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HOW FRAGILE THE LAND

The lot I live on is about a third of an acre. It's the biggest in my neighborhood and is one of the main reasons I bought my home. Land. When I was a child, I was taught it was important. An investment. A clear measure of a person's success.

The earth is damp here in Louisiana. Our yard floods so often that the Bermuda mix we planted, a ferocious grass that takes over each garden we attempt, has given up on certain patches. Tall, thin-bladed swamp grasses grow in those low, wet spots. We joke about planting a cypress, and we build the yard up with dirt we excavate whenever we dig a hole for another doomed lemon tree. My family moved here to Louisiana after we lost our house in Miami to Hurricane Andrew. It took a while, but I fell in love with this state, made it my home, and it is disappearing.

You can fit nearly 32,000 copies of my American dream over the amount of land being carved away from the Louisiana coastline every year. I did the math. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the state is hemorrhaging wetlands, shrinking at a rate of 16.57 square miles a year. These wetlands, along with the disappearing barrier islands beyond them, are our main protection from hurricanes. But on average, a chunk larger than the city I live in disappears from Louisiana every three years. Over ten and a half thousand acres are just gone — poof — every twelve months. The USGS website says that this works out to about a football field of swampland an hour.

Or nearly four wild, wet versions of my lot.

In the 1850s, rich southerners boarded steamboats that ferried them from a rail station in Patterson, Louisiana, out to a little island off the coast, which was considered to have what the article "Heart of Louisiana: Last Island" calls "the finest beach in the world." Isle Derniere, or Last Island, was a barrier island, a buffer between the ocean and the seaboard. Technically it still exists, though now it is a chain instead of a single land mass — large swaths of the original island swallowed by the Gulf — and, for the most part, is only visited by scientists.

I've never boated out to the little stepping-stone chain that has replaced the

Last Island, but I have spent a lot of time imagining its final moments.

In the summer of 1856, while tourists leaned into the warmth of the sun and danced through nights cooled only by ocean breezes, a hurricane — the first major hurricane to be recorded on the American Gulf Coast — swirled through the Atlantic and into the Gulf. It was unnamed. Unwatched. The technology we use today, satellites and supercomputers and dropsondes, had not yet been invented.

Nearly every article and book about the island, about the hurricane that split it in two, about the vacationers who lived through the storm and those who died there, mentions a carousel. In *Island in a Storm*, Abby Sallenger writes, "At first the carousel was solid and still. Windblown sand had accumulated into a dune that had grown high enough to hold the frame firmly in place. That night, however, the waves beat against the dune, eroded it, and swept the sand away. The carousel began to spin." I wonder if, over the howling winds, you could hear the squeak of it turning. I've lived through many hurricanes and have never gotten used to just how loud they can be, the way the air roars against your house in even the small storms, a noise you can feel in your chest as the air pressure changes. A noise that crashes in waves and then suddenly disappears with the eye of the storm, a vacancy that always leaves me feeling deaf and unsettled. The soft call of the spinning carousel must have swelled in that sudden calm, an eerie replacement for the birds that had gone silent in the wake of the storm.

There was no evacuation. About half of the 400 people there died. Survivors brought home stories of latching onto the carousel, holding to terra firma by the handles of the child's ride. It is a surreal picture, the sort of thing that belongs in a disaster movie, but a hurricane can drag a building from its foundation. Yank a thousand year old tree out by its clinging roots. A man is a silly thing in a force like that, a straw doll in the shaking jaws of a rabid beast.

In 1992, the call for the mandatory evacuation of Miami-Dade County seemed ridiculous. I had just turned seventeen, and even I knew Hurricane Andrew was not *really* coming. For days, everyone said that there would be no direct hit. They said the storm was weakening. "The storm was not an easy forecast," meteorologist Matt Daniel writes; on August 21, 1992, "the National Hurricane Center...had Andrew pushing much further north and away from South Florida. Andrew was only a

tropical storm that Friday, and no one had any idea that Andrew would rapidly intensify into a Category 5 storm two days later."

It was hard for people to understand the speed with which information on the hurricane kept changing. And so it seemed like every adult who talked about the storm scoffed at the official panic. I volunteered at an animal rehabilitation center that summer, cleaning possum, raccoon, fox, and owl cages, warming frozen mice for the raptors, and blending mealworm shakes to feed baby birds. The man who ran the center patted my hand while we discussed the storm. He reassured me that even if Andrew did hit, modern building practices would prevail. We would be fine.

As far as I know, the animal rehabilitation center did not survive.

