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The Skeleton of the Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana

Walk, as residents once did before the promise of oil brought a paved road, out to the Isle de Jean Charles and your gut will tell you what you already logically know. This is a world apart. Snowy egrets dig in the bayou banks and mullet throw themselves out of the water when the rains start. The sky is so big it contains a thousand things at once. A ribbon of lavender-lit clouds hovers over the bay. Hoodoo-shaped cumulus formations hug the horizon. Above the hoodoo universe a storm is fixing to start. Bits of the sinking sun flare in the black water below. The marsh holds up its watery mirror, making the sky doubly large.

The Isle de Jean Charles is a slender spit of land a quarter mile across and two miles long in the heart of Louisiana's bayou country. A half a century ago the island was ten times larger. Back when the island was big, cypress and live oak trees gave shade and a single islander could catch hundreds of pounds of shrimp a night. There was a dance hall and a fresh market, a school and watermelon patches. In short: there was more than enough. But then the island began to disappear. If you compare aerial images of then and now, the change is dramatic. Blue replaces green. A skeleton of what once was seems to rise out of the water world, like braille embossed on paper.

I have come to the Isle de Jean Charles to find out how small communities are responding to global warming, sea rise, stronger storms, saline inundation, the end of one world and the beginning of another. As New York rolls out a 30-billion dollar plan to save the city, and Louisiana continues with their 50-billion dollar 'Morganza to the Gulf Hurricane Protection Project,' which will provide levee protection to much of the area around but not including the Isle de Jean Charles, I have begun to wonder about those people who live beyond the reach of our centralised governments' tax dollars. What happens in communities so marginal they are left to fend for themselves? Can they adapt? And how do they know when it is time to leave?

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While not technically a federal Native American reservation, the Isle de Jean Charles is inhabited almost entirely by decedents of the Choctaw tribe. The island was first settled in the early 1800's when a Frenchman and a local Native American woman married. No roads ran to the island back then and a property survey declared the area uninhabitable. Their family grew and in 1876, Louisiana started to sell them pieces of the island. They were amongst the first Native Americans in the state to be offered private land titles. Today there is an ongoing argument over which tribe the islanders and nearby residents belong to. Some say they are a blend of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw; others say they are decedents of the Houma.

Either way, by the early 1900s, about three hundred people lived on the island, almost all of them related to the original settlers. They fished for speckled trout and crawdads, caught shrimp and crabs in cast nets. In the winter the islanders trapped beavers, otter, and muskrat. In summer they tended gardens. More than a vague source of mystical pleasure, the land and the water were integral parts of how the islanders survived.

'This is really *our home*. It is our identity. Our basket weavers use the pomello reeds and we make dolls from the Spanish moss,' says Lora Ann Chaisson one night over a homemade dinner of shrimp and potato salad. Lora Ann is the Vice President of the United Houma Nation, a local Choctaw branch fighting for federal recognition and the right to land that comes with the formality. 'I grew up trawling with my granddad and his dad fished too. I don't see people leaving the water, that's who we are and it's our livelihood.'

But Lora Ann doesn't live on the island anymore. Instead she has a home in Pointe Aux Chenes, five miles inland. 'When I came here all I wanted to know was, "does it flood?"' Lora Ann says. "'No, it don't flood here," they told me. And do you know what? You can't stop the water; it is coming in here now too. Nothing in this house is original. I spent 10,000 dollars on hurricane windows and more on a metal roof – the kind that don't come off in storms. I have these walls here – the bottom third pops right out so you can just replace that if it floods.'

Thirty of the three hundred people who were born on the island remain. Chris Brunet is one of them. Whenever I go out to the island I make a point to stop and talk with Chris. He is as kind as they come and has lived on the island his entire life. We sit in the open-air living room

beneath his house, which he lifted on 16-foot-high stilts after Hurricane Lily covered everything he owned in black muck. This is the house Chris was raised in, that his parents built from Douglas firs to ensure its longevity, that his grandmother grew okra alongside, and that his father used to return to after hunting ducks for the family. What were once the marshy hunting grounds a mile south of home is open water today. The ducks nest elsewhere and Chris buys his poultry at Walmart.

