



Photo by Frank McMains

C.E. Richard

The Longest Main Street in the World¹

Traveling south from New Orleans to the Islands, you pass through a strange land into a strange sea, by various winding waterways . . .

—Lafcadio Hearn, from *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (1888)

The Road.

Grand Isle. To get there, you follow LA 1 going south—a long ribbon of roadway unfurling along the west bank of Bayou Lafourche, shadowing every bend and turn of that disabled waterway, from its split with the Mississippi River at Donaldsonville down to where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico and the surrounding marshes along the way. Loose and steady on the steering wheel, my hands know all the coming curves in the road ahead, feeling them in my fingers even before they round into view. I've driven this route more times than I can count.

But, today, I am trying to see it differently. I want to rub from my eyes the dull glaze of familiarity that leads you to think you know a place; the slow-growing cataracts that make it hard to notice the changes seeping into your surroundings so gradually that they escape your attention completely until, all at once, you no longer recognize where you are, in what was once a part of your home.

At more than 430 miles, this old highway is Louisiana's longest, draped diagonally across the state like a ceremonial sash, from the northwest corner above Shreveport down to the southeast corner at Grand Isle, where it halts at the water's edge. I'm traveling to the island to meet again with photographer Frank McMains, a native of South Louisiana like me, and my chief collaborator over the next year in an introspective endeavor to know the coast in a new way.

Frank and I had never met before beginning this work. We have in common an editor who knows the books and films we've each made about Louisiana through the years. Allowing us extraordinary creative latitude, he asked us to try to document what, arguably, could

be the most significant thing to happen here since LaSalle landed and gave a name to this place—the destruction of Louisiana's coast. But after several field excursions and reams of research, Frank and I still don't know how to rightly address the question or record such a grand transformation.

These trips to the water's edge have become a paradoxical sort of pilgrimage, a journey to strange places we already know, to look for something without an idea of what it really is.

Stories.

Right now, however, riding in the passenger seat beside me is my other constant companion in these travels: a stack of papers, prints, and old books—collections of Louisiana literature, a few quite rare, written by authors who, over the course of several centuries, have undertaken the same enterprise, groping for words and images to depict the incomparable setting I am passing through as I journey southward down LA 1.

There is Kate Chopin, of course. But among my books and photocopied stories are also works by Eudora Welty, Frank de Caro, Christopher Hallowell, Harlan Hubbard, Mike Tidwell, Roger Emile Stouff, and John McPhee. There are others, some much older, like the letters of Sister Marie Madeleine Hachard de St. Stanislaus—a young Ursuline nun who left her home of Rouen, France, in 1727, determined to help civilize the people of New Orleans (a labor that still continues), less than ten years after the city's founding. I have Lafcadio Hearn's indispensable novella *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* and a rare copy of *Un Eté à la Grand'Isle (A Summer at Grand Isle)*, in translation, by an overlooked New Orleans Creole author named Adolphe du Quesnay—a gift from one of his descendants, an elderly professor and colleague of mine named Maurice.

Du Quesnay's 1892 novella is an intriguing but profoundly sad little book that few remember or have ever read. The central character, Olivier, is a French émigré on his way to the island on holiday with his Creole bride and their baby. Olivier spends considerable time looking out at the edge of the Gulf on Grand Isle in meditation. He remembers his first glimpse of it with these words:

This vast and gloomy shore was struck on its edge by the powerful shock of the great waves, bouncing on top of one another, hurling themselves

¹ "The Longest Main Street in the World" is excerpted from C.E. Richard's forthcoming collection of essays entitled *Land's End: Field Notes from the 'End of the World.'*

along continuously. Crazyed, the immense foaming waves struck the shore again and again, disbeveled, stretching out . . .

It seemed strange to me when I read that description. I always remembered the waters around the island as green and genial during the summer. Apparently, Olivier arrived at Grand Isle at a time when the surf was especially turbulent. Or perhaps, after reflecting on the place later, having lost his entire family to the sea there, Olivier recognized something in the tides that normally goes unnoticed by most of us. For him, the Gulf was an inscrutable force of relentless rage, “a delirious sea persisting in its struggle against its shores.”