We didn't pack like people evacuating. We packed for a vacation, a night or two in a hotel. We were not the sort of family that traveled much, and when we did it was for the holidays, visiting grandparents and aunts and uncles in Baton Rouge. "Bring your swimsuit," my mother said. "And something nice. You never know, we may get to stay a couple of nights."

We were gone for several weeks.

We drove north, perpendicular to Andrew's path. The traffic was horrible. And no matter where we went, the signs were the same. No vacancy. We drove and drove and drove. Around us, all of South Florida spilled north in a human storm surge we could not escape until Tallahassee, where we finally found an empty room in a small motel. We shuffled to the room, half asleep, the little ones propped in my parents' arms.

The day after Andrew hit, the newscasts were clear. If you lived in Dade County and you left, stay gone.

It is not safe here.

You do not have a home.

The room was little, two double beds, a bathroom, the television. My mother made a pallet on the floor for me, a nest of covers and pillows pilfered from the beds. The little ones shared one bed. My mother and stepfather had the other. Apollo, our chow, stalked the small spaces between us.

We sat on those beds watching the pictures of a place both familiar and alien cycle over and over on the television. Pictures of abject destruction. Everything, everything was ruined. This was before the 24-hour news cycle. Or maybe it was the

start of it. It was certainly the start for me. We could not look away.

A few months ago a picture circulated on Facebook. In it, a battered Louisiana highway sign is surrounded by overgrown grass. It is unremarkable; except on *this* sign, the simple white silhouette of Louisiana has lost its familiar shape. It is half the original size, cracked and crinkled along its edges as if the state has been nibbled, picked at, and discarded, a half eaten sandwich left to mold.

It is terrifying in its smallness, the familiar becoming broken, alien.

The image was created by *Matter* for "Louisiana Loses Its Boot," by Brett Anderson, which discusses the devastating effects of Louisiana's shrinking coastline. It's a map without wetlands, created as a "more honest representation of the boot," which the author believes will help Louisianans understand what is happening to our state. It "would not erase the intractable disagreements — around global sea level rise, energy jobs versus coastal restoration jobs, oil and gas companies versus the fishing industry — that paralyze state politics, but it would give shape to the awesome stakes, both economic and existential, that hang in the balance."

Louisiana is one of the places in America where the term "melting pot" seems less clichéd. We joke that since so many cultures bump up against one another here, the state is more a gumbo than anything else. A rich, thick soup of scraps. From the self-described Rednecks to the Creoles to the Cajuns to the Yats of Chalmette, the Granddaughters of the Confederacy, the Sons and Daughters of Slaves, the Irish Channel, the French Settlement, the German Coast and beyond, Louisiana's cultures bump and mingle. At the store I may hear mostly English (in a variety of accents) but French and Spanish, Italian and Vietnamese all catch my ear. There is a lot of hate. A lot of racial strife and ugly, backward-thinking fights. And a lot of love. Mixed marriages and hard won friendships. The thing we all have in common, though, is a fierce strength, a prideful heartiness. We fancy ourselves a rough-and-tumble sort, hosting hurricane parties and eating mudbugs and riding four-wheelers and walking down dark streets in the French Quarter with barely a thought.

It is hard to imagine we live in a fragile state, with lacy-edged shifting borders.

The signs have been surprisingly easy to miss.

"For years, most residents didn't notice because they live inside the levees and seldom travel into the wetlands," Bob Marshall explains in *Losing Ground: Southeast*

Louisiana Is Disappearing, Quickly. "But even those who work or play in the marshes were misled for decades by the gradual changes in the landscape."

The problem with the football field metaphor is also what makes it so nice, so easy to understand: when the statistic that Louisiana loses a football field of wetlands every hour is repeated, we picture a long rectangle of land. We picture our children making passes across it, our idols running long. We imagine something solid and continuous. But the truth has been harder to hold steady in our minds: "A point of land eroding here, a bayou widening there, a spoil levee sinking a foot over 10 years. In an ecosystem covering thousands of square miles, those losses seemed insignificant. There always seemed to be so much left."

When you live in a state that has absorbed so many people, so many cultures, so many conflicts, it is easy to imagine it is big enough, strong enough to absorb anything, even loss. A friend of a friend said recently that this issue was not such a big deal. "Louisiana will adapt," he said. Someone I didn't know nodded.

In 2014, a survey from America's Wetland Foundation found that nearly three-quarters of Louisiana residents "consider saving the coast to be the most important issue of our lifetime." And yet, it is one we have a lot of trouble wrapping our heads around. So we don't seem to be able to do anything about it.