'I will leave when it is time for me to go. It's just not that time yet,' Chris tells me on an August morning so pretty that leaving now sounds as irrational as staying does when the wind picks up. We sip lemon tea as the sunrise lights the bare branches of a nearby saline-ruined cypress.

'There is no difference between those who stay and those who go. After a while many people left because of the challenges of living here,' Chris adds. 'When a hurricane hits you have no bed, no sofa, no lights, no gas, no running water, sometimes no roof for a month or more. It's not that those who left wanted to go. But each person has a decision that only they can make. And if you are one of those who left, there is still a big part of you that wants to be here.'

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Generally speaking, we tend to think sea rise hit critical velocity about fifteen years ago, as the dramatic acceleration of the withdrawal of the Greenland Ice Sheet meant that more water than any human had ever witnessed was suddenly getting dumped into the ocean. But the deltaic lands at the mouth of the Mississippi have been losing ground to the sea far longer, since the 1930s when the US Army Corps of Engineers dammed the river that made them so.

'Before the dams, we used to flood, but they were good floods, replenishing the land. When the silt started to get backed up behind those dams, the floods came stronger and didn't carry any sediment with them and that's when the land started to withdraw,' Lora Ann explains to me. 'It only got worse when they discovered oil on the bayou.'

In 1948, the first oil rig was installed near the island. With the oil rigs came channelisation, a process where routes are dug through the marsh and swamp to make for easy access to the rigs. The oil companies were supposed to 'rock' each of these channels, that is backfill them when the well came out, reducing the movement of water through the fragile marshland that surrounds and supports the bayous.

‘But they didn’t do that, they didn’t maintain the bayou like they was supposed to. And now the Gulf is at our back door,’ says Burt Knight, who has been shrimping in the area his entire life. When water washed through the new channels, erosion increased. Marshes opened up and became lakes, and swamps widened into bayous. Salt water replaced brackish water, and what was once fresh became brackish. The island started sinking and shrinking further, faster. And it’s not just the land that got lost.

Gulf shrimp reproduce in estuaries. But, thanks to the shifting saline saturation, now they must travel further inland to reach their brackish spawning grounds, and the further in they have to go, the more likely they are to run into all sorts of levees, locks, and dams, barring their way. ‘You don’t need to kill all the chickens, just break all the eggs,’ Burt told me as he helped Wayne Dupre sort out his shrimp nets after another mediocre run. After deducting the money he spent on gas, Wayne will take home about a hundred and fifty dollars for the shrimp he spent all night catching. After the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, Burt claims, scientists have been urging local fishermen to quit eating their catch. ‘What are we supposed to do? Just look at ‘em?’ Wayne asks as he hands me a jug full of fresh Gulf browns.

Not too long after the oil companies cut up the marshland, islanders started leaving. At first the migration inland was slow and fickle. When the storms started, the trickle turned into a flood. It used to be that a hurricane hit every hundred years or so, but the past two decades have brought a string of foul weather so potent it started a hegira.

‘Juan was a real eye-opener, in 1988. It flooded us pretty bad and it wasn’t even a real hurricane. Then we got Andrew, Cindy, Dan, Lily, Katrina, and Rita. After Rita I had my house lifted. Then Gustav took off the roof and the entire back fourth of my house,’ Lora Ann prattles off the list of storms with a familiarity that borders on familial. Without marshland to act as a buffer, when a hurricane whips up swell in the Gulf, all that water hits the island. The road, the landing where Chris’ nephew Howard fishes, the trailers, the blow-up swimming pools, the dead cypress trees, the entire constellation of points that makes the island the island, they all are growing accustomed to life underwater.

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We must rethink what it means to live on the coast. And by rethinking, I don't necessarily mean designing our way out of the dilemma of sea level rise. I came down to the Isle de Jean Charles in order to try to answer the question: has the time come for strategic withdrawal? And before I even set foot on the island I thought I knew the answer, I thought the answer was an obvious and rational yes.

