*Carlo Rotella*

# Three Landscapes, With Gamblers

## Water-Gazers

I was idling at Pier 11 in Manhattan on a breezy weekend morning, waiting to take the Seahorse Express boat down to the racetrack at Monmouth Park on the Jersey shore. It was the day of the Haskell Stakes, a day of big races and bright July sunshine, and I was eager to get away from the routine of post-collegiate life: office work, bars, playing house with my girlfriend. Seagulls called in the narrow, potholed streets that surrounded the deserted pavilions of South Street Seaport. I had intended to give the racing form a thorough reading while I waited, but the play of sun on water distracted me.

That made me a water-gazer. In the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael marvels at the pull exerted by the sea on New Yorkers: "There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the Battery, where the noble mole is washed by waves and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there. . . . Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier heads"—as I was—"some looking over the bulwarks of ships from

China; some high aloft in the rigging as if striving to get a still better seaward peep." They are all, Ishmael reminds us, "landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks." What he wants to know is, "What do they here?"

Most of the water-gazers waiting for the Seahorse Express were in their sixties or older, outfitted for leisure in brightly colored sweats and other loose attire that snapped like sailcloth in the waterfront breeze. The gambling crowd, especially the more modest players, is an older crowd. This was in the late 1980s, before the opening of Indian casinos in Connecticut and upstate New York provided convenient places to warehouse those persisting in the interval between retirement and death, but even then Pier 11 formed part of a regional landscape of legalized gambling traversed by thousands upon thousands of retirees. Grandmothers loitered outside corner stores, waiting for the bus to the Atlantic City casinos; grandfathers crowded into smoke-yellowed Off-Track Betting outlets; in grocery stores, you patiently cradled your milk, sixpack, and *Daily News* while somebody at the front of the line tried to parlay grandchildren's birthdays into a lottery winner.

Playing slot machines, the lottery, or the ponies is like gazing out to sea at what looks like more life. You feel yourself to be at the verge of some other dispensation that begins where the materials of the everyday come to an end—the lath and plaster of work, family, neighborhood, doctor's appointments, Social Security checks. The unremarkable money you wager, which you earned while nailed to one kind of bench or another, mixes promiscuously with more glamorous money from places unknown, money which a few hours previous was out of sight of land. When you lose, all you get is a taste of salt air and the slightly dazzled feeling of having looked out to sea. If you get lucky and win, your money brings home some of its new seafaring acquaintances—although the exotic charm of such winnings never lasts. Sooner or later, it's all just money again, burning a hole in your pocket. Most casino and racetrack gamblers who win do not even manage to get their winnings home: they throw away house money even more heroically than their own, seemingly hellbent on leaving the premises dead-even or broke, already recharging the capacity for longing that will draw them back to the water's edge tomorrow.

Gambling as it is done by most people—fitfully, with studied inexpertise, betraying a quasi-religious impulse to lose—proceeds from a willingness to treat one's money as somehow tainted by the work that produced it. In the bewildering logic of "gaming," one disposes of that

sweat-stained cash as swiftly as possible, replacing it, ideally, with magically fresh and exciting money one has acquired through play. Ishmael knows better. Recognizing that "there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid," he goes to sea as a working seaman "because they make a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never pay passengers a single penny that I heard of." This is not strictly the case on land, since casinos often give passengers on charter buses their fare's worth of coins to dump in the slots as a preliminary to dumping their own money in the slots, but Ishmael has a larger truth in view: if going to sea, like gambling, feels like throwing off the bonds of drudging routine and reaching for more life, remember that the workaday round of salaried labor gives form and meaning to any attempt to escape from it.

The Seahorse Express got out into the harbor and passed through the Verrazano Narrows, a moment that always seems full of promise. The great bridge soared overhead, we passed a line of ships arriving from far-distant ports, the open sky was full of sea birds. We took in lung-fulls of ocean air edged with the tang of Patagonian distances. A trim, white-haired woman wearing a Members Only jacket over sweats came down the rail toward me. She had a folded racing form in one hand and a pencil in the other. "Tell me, son," she said, "who do you like in the fifth?"

Perhaps because I never did manage to give the racing form my undivided attention, relying instead on blind and progressively more drunken inspiration to guide my bets, I hit a couple of long-odds exactas and came home to Brooklyn that night a big winner. I took my girlfriend out to dinner to celebrate. We ordered pricey wine and became hilarious on the subject of my transformation from policy analyst to high-rolling horse player. The long day of heavy drinking, convulsive eating, sunburn, dehydration, and the unfamiliar motion of boat travel caught up with me late that night, and I threw up my meal. It went down the toilet and, after making its way through the sewer system and a waste treatment plant, proceeded into the bay and perhaps eventually out to sea.

## Atlantic City

I was introduced to Atlantic City in the late 1980s by a married couple who went there too often and lost too much when they did. The husband—let's call him Ken—worked with me at a sort of think tank

(at least partially a CIA front, I came to suspect) in midtown Manhattan. Ken was a few years older than me, but we were both post-collegiate flunkies, writers of memos and occasional speeches, ill-paid because it was understood that we would soon quit because we were ill-paid. His rudimentary helmet haircut spoke of cost-cutting rather than hipster minimalism, and he had a bowling-ball potbelly of which a man twice his age could be proud. Billowy shirts only partially concealed the gut, and, like clouds wreathing a mountain peak, they had the effect of rendering it more impressive. Ken wrote outsider-art crime stories, among the pleasures of which was violently forced exposition that clanked like a rain of safes and anvils: "Jack said, 'Hey, isn't that the same woman who saw us with our masks off right after we committed that bank robbery last year?' " The more I talked with Ken the more I understood that his daily life, even his writing life, amounted to marking time between trips to Atlantic City. Think of three concentric rings: on the outside, his job, easily done and forgotten; inside that, writing, at least two hours a day every day at a desk in his apartment in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, patiently submitting stories and filing the rejections when they came in the mail; and, in the inmost ring, Atlantic City, its lighted towers rising up between the bracketing darknesses of the ocean and the lowrise city inland, offering action all day and all night, and prefab grandeur you could put your fist through.

Lisa, his wife, was tight and dark-haired where Ken was slack and fair, but she had the same air of initial non-descriptness incompletely masking a quality to beware of. Like Ken, Lisa did some kind of low-mid-level office work, but she made a little more money than he did, their agreement being that she would contribute more to the household in the short run while they waited for his writing to pay off in the long run. The Atlantic City problem seemed to grow between them. Maybe they would have been immune to it if they had not been married to each other, but, since they *were* married to each other, they could hold off for no more than a week or two, careful not to jinx the run of self-control by talking about it too much or too little, before eventually breaking down and heading south once more. I pictured them returning home from work, first Ken (we never worked late at the think tank) and then Lisa, both uncomfortable in their bargain-basement office wear after a long subway commute, and the inspiration striking them all at once: let's change clothes, let's go to the bank, let's gas up the car, let's go. From Sheepshead Bay, they could cross the Verrazano Narrows Bridge to Staten Island, then a second bridge to New

Jersey, and be in Atlantic City in two hours. Listening at lunchtime to Ken's latest account of how his closely theorized blackjack system had run afoul of an unlikely turn of the cards, I would imagine them giving in to their weakness, rushing down to Atlantic City, losing all their money, driving home broke and regretful, suddenly realizing—adrenaline coursing through them, despair at the fact of it right behind—that they could lay their hands on more cash, turning around and making the long drive down from Brooklyn again with a fresh bankroll to fritter away.

I went to Atlantic City with them once. Driving down, leaving the orbit of New York City and passing through the indeterminate spaces of south central New Jersey and then approaching Atlantic City as the sun finally disappeared, Ken and Lisa began to sweat. In the car with the windows down it was a comfortably cool summer evening, but their clothes grew dark at the necks and armpits, they shifted in their seats to unstick themselves, and from the back seat I could see shiny drops hanging in the hair on backs of their necks. It looked like the kind of sweating that begins in anxiety but proceeds into relief, the initial heat and chills giving way to warmed-up looseness. They knew themselves to be weak and bad, but whatever was wrong with them was wrong with both of them, which made it part of what held them together as a couple.

My trip to Atlantic City with them was also the first time I ever went to a casino. This was back when casinos were still concentrated in Las Vegas and Atlantic City and not yet generally regarded as a viable alternative to the welfare state. I had some notion (I still do, every time) that the anthropology of it would be engaging, that I would hang around and place a wager here and a bet there between stretches of observation and a turn or two on the boardwalk in the sea air, that we would drive home to Brooklyn in the morning with a long session of light misbehavior and inquiry into the human condition under our belts. Within two minutes of our walking into a casino, Lisa was inspired to make a relatively large bet at long odds on a spin of the wheel of fortune, the most dull-witted game of chance imaginable. (The wheel was positioned as a sort of toll booth to collect a first round of losses that a gambler would barely notice in the excitement of scanning the vast room full of light, sound, and surging humanity. If the gambler happened to win, he or she would certainly not stop there, at the threshold of big fun, but would instead take those winnings further into the casino, where the house could reclaim them and get at

the gambler's own money.) The wheel, improbably, stopped exactly where Lisa wanted it to, and the man gave her a pile of winnings that probably exceeded their monthly rent payment. She turned to her husband—eyes wide, a line of fresh sweat droplets starting in the near-invisible down above her upper lip—and said, "I want to go home. Now." It was a lot of money, and they needed it. Having with the evening's opening move beaten the house, Atlantic City, and herself, for once, she was desperate to get out of there before the thrill of gambling with house money overwhelmed the thrill of going home a winner.