The truth is there is a plan. In a recent interview, Bob Marshall explains that a $50 billion plan for "marsh creation" is on the table. It will use "slurry pipelines. They dredge sediment out of the river, pump it into some of the sinking basins and just re-create these areas as they once were." Unfortunately, it is a $50 billion plan without $50 billion. There just isn't the political or private will to drop that kind of money unless, as Marshall points out, the worst case scenario has already happened and the crisis is upon us.

And without the wetlands to protect us, without barrier islands doing their job, the next crisis is a big one, and it is just a hurricane away.

My father called me a few days before Katrina hit. "Are you watching the storm?" he said. I had no idea what he was talking about.

It was the first week of school, and I was a new teacher. I'd taught one class as a graduate student, graduated, and then suddenly, somehow I was teaching three composition classes at a university in Hammond and three more in Baton Rouge,

over an hour away. Six classes. I was excited and terrified. And I didn't have much time for television.

My father sounded worried, though. So I turned it on. I know I must have turned it off many times between that moment and the weeks after Katrina hit — I went to work, packed, evacuated, cried, slept, turned my back, refused to watch — still somehow I remember it always being on. I was back in the 24-hour news cycle I'd made a point of shunning.

Things happened quickly. Television maps became the focal point of life. The cone of uncertainty shrank until it was replaced by evacuation lines that shifted and changed color too fast to process. We were an hour away from the mandatory evacuations in New Orleans and the borders of the recommended evacuations were shifting closer, jumping rivers and roads to cover more and more land.

My boyfriend left the decision to me. I was the one who'd already lost everything once, he said. I was the one shaking so hard I could hardly stand.

We left.

And so did everyone else, it seemed. Once again, I was in a storm surge of cars. The traffic was horrible and the air in our Neon was broken. The car was black and the wind would not blow and the cars would not move and the August sun beat us down. The heat was unbearable. Our cat panted and drooled and when we could, we stopped for ice and put it in her cage. I rubbed it against her mouth, begging her to take it for water. We put her in the backseat, out of the glare of the windshield, her carrier buckled in next to the fat computer monitor. As we drove, I replenished the ice, scooping it from the Styrofoam cup we'd filled, unbuckling my seatbelt and swinging my body over the seatback to reach her cage, to tell her she would be okay.

It would have been an easier drive if I had not been filled with panic. If the last home I'd left to escape a category-five storm had been there when I'd gone back.

Hammond did not take a direct hit. And even though New Orleans did, for what now seems like a split second it looked like they would be okay.

And then the levees broke.

And while everyone else watched the never-ending coverage on the television, I cowered, too afraid to look, too afraid to turn away.

When Andrew hit Louisiana, we were staying at my aunt's house in Baton Rouge.

He'd followed us from Miami. After the television told us we couldn't go home, my parents packed us into the car and continued west. So did Andrew. Our paths converged.

He settled down during his trek to Baton Rouge, petering out and then gearing back up once again. According to a 1996 report, Andrew was barely a hurricane by then, but was formidable nonetheless; "its peak wind gusts were still...113 kph (70 mph)," and the tornadoes spinning off it were even stronger.

We huddled in the hallway as he roared and beat against the house, the winds around a hundred miles an hour slower than what was reported to have hit our home in Miami. I only knew the great noise. The numbers would have meant little to me. But 70 miles per hour was plenty strong enough to rip a tree from its roots and throw it against a roof, cleaving a house down the way into two.

No building survived the hurricane that hit Isle Derniere in 1856. *Heart of Louisiana: Last Island* paints a desolate picture of the next day: "As the low-lying dunes emerged from the storm surge, not a single structure, not even a foundation was left on Last Island." This may explain why so few people have heard of it. There is nothing of the past to see there.

The storm submerged the island and for a while there was no land at all, just the rocking Gulf. When the empty land emerged, it was broken and small, a Lazarus land, dead and reborn at the hand of the nameless storm.

Isle Derniere was predominantly a place of leisure, so most of the buildings that disappeared were places of fun, the hotel with its bowling alleys and ballroom, the stables that rented carriages, the gaming hall. Not all were, though. Behind the vacation homes were slave quarters.

The Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1861, five years later. The 13th amendment was ratified in 1865, nine years later. There are stories of slaves who survived the storm. Slaves who would see freedom in their lifetimes. It is easy to imagine that most did not, but the records are not entirely clear. Even the general number of dead fluctuates from article to article, though most numbers hover near 200.