Thinking about the breathtaking destruction that Frank and I have seen occurring along Louisiana’s coastline, I’m inclined to wonder whether Olivier’s losses and terrible grief allowed him to perceive more immediately a fundamental truth about this place. What seems stable, peaceful, even permanent is, in fact, a tremendous tumult, occurring on a scale too large for short-lived creatures like us to see, most of the time. Seemingly suspended in equipoise, I have learned, is a titanic clash of elemental forces much bigger, much older than we realize, fighting for ends we cannot foresee.

Refuge.

Thibodaux, Raceland, Mathews. The road rolls forward through the same sequence of small towns that I remember—Lockport, Larose, Cut Off—strung along the bayou like the smooth-worn beads of an old rosary—Galliano, Golden Meadow, Leeville—familiar villages built by generations of folks who, up until recent times, mostly spoke French, regardless of where their ancestors originated. It’s hard to tell exactly where one little town ends and the next begins, but moving through them, I can recite their names as easily as the bedtime prayers of childhood.

When I was a boy, we used to caravan in carloads down LA 1 with our neighbors, a big family by the name of Vezina, following them to their camp on Grand Isle. Louisiana’s last inhabited barrier island, Grand Isle was the customary refuge for people looking to escape New Orleans for a few days’ vacation. This was a tradition among the citizenry dating back well into the nineteenth century, if not earlier, whether it was to flee the heat, avoid the recurring plagues of yellow fever, or leave behind the strange sense of stifling

oppression there that writers described simply as “the miasma.” The excuses have changed, but that same need to escape the close quarters of New Orleans still wells up in people with no less urgency, and the ritual of retreating to Grand Isle persists today. Driving along Bayou Lafourche this November morning, I am reminded of the many trips we made this way, following the Vezinas between the city and the island, when I was a child.

And, as I look around now, with the drone of the roadway under my wheels, it would be easy to allow myself to slip into hypnotic nostalgia, imagining that nothing has really changed. Shrimp boats still dock here. Ships are still built at the Bollinger yards. The old folks still toddle across the road in summer to cut okra and eggplant from well-tended rows in the swatch of rich alluvial earth that lies between the bayou and the highway. Here and there, a few grand plantation homes still hide in the oak shade, set back just shy of busy LA 1.

But things are not the same.

This Place.

Visiting the marshes not far from here, the nineteenth-century writer Lafcadio Hearn sensed “the weight of the Silences, the solemnities of sea and sky in these low regions where all things seem to dream.”

Those who’ve lived amid Louisiana’s coastlands will know what he means, and if they’ve read Hearn’s stories, they’ll likely concede that he comes closer than most to getting it right. But not quite. Always *almost*.

Ceaselessly changing, Louisiana’s coast is a place unlike any other, stubbornly defying the grasp of description and oozing out from between the fingers of anyone trying to firm it up in words or fix it in pictures. It’s a place that won’t keep still.

Differing from the rest of the American shoreline, Louisiana’s intricate coast can’t be defined as any neat border or narrow band of sandy beach keeping the sea segregated from the land. Instead, our coast is a liminal place reaching deep inland, far from the lapping of the Gulf and the smell of salt. Here is where lines dissolve and distinctions blur. It’s where one of the world’s Four Great Rivers, cocoa-colored and freighted with earth collected from across the continent, pushes itself outward against the blue of the sea. Along the way,

the Mississippi is unburdened of this dirt, spreading a delta whose lower reaches are never wholly dry land, neither entirely water; nearing its end, what flows down and out is no longer fully fit to be called a river, nor rightly named the ocean yet either. Louisiana's coastlands are an intermarriage of differences, far more syncretic than even the mix of peoples who've settled into it together like layers of sediment; a confluence of contrasts, land and water, salt water and sweet, merging so gradually that it's never quite clear where one begins and the other ends, like lingering between wakefulness and sleep, and where, true enough, together, all things seem to dream.

Travel the length of LA 1 along the Lafourche, follow it all the way to its finish on Grand Isle, and soon you realize that our coast is less a place than it is a process, constantly washing itself away and building itself back.