But Ken had not even begun to gamble, and of course they had a guest to think of. There was a hurried and mostly silent marital confrontation. Lisa, who rapidly passed from beseeching to accusatory surliness, tried to keep her face in front of Ken's while he smiled thinly and looked around the room, unable to meet her eyes. He tried to counterfeit the air of a reasonable man who must be patient with his wife's moods, but it was all he could do to restrain himself from hissing at her to do whatever she wanted and bolting for the gambling tables, where dealers and croupiers awaited him with appraising looks that said, "Look, pal, why not cut to the chase and just give us all your chips right now? And bring your wife's money while you're at it." At the end of the standoff, Ken headed for the tables—the inevitable result, as they both knew all along—and Lisa said she would find something to eat and then rejoin us to reconsider our options. Ken assured her, as he fled, that there was a chance we might all decide to go home then.

An hour or two later she found us at a low-rollers' roulette table, where we were betting twenty-five cent chips—winning and losing, winning and losing, holding even for the moment against the house's advantage in odds. Roulette is not much more challenging than the wheel of fortune, and even the casino staff affects to look down on low-stakes roulette as a bottom-feeder's pastime. Ken had not yet begun to gamble in earnest; he was just getting loose in preparation for long, stultifyingly systematic hours of blackjack. Lisa, looking pale, hauled Ken off to one side for an urgent negotiation. When finally he brought himself to look her in the face, which she insistently held up to his as if demanding that he inspect fresh damage, he could see that his wife was in trouble. Only a complete animal would have obliged her to suffer further.

When they rejoined me a few minutes later, Ken announced that they were going home. Lisa hung back a bit, hugging herself in the

chill of casino air conditioning, unwilling to join the group. Because they were leaving me to take the bus home in the morning on my own, Ken felt obliged to explain that Lisa had managed to lose, in some unspecified way, all of her winnings and then most of the money she had brought with her from Brooklyn. Piling losing bets one upon the other —first, I could imagine, to mark time amusingly until she could go home with her profits, then in an effort to turn dwindling good fortune into a great killing, finally in a desperate attempt to salvage her triumph— she had turned a moment of unlooked-for good luck into a night of memorable failure and weakness. Especially now that her winnings were gone and she had missed her chance to do the prudent thing with them, the strain of cutting her losses imparted a martyred gauntness to her. It took all her strength to resist the urge to complete the evening's logical sequence by throwing away the rest of the money she had brought from home. When Ken was done explaining and apologizing, he and Lisa disappeared into the crowd.

Had Lisa scooped up her much-needed winnings from the wheel of fortune, cashed out briskly, and headed for the door, the whole thing would have been over in about five minutes. When she hesitated, she gave herself and her husband a chance to let her down. Perhaps, though, the ensuing cascade of disappointments only infused her memory of that visit to Atlantic City with more of what mattered: an insight into the character of her marriage, a sense of her own and her husband's strength and weakness, a feel for the push and pull between will and fate. She and Ken did leave early, if not early enough, and what they gave up in additional gambling thrills that night by leaving early they may well have gotten back many times over in the form of an episode to revisit, a small disaster from which proceeded understanding and mystery like quarters pouring from a slot machine that has come up lemons, lemons, lemons.

## Powerball

I had a professor who used to say, "People aren't stupid; they're crazy." He meant that we should seek complexity in our fellow humans, a form of giving them the benefit of the doubt. If you cannot understand why people do something, especially something you don't like, assume it's because their reasons are complicated and obscure to you rather than simple and contemptible.

I try to keep his advice in mind when I encounter yet another instance of Americans' willfully futile engagement with the gambling industry. I do not mean recreational poker with cronies or an outing at the racetrack, and I do not mean what professional gamblers do (even if they are almost all doomed to failure over the long haul): I mean consistently betting to lose, which is how most of us pursue satisfaction in casinos and lottery outlets. You want to dismiss such behavior as just plain stupid—*this* is why you wanted a tax cut?—but just plain stupidity doesn't explain the peculiarly self-flagellant quality of most people's poor gambling technique. Let's assume they are crazy instead.

