

BORSCHT BELT

Words KAREN SCHOEMER Photography MARISSA SCHEINFELD



At the corner of Frasier and Anawanda in the heart of Borscht Belt country—I know, it’s practically the setup for a Henny Youngman joke—Marisa Scheinfeld pulls off the road and leaps out of her car, a gleam in her eye. She scrambles through a broken chain link fence, passes a crumbling pool filled with black, dead-leaf-strewn water, and zips up the steps of a sagging, weather-beaten bungalow. A plywood door hangs open, like an invitation to a horror movie. Inside, the floor is covered with dirt and old ceiling tiles; a fallen refrigerator cuts diagonally through a rotting kitchen. “Be careful,” she says over her shoulder. “Do you smell the smell? Like old books and mildew, but more. Seeping moisture and paint. It’s like time.”

She skirts the refrigerator, snapping iPhone photos, and points out a bird’s nest on a ceiling fan in the front bedroom: “That’s been there for years.” Then she ushers me into the back bedroom, and when I stick my head through the doorway, I gasp. Not because it’s scary—because it’s art. What lies before me is an image straight out of her book *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America’s Jewish Vacationland*, published in October by Cornell University Press. It’s one of the most remarkable photos in a book that boasts many: a paneled bedroom bathed in afternoon light, a washed-out pink spread on the twin bed, bureau drawers haphazardly open, as if the final occupant fled in a hurry. What blows my mind is that a year and a half after she took the photo, nothing in the scene has changed. A lone tissue box is unmoved on top of the bureau.

Scheinfeld’s face in the doorway is impish with delight. “Same freakin’ drawers,” she says. “It’s bugged out.”

With *The Borscht Belt*, Scheinfeld has become the unofficial visual historian, documentarian, and diarist of the sad, dwindling flame of the Catskills’ once-thriving resort community. A Monticello native, she came of age in the ‘80s when the big hotels were in a freefall decline following their ‘50s and ‘60s heyday. She played on the playground at Kutsher’s, worked as a lifeguard and had her first love as a teen at the Concord. “This was my childhood,” she says. But like a lot of kids from hard-hit upstate areas, she got out when she could. She was a photography graduate student at the University of San Diego when the shuttered Concord became a firefighter training camp in 2007. “I was, like, surfing,” she says. “I wasn’t thinking about photographing the area. I moved away and didn’t think about it for a decade.”

A project photographing Holocaust survivors was so emotionally taxing that she needed to switch gears. “I had to stop. I’d have really bad dreams, I’d go home and be so angry and sad.” A mentor steered her toward what she knew best: home. At its peak, the Borscht Belt offered more than 500 hotels and as many as 50,000 bungalows. Scheinfeld began making trips on school breaks, cruising up and down back roads, sometimes getting permission to enter properties, sometimes sneaking in. Because of its economic collapse, the Borscht Belt was in a state of intact abandonment rivaled in America only by Detroit. Nature was intruding on the sites, turning indoor pool decks lush and mossy, trailing vines through broken windows toward crooked desk chairs. “I started out wanting to document the past,” she says. “But I realized it wasn’t about the past at all. It was about the unruly state of the present and the effects of time. I was enthralled with each season—what one room would look like in the spring versus what it would look like in the fall, and then when icicles would be dripping from it in the winter.”

When I look at Scheinfeld’s photographs, I experience loss and disbelief. Graffiti and mildew streak the once-magnificent multi-tier lobby at Grossinger’s in Liberty. A moldering roll of paper towels lies on the flooded kitchen floor of the Pines in South Fallsburg. A hallway overpass at the Pines is a wreck of drooping fiberglass insulation. And yet the work is compelling for more than its depiction of disaster and decay. As a photographer, Scheinfeld has a gentle touch: she uses natural light and never rearranges or stages objects for effect. “I never wanted to alter my images or oversaturate them or make them look not true to what my eye saw. Photography can lie, but I try to use it as a form of objective truth.” In a present rife with anxiety over climate change, she gives us a sneak preview of a world without us, and, if nothing else, reassures us with its still, silent beauty. She brings a surprising empathy to her subject, an almost teen-like enthusiasm for exploration. “I like the idea of returning,” she says. “Returning here allowed me to connect with myself, connect with my past, reconcile it, think about the future. Everyone left. So maybe now they’ll return, even if it’s just through the pages of the book.”