At least, that's how it had been for a long time. But things are not the same.

Loss.

Louisiana's coastlands are vanishing from under the feet of a people who've made their home here much longer than they have called themselves Americans.

The seas are rising, the land is sinking, and this state has ceded more territory in the last century than our country would ever tolerate losing otherwise without going to war.

There is no question about this. These things are not in dispute.

The matter of Louisiana's coastal crisis has not suffered the kind of blind denial of science that still beleaguers policymakers grappling with climate change, nor has it been cynically manipulated as a wedge issue to win elections. Evidence of the problem is abundant and conclusive; it has been faithfully reported; and there is growing public awareness of this slow-motion catastrophe, not only here but, increasingly, in the national media as well. Stacks of data about coastal erosion have been well represented in compelling statistics, slick graphics, convincing forecasts. More people than ever now know, for instance, that Louisiana is losing 25 to 35 square miles of land per year. We've all heard more than once that current erosion rates will submerge another 640,000 acres by 2050. School kids routinely inform us in their oral reports that this is an area roughly equivalent to

the size of Rhode Island.

Most everyone now acknowledges that Louisiana's coastline is crumbling away into the Gulf at an alarming rate. Given our tradition of rancorous politics, I'm amazed by this rare show of universal consensus. Stranger still to me, however, is that it often appears matched by an equally unanimous indifference.

These are the things I think about as I look around at what I pass, making my way south on LA 1, down toward Grand Isle and the "delirious sea" where the road reaches its end.

Abundance.

Across the bayou on the eastern bank, the fields are solid walls of green, tall brakes of sugarcane topping out at ten feet or more. November is grinding season, the time when the cane is cut, and I know that when I come this way again in a few days, driving north back from the island, it's likely that the big yellow combines will have come and carved away those blocks of impenetrable green, leaving just vacant space.

Earlier today, I slowly motored past an old man browsing the leaves under a stand of tall trees, blown bare by early November wind. In his hand was a stick the length of a cane that he poked and jabbed as he ambled the grounds. The tip of the stick was cleverly fitted with an odd aluminum scoop. In the other hand was a plastic grocery sack, bulging and round.

I knew what he was doing. He was picking pecans, as old men seem to do everywhere in South Louisiana, much of which is thickly littered with them at this time of year. It's an effortless occupation. Except for the darting tip of his stick, he hardly seemed to move at all, plucking up pecans with the scoop he'd fashioned. In my mirror, I glimpsed him pausing to empty his contraption into the plastic sack, before resuming the serious business of gathering up the bounty that had dropped down all around overnight. Within an hour, I guessed, he'd have as much as he could carry. Tomorrow, he will be back.

The Bayou.

Gazing through my windshield at the black glassy surface of Bayou Lafourche, wondering how to describe it, I find myself fighting

back the temptation for words like “tranquil” and “serene” to emerge. That’s because I know that it isn’t true. Rather than “peaceful,” this bayou is better called *paralyzed*.

In the beginning, it wasn’t called any of those things. It was known by most as *La Fourche des Chetimaches*; sometimes it appeared on British and American maps under the name Chetimachas River in the mid-1700s when their soldiers and scouts came snooping around the rival colony of Louisiana. Those old maps show that the waterway was dotted with populous settlements built by the Indians known today as the Chitimacha, as well as other tribes. The U.S. Census tells us that Indian descendants still reside here, making up the largest share of the population in most of the towns along the bayou, after whites.

When visitors hear local folks refer to “the longest Main Street in the world” running through their hometowns of Cut Off or Galliano or Golden Meadow, many assume they’re talking about LA 1, the highway that links them all. This is incorrect. To the people who live here, it is the bayou that connects them each to another, not the road.

At more than a hundred miles long, Lafourche is—quite literally in French—a fork of the Mississippi River, branching off at Donaldsonville, winding its way southward through Belle Rose and Thibodaux, through Lockport to Leeville, ever widening along the way. But even as the bayou broadens in its descent toward the Gulf, the sprawling sedimentary strip of solid ