

Seacoast Maine

by George Tice



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Commentary

If the photo gods were suddenly to smile on me and grant me a wish; if they said that I could have the talent of any photographer I wanted, there is no doubt that George Tice would be at the top of my wish list. I've always found his photographs quiet, yet powerful.

Consider this simple image, from his book *Seacoast Maine*. It is so *deceptively* simple, yet it reveals layers the more we look at it. It is not dramatic; not the end of some visual crescendo, not one of Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moments." Instead, it is a melancholy ache that takes us by surprise. It lacks all the commonplace attractions of a the "great photograph." There is no peak moment of action, no facial expression of intensity, no light that screams the importance of the moment. There is just the corner of a building, a patch of unkempt yard, a clothesline, a bit of rock, and the ocean's horizon. Not the stuff of great photographs — but there it is.

I'm not exactly sure why — perhaps it's the movement in the water, perhaps it's the proximity to the coast — but this photograph *feels windy*. He accomplishes this without having any garments on the close line, nonetheless it still feels windy. There is no movement in the grass, but it feels wind-blown. This kind of mysterious presence often appears in Tice's photographs — we can hear crickets, sirens, feel the sun, catch a whiff of some distant factory. I have no idea how he does it, but he does it consistently.

Did you notice the careful camera placement that includes both the house and the post at the end of the line, but carefully leaves a small amount of space between the clothesline, the clothespins, and the distant rocks? The clothesline creates a continuous line that is visually unbroken by any clutter from the background. Perfect camera placement.

I can't help but notice, also, that the supporting post at the far end of the clothesline is an unusual triangle shape. It subconsciously reminds me of the front bow of wooden boat. The clothesline secures it to the shore, in fact to the house itself. It's almost as though the rest of the boat is in the water, but somehow invisible. Perhaps that's where the sense of wind and movement come from.

Is there any doubt that this is an old seacoast cottage? How do we know that? The rough shake siding on the building, devoid of any paint, provides a temporal context that would be completely absent from the photograph if Tice had framed this composition even slightly differently. I can't speak for Tice, but I know that this kind of detailed analysis is rarely a conscious process in most photographers. While photographing this scene, I doubt anyone would think, "I must include the edge of the building to provide a sense of temporal context." Instead, we



just frame the composition and know that it's *right*. Later, we might understand the importance of this compositional decision, or we may never understand it. That doesn't, however, prevent us from *feeling* it.

I've used this photograph in other situations as my proof to debunk the theory that great photographs cannot be made in the middle of the day, nor in flat, gray light. I would propose that flat light in the middle of the day is the *perfect* combination for this image. Obviously, any other time of day or kind of light would make a completely different photograph. Those other photographs made under more dramatic light might be interesting, but they wouldn't have the sense of melancholy quiet that emanates from this image.

To be succinct: There is no such thing as good light or bad light — unless one makes such evaluative judgments against predetermined compositions before one photographs. If, instead, we approach the landscape with open arms, ready to receive whatever the light and weather feel disposed to provide us, we can make great images anytime, anywhere. It does, however, require that we are willing to accept what is given rather than dictate what we must have. Lots of photographs tend to shout the photographer's intentions; Tice's images consistently whisper an invitation — but it is a seductive whisper. After having studied his images for years, I'm convinced it is his sensitivity to light and mood that distinguishes his images from the hyper-processed images we see so often today.