While some of the dead were brought back to Louisiana for burial, Sallenger writes that many were buried in shallow graves on the beach. Others were plundered

by pirates and abandoned to the elements. Either way, their bodies are as forgotten as Last Island.

Today, seagulls swarm the beaches, crowding the dark, wet sand, which is spotted with ocean debris, flotsam and jetsam from the tides. The islands are not barren, nor empty. They can't be described as pristine, but photos and videos show a place which is little more than a series of sandbars, markedly devoid of the marks of civilization: a perfect memorial for the strength of a raging, unhindered storm.

After Andrew, it was weeks before we could leave Baton Rouge and return home. While we waited for the logistics to fall into place, we watched the news. Searching for our neighborhood in the flashing photos, watching the reports became a macabre game. My parents had finally gotten hold of a friend who had word on the state of the house, but there were no cell phone cameras or social media websites back then. There was no easy way to get an actual look at what we still had, what we'd lost.

In every shot, Dade County looked post-apocalyptic. Structures stood, but they were wounded things, mutilated homes missing windows, walls, and roofs, bandaged with leaning plywood sheets and flapping tarps. Mostly we saw the same homes over and over. Footage recycled for impact. There was a house with the message, "Looters beware: woman with pms and a gun" spray-painted across its makeshift repairs, and we laughed every time it flashed on the screen. It wasn't funny, though. The looters were real. The violence was real. The destruction was real.

When we finally made it home, it was with a fifteen-foot trailer in tow. For the next few months, we would sleep there. Our house was totaled, though it stood with all four walls and most of the roof intact.

Every window was blown out, a blast of debris shooting from it as if an explosion had pushed the glass and our belongings outward in a streak across the lawn. Clothes. Toys. Photos. Trinkets. My Barbies. My books. My CDs.

Leaning against our roof was a yellow sailboat that we'd dry-docked on a trailer by the house. At twenty-four feet long and more than 3,000 pounds, it looked like a sunny giant propped up after a hard night at the bar.

There was a sunflower in the yard, and a roofing tile buried in the front door, sea water in the washing machine, mold on the walls. Everything we owned was smashed, rotten, toxic.

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We cleaned out our belongings with shovels. We ate at the Red Cross shelter. We slept in the trailer. We used vouchers to buy clothes. Everything smelled bad.

This is how I remember it, in short sentences that describe the passing of time. Particular days are lost. The National Guard trotting past, shirtless, sometimes singing cadences as they went. I'd moon over them from the bus stop as I waited for my best friend to secretly pick me up.

A Red Beret giving my brother his flashlight, my sister his Oreos.

A girl screaming in class about the constant buzz of the generators.

Stories of dead neighbors.

Slipping a quarter in a payphone to get permission to not come home.

The looter who stole our family pictures.

Crickets chirping as I did homework on the lawn.

The semester after Katrina, a sour faced girl sat in the second row of my class in Hammond. She refused to participate. She gritted her teeth and scowled and muttered. I'm not supposed to admit it, but I hated her. It was hard to concentrate with her constant stream of sass.

During group work, she made things hard for the other students, crossing her arms and turning away, giving short answers filled with hatred and venom. It quickly became too much to ignore. I touched her shoulder.

"I need to talk to you after class," I said.

She snarled.

I let the other students go and sat on the front desk.

"I need you to tell me what's going on with you."

She broke down. She'd lost a family member in Katrina. Another died soon after. A cousin missing since the storm. No home. She hated everything, everyone.

"You're the first," she said.

I didn't understand. And then I did. No one else had even asked. I was her first to reach out with the question and she was my first to answer, the first student I would walk over to counseling that semester, but hers would not be the last hand I held while we waited for a crisis counselor to be free.

I like to say that the weather in Lafayette, where I live today, is milder than Baton Rouge or New Orleans. It is a sort of a mantra that I have picked up. What it means is this: I do not live in a Category 5 town. I'm too far inland for a storm surge. I'm safe. I'll be okay.

None of that is true, though.

According to Jeffery Masters, the director of Meteorology at Weather Underground, "The traditional rule of thumb [is] each 2.7 miles of marsh knocks down the storm surge by one foot." Unfortunately, that marsh is disappearing.

According to *Matter's* new map, Lafayette is getting closer to being a shore every year. The barrier islands, the wetlands, the marshes, the miles of physical protection between this city and the Gulf are disappearing.

The fragile, lacy curve at the border of the nation is failing catastrophically.

If land is an investment, a measure of success, what is this loss? I wonder who we are that we let it happen.