantage points to observe it all; to stand enthralled, humbled into silence at the primal display of beauty and power. There is something visceral in our connection to it. The concussive force from the breaking waves pressurizes our eardrums. It pushes us back on our heels. The proximity to danger excites and scares us. It makes us hypervigilant. We walk closer to the dunes for a quick escape. We keep our dogs leashed.

Still, we come.

On January 11, a father and his two children were pulled into the ocean in Falcon Cove on the northwest

flank of Neahkahnie Mountain, a few miles from here. The beach there is different from ours. There isn’t a wide, flat sandy floor where one can make a hasty retreat from a rogue wave. The beach slopes down quickly into the ocean at Falcon Cove. The water deepens immediately, lapping up against a thin berm of black rock and pebbles. The swells surge over like the hands of cartoonish ghouls to pluck away what is available before pulling back into their dark caves.

They were hiking on an *off-beach* trail that runs just above the berm, the reports said. The father was holding the children—a seven-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy—when a king tide grabbed them. There is a photo from an earlier time. The family is leaning back for a group selfie. It appears to be taken at the coast. The father’s eyes twinkle. A wide smile, framed within deep-red lipstick, is building on the mother’s face. The two children are grinning, too. The family is snuggled into itself, happy. The rescue team was on the scene within minutes. The father recovered at a local hospital. The girl died soon after being pulled out. The boy’s body wasn’t recovered. A witness mentioned a woman, soaked through, her face bloodied, frantic, distraught, screaming for someone to call 911.

The recriminations came quickly: *There were warnings. Why did they bring the kids so close? What were they thinking?* I think that anger and blame help avoid the burden of letting pain in, of trying to make sense of it all.

The mother posted a thank you on Facebook to all those who had reached out to comfort her. She was broken, she wrote. She was waiting for the “new normal” of her life to settle in.

I felt broken, too, when I heard the news. In the weeks following the tragedy, I found myself wide awake just past midnight, thinking of them. I am a strong swimmer. I imagined their heads bobbing just a few feet out from the berm. They stared up at me, silent, the same expectant looks on their faces, waiting for me to do something. A woman’s voice was screaming, “Help them, please help them!”

“It would be suicide to go in,” a friend told me when I shared this. “I would let them go,” he said. “Unless they were mine.”

I don’t want to let them go. There wouldn’t be time to do that calculation. In my restless early-morning

imaginings, there were more heads bobbing. Too many to count. They were all children.

It is all conjecture, of course. I wasn’t there. But what if I had been? What would life be if all I had was a memory of standing on the berm, watching the ocean take them away?

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March/April 2020: Talk of the Falcon Cove tragedy is replaced, in growing increments, by more daily concerns and then by a microbial virus whose spread no ocean can stop. The children are not forgotten. It’s just too much to carry every day. The boy’s body has vanished into the sea like those wisps of ghosts shimmying above shredded waves in the winter storms. Another disembodied-spirit-memory that will pop up, occasionally and unannounced, to haunt me on my beach walks.

The pandemic has added another layer to the complex conditions here. Manzanita has been “discovered.” It has managed to retain the small-town charm that makes it a popular choice for second homeowners like me from Portland up to Seattle; a destination for vacationers from all over. Underneath that veneer are issues common to out-of-the-way destinations and service economies: intermittent employment, boredom, youth flight, affordable housing, retail staffing gaps, illness, and, here on the Oregon north coast, the struggle against an impending dread that accompanies the rainy season. Signs on Laneda Avenue leading into town from Highway 101 warn travelers away. The merchants have, for the most part, shut down. The town is empty, quiet. There is takeout at Manzanita Coffee. Natalie and Max greet me with a smile through a quarter-inch pane of plexiglass. I ask Max how his writing is going. “It’s going,” he says through his bandana mask. We do our best to distance ourselves in the narrow aisles of Manzanita Grocery & Deli (“the little apple”). The San Dune Pub is shuttered. MacGregor’s Whiskey Bar, too. Cloud and Leaf Bookstore remains open, if you know what title you are looking for; you can order online or over the phone. Deborah or Dan will leave it out on the front bench or ship it to you. The delight of browsing the shelves, reading the comments inked on index cards tucked under the volumes, talking about books and writing are all gone for now. Deborah put a bar of dark chocolate into the bag with my copy of Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *Thomas Cromwell*:

*A Revolutionary Life*. The book’s first pages are forever smudged with the dark-cocoa stamp of my fingerprints, a reminder of a time and place that I will inevitably reflect upon when I come back to revisit them. What capacity we have to find ways of extending kindness, of offering hope in such surreal conditions.