Once, in the mid-1990s, I got stuck in a massive traffic jam on northbound I-95 caused by New Yorkers driving up into Connecticut to buy lottery tickets. While still in the Bronx I was already socked in, rolling forward a few feet every minute or so and then hitting the brakes again, and the radio traffic reports assured me that the jam extended ahead for many miles. It was a blindingly hot Saturday afternoon, my car was threatening to overheat, and I was impatient to get my business done in New Haven and continue on to Boston, where my wife was waiting for me. I was stuck because I had run afoul of a temporary folk migration set in motion by a Powerball jackpot in the two-hundred-million dollar range. New York did not offer Powerball among its various schemes to rook its citizens, so New Yorkers were heading for the ordinarily sleepy convenience stores of southern Connecticut, where Powerball tickets could be had.

People aren't stupid; they're crazy. I was repeating that to myself, trying not to succumb to contempt for those who would be inspired by news of an extra-large jackpot to leap into their cars, rush to the ATM, get on the highway, and spend their Saturday sitting in traffic and then standing in line to throw away their money on the longest shot imaginable—if in fact one can even imagine what it would mean to win against odds of scores of millions to one. They had screwed up my day in pursuit of a prize as close to unwinnable as any prize could be. So, I told myself, eying the engine temperature gauge as it swung to the right of the L in NORMAL, let's assume that people did not cast a long, calculating look at the odds and say to themselves, "It's worth a shot. I've got a good enough chance of winning that it makes sense to invest my day and whatever cash I can get my hands on. After all, I could win." Let's assume that nobody, or almost nobody, on the road that day was that dumb.

Let's believe, instead, that ticket-buyers did not expect or even

hope to win, but were rather taking a ritual opportunity to register dissatisfaction with their lives and express hope for a better life somewhere. People who buy lottery tickets at all tend to buy lots of them, spending hundreds and thousands of dollars a year on them, which seems like an extravagantly self-defeating thing to do with money. I can only begin to sympathize with such behavior if I understand it as a diversion of precious resources to erect a kind of monument to the yearning for something better, sort of a secular, nihilistic parallel to pinning bills to an icon as it is carried by during a Catholic street festival—as opposed to thinking that one can actually invest toward and perhaps achieve a better life by buying lottery tickets, which would be just plain stupid. I would like to believe that the people around me in traffic had found a coded way to express dissatisfactions and hopes that they could not afford to confront directly for fear of disrupting the attention to mundane detail you must sustain to perform the daily slog. They were acting crazy, in other words, because their lives made them crazy, which strikes me as reasonable.

I was encouraged in this line of thinking by the fact that Powerball's larger jackpot and longer odds had inspired the great rush northward, as if all of a sudden the usual twenty or thirty million dollar state lottery jackpot at the usual inconceivably long odds were a mere pittance beneath notice. I hope this means that Powerball's attraction resided precisely in the greater chance of *not* winning a bigger prize, in the more dramatic opportunity to ritually immolate one's time and money. Powerball offered a chance to build a more expensively grotesque monument to dissatisfaction and hope—thus the appeal of the drive to Connecticut, the waiting in line, the expenditure of money better spent on almost anything else. It was a kind of mortification of the flesh. I felt better about the traffic jam to the extent that it had been produced by the rich, tangled moral intelligence of humans, albeit an intelligence expressed indirectly and in a death-seeking fashion.

By the time I got into Connecticut my car needed filling and I needed emptying. I pulled into the first roadside service area. So, apparently, had everybody else. Temporary workers in orange vests waved the overflow of cars around to emergency parking areas in the back, and a great mob had converged on the building that housed bathrooms, restaurants, and a convenience store that, of course, sold lottery tickets. The line to buy them trailed through the building and outside into the sun. The prospective ticket buyers looked as if they had been waiting for hours. Parents dozed with kids in their laps; fast food runs

were arranged; people wondered aloud how much longer it would take; a man exasperatedly checked his watch, exhaling noisily, as if he had a right to be outraged. It could have been any crowd of people waiting for anything—concert tickets, jobs, evacuation.

Right then, once we were all out of our automotive cells and face to face, I found myself beginning to feel surprisingly good about the whole episode. In part, I have to admit, it was because I knew the road ahead would be clear now, but it was also because looking at the faces in a crowd, almost any crowd, makes it difficult to remain completely impervious to the claim other people make on you. Even if you have contempt for the crowd's collective behavior, you find it harder to sustain contempt for the individuals who make up the crowd. It usually ends up as respect, for the potency of their complicated drives if not for what those drives lead them to do.

I gassed up and pulled out of there. Within a few miles I had the road almost to myself, even though any Powerball-seeker who had thought to keep driving a few more minutes into Connecticut would have found much shorter ticket-buying lines. By then, though, I was ready to regard this further failure of good sense as just more flesh-mortifyingly soulful performance art. I was back up to cruising speed and the temperature gauge had swung back over between the N and the O of NORMAL where it belonged. And I was back to firmly believing that people are crazy—an uplifting thought, in those circumstances.