Now that industrialisation has irrevocably changed the earth, I half expected those who live at the edge of America's state-centric social imagination to be the first to flee the rising tide. Or as Albert Naquin, the Chief of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, who moved inland in the 1970's puts it; 'We got chased out here by the whites; now we're getting chased back by Mother Nature.' But the longer I spend on the island with those that remain, the more it strikes me how terribly unfair expecting relocation is to those who lead small lives, intimately connected to the place where the water and land meet.

'My dad lived 91 years on the island, and his dad was born and raised and died here too. We have been down here a long time,' Edison Dadar he tells me one afternoon as he fusses with his cast net. 'Back when I was young, I used to catch four hundred pounds of shrimp a night in the little inlet right here behind my house. I still catch enough to eat now.' Edison pulls a five-gallon bucket out of his refrigerator. There can't be more than fifty shrimp in the bottom of the bucket. Two big whites and the rest brown, probably no more than a pound or two total. It's enough to feed him, his wife, and his son who still lives at home.

Edison shows me his garden, which he has in a bathtub and a few raised beds to keep the saline out of the roots. There are three cantaloupes growing and a couple cucumbers. Out front the two persimmon trees Edison planted after Hurricane Andrew catch the wind. 'Each tree you have is good protection,' Edison tells me, 'Plus the fruit is pretty tasty too.' Before Edison and I go our separate ways, he hands me a flair of oyster shells each growing out of and on each other. 'When one oyster dies,' Edison says, 'the next one builds on his shell, and the next one builds on him. Me? I plan on dying right here, on the island.'

The solution, if you can call it that, is to live like Edison – to make do with less. Quit building bigger levees and instead learn to live even smaller, slighter than before. According to Naomi Klein, whose most recent book chronicles the ways in which deregulated capitalism has rapidly warmed the planet, we need not give up all the comforts that have come to define the modern age, as climate change deniers argue environ-

mentalists are suggesting. She writes, ‘The truth is that if we want to live within ecological limits, we would need to return to a lifestyle similar to what we had in the 1970s, before consumption rates went crazy.’ There is still time to avoid catastrophic climate change, but that means moving away from an all-encompassing economic system that promoted endless growth through the increased availability of cheap plastic objects. Which is to say, when you see people like Edison struggling to make do with less, performing that difficult work, you begin to appreciate ‘going light’ for what it actually is, without the sexy branding. In our consumptive culture, actually living with less often ends up looking a lot like being poor.

‘We have each other,’ Chris tells me later in the afternoon when I ask him how he stays on against great odds. ‘After a storm hits, and you have to clean out your house, scrub it from top to bottom to stop the mould, most people on the island come out and help you get to it. And even though it’s heartbreaking to watch the island disappear, the scenery is still beautiful. For me to have this somewhere else would cost too much. To have land enough to not feel choked and to be close to the water, well I couldn’t afford it.’

A porpoise swims up the channel behind Chris’ house. For a second I find its pinkish fin thrilling, like spotting a whale on a sightseeing tour, but the thrill gives way to sadness and a thin wire of fear. Forty years ago it would have been unimaginable to find a big saltwater marine mammal so far inland.

‘It’s like the end of the world out there,’ the director, Benh Zeitlin, of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* told me, the day I was to head out to the island. I think he was speaking of the size of the sky, and the feeling that when you stand on the edge of the bayou, the world you see seems big beyond the realm of personal knowledge. But as I looked at the porpoise swimming up the channel and dead oak trees littered along the banks – their trunks and limbs like electricity in search of a point of contact – his words struck me as ominous. I get the feeling that those who remain will stay on the island until they die, perhaps in a storm, perhaps not, or until the island simply isn’t anymore.

‘I’m not going to see it,’ says Theo Chaisson, who owns the marina where locals drink and steam crawdads on Saturdays. Theo is 74 years old but seems much younger. ‘And my kids, they probably aren’t going to see it either. Their kids, they might see it, they might know a world where the island isn’t.’