A cluster of large flat-topped boulders—basalt, I decided long ago; “When in doubt, it’s probably basalt,” someone once told me—are clustered on the sidewalk where Laneda Avenue ends and the beach begins. I often sit there after a hike to gaze out over the ocean while wiping the sand from my feet. Three-year-old Rosie, my black Lab, drinks fresh water from the bowls that a local group keeps generously replenished.

The beach is cleaner than I have ever seen it. The ocean is translucent. It seems joyous. I am projecting here, of course. I am joyous. I like the quiet, the stillness. I like the emptiness on the sand, sidewalks, and roads. I like the little acts of civility that seem to surface in times like these. I wrestle with the contradiction that a deadly virus or an ocean capable of taking away our loved ones can reward us, too; turning our focus inward to discover things within ourselves that we long ago abandoned or have forgotten.

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May/June 2020: There are signs of reopening: More cars on Laneda Avenue, clumps of people on the beach, stores improvising their retail processes—going online, sidewalk sales, takeout—to get revenue flowing once again. Second homeowners are returning. Day visitors and vacationers are still asked to stay away. Many don’t.

Rosie runs through tide pools and low surf on our morning walk north into the village. I do my best to keep her near the water, away from the remains of dead gulls and a large seal, its exposed ribs curled upward out of the loose sand, close to the dunes. We almost lost Rosie to salmon poisoning a year ago. A cheap paper mask rolls over the sand toward me. I shove it into my sweatshirt pouch along with the cigarette butts and discarded plastics and crushed empties of a six-pack of beer left around the embers of a still-smoldering beach fire. There is a cluster of garbage and recycling and poop-bag disposal bins at the sidewalk where I leave the beach to head into town. Natalie and Max greet me through the plexiglass at the coffee shop. I sit

on the bench outside. Rosie lays her head on my lap. It's still early. A few pickups with construction and landscaping tools drive by. Across Laneda, a couple, masks tucked under their chins, hold hands on a leisurely stroll toward the beach. Their small dog sees Rosie and tugs at the leash. A large truck is parked in front of Manzanita Grocery. A man stacks boxes onto a hand truck. The sound of pounding waves lulls me.

Deborah has responded to my email inquiry about how she is holding up. She says that I can browse the books once again. I'm happy that things are coming back to life, though wary of what that return brings with it. On our trek home, walking south on the beach toward dune marker twelve, where we will head in toward my house, Rosie chases a large flock of seagulls convened just above the surf line. They play with her, flying off and settling back down just far enough away to entice her pursuit again and again. A snippet of a Neil Young song plays in my head: *Now I'm living out here on the beach, / but those seagulls are still out of reach.* As they should be, I think. Rosie will be exhausted tonight.

The tide is coming in. The waves are smallish though frequent. They build farther out toward the horizon, breaking early. The trim of whitewash extends out about fifty yards from the shoreline before the sea turns a matte green black. A seal pops up its snout close in. We stare at each other for a moment before it pulls back down. I walk barefoot through a line of yellow-stained sea-foam at the tide line. A few mild sneakers surprise me and I call out for Rosie to follow as I scamper inland.

I never know what I am looking for when I stare into and beyond the waves. I never come away empty. There's a large tanker on the edge of the horizon. How huge it must be to command so much of my visual field from this distance. In the spring and fall, gray whales visit us on their runs north and south between their Arctic feeding grounds and the Baja lagoons where they breed. Pelicans fly north in a single line just past the waves. I watch them hunt, dipping and rising, until they disappear into the shadows under the Neahkahnie cliffs. The mountain looms above blurred shapes on the beach just off the village. Morning fog obscures its summit. A month ago, there was no one out there with me. The fog will burn off by midday.

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July/August 2020: The traffic from Portland on Highway 26 through the Coast Range is getting heavier. There is more still on Highway 101 winding south from Cannon Beach past Arch Cape and through the tunnel just above Falcon Cove before making its way down to Manzanita. Added to the annual summer desire to get away to the cooler climes of the coast, especially after four plus months of sheltering in place brought on by the pandemic, a Black man is murdered by the police in Minnesota. His death is a breaking point. There is enormous social unrest across the country and, especially in Portland, violence and some destruction. Families are lining up in droves to get out.

It feels somewhat disorienting, though encouraging, to see the Black Lives Matter signs in the storefront windows. It is predominantly white here. The occasional pickup truck racing down Laneda Avenue with large American flags flowing somehow menacingly behind it ensures that we know there are, at least, two distinct perspectives here.

The boy's body is still yet unrecovered. Large motor homes labor on Highway 101's snaking inclines. It is a quiet Fourth of July, though. No pancake breakfast by the firehouse to kick off the festivities. No F-14 roaring in from over the Pacific to awe a large crowd lining both sides of Laneda Avenue, the parade route, in their folding chairs. The popular fireworks show on the beach after sundown was discontinued a year or so ago due to budget and clean-up concerns. I like the quiet. There is a police action out on the street in front of my house. A woman appears to be experiencing a psychotic event. "They're taking away my amendments," she screams over and over again. "Please film this," she implores Kyle, who is trying to negotiate a calm ending.

Summer winds kick up in the afternoon. There are more than a few kites in the sky, though nothing like in summers past. The gusts pull the unspooling strings taut. I half expect to see bodies lifted up off the ground. Plastic and paper animals, dinosaurs, flags, and Disney characters flutter and flap over me and Rosie. They flit and cut through the air at high speeds, snapping and crackling in what sounds like the staccato bursts of distant gunfire. Children are squealing and running up and down the dunes. Some splash into the surf. I slow a bit until I'm confident that someone is nearby, watching over them. Wetsuited surfers race kite- and sailboards through the

waves at high speeds, soaring off the swells to twirl ten or more feet over the water, landing precisely and flying out of my sight without missing a beat. One of them seems nearer the horizon than the shoreline. Washed-out remnants of sandcastles and labyrinths wait for the next round of waves to finish them off. *Katie loves . . .* in enormous letters, has been gouged with dragged toes or heel or stick in the sand. I have to walk its length to read it. I wonder whom it is that Katie loves. Or was that the whole message? For the sheer metaphysical-ness of it, I hope the latter.

August surprises me every year. Summer temperatures at their highest, during the day, mix with the first undeniable traces of fall in early morning and evening. It's sweater weather at night in the last two weeks leading into September. The blackberry bushes are ripening on Necarney Boulevard south out of the village. They mass along the side streets, as well. Thick vines cluster into winding spaghettilike blobs that push and fall out over the streets like Buddha bellies. The berries ripen toward month's end. Families gather to fill colorful beach buckets with the large, sweet fruits. Their hands are stained a deep purplish black. There is the occasional yelp when someone reaches in. The thorns grow to the size of small shark teeth. The consequences of being too casual or to miscalculate, here on the coast, can be serious.

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September 1, 2020: Fall is here. The calendar is not the arbiter of its arrival. The cool air and low sun confirm its presence. It brings with it—as it has every year without fail since childhood—an oddly delicious melancholy to me. I feel a low-grade anxiety and depression building, a mild fear of things falling apart, a need to batten down all that may slide overboard when the existential storms come, a tendency toward deeper reflection, the urge to read bigger books. The need to write it all down.

If there's a more appropriate backdrop for a journal than the ocean, it has thus far eluded me. I am, as always, more awake and aware after my beach walks than I was before them. Many days, I—or Kyle and I—walk to the village two or three times with Rosie. Watching her run freely through the thinning tide lifts us. Neahkahnie lifts us. The seagulls lift us. Max and Natalie and Deborah and Dan lift us. The crew at MacGregor's lifts us.

The ocean lifts us.

The same ocean that snatched away, forever, a seven-year-old girl and four-year-old boy from their father's arms. It is indifferent. It offers no explanation. It is neither ashamed nor repentant. I am left on my own to assign any higher meaning to it all.

These words, then, are for you and me, dear reader. The ocean cares not a damn whether I invoke invective or praise, whether my prose is flowery or spare and ascetic. Two children were pulled into the frigid, violent Pacific on the north coast of Oregon less than two weeks into the new year. They did not survive. Their story pulls me into the deep waters of contemplation and wonder in a world that is, surreally, closed down from a still-ongoing pandemic. A world that is struggling to identify the foundations of its history. A world that is, I hope, awakening. I am unsure—like the mother of those two children—of what the new normal will look like. I am trying to understand things that I fear I will never fully understand. It's time to stop writing and walk into the village with Kyle and Rosie. Dar Williams is playing in my head:

*Oh it's ashes to ashes, but always the ocean.*

**Joe McAvoy** can usually be found walking on the north Oregon coast with his wife, Kyle, and English Lab, Rosie, or in his study reading and writing and, occasionally, napping. His short stories, essays, sport pieces, satire, and poetry have been published in *The Opiate*, *the Timberline Review*, *Speculative Grammarian*, *Points in Case*, *Sensitive Skin*, *the Sport Digest*, and other magazines and literary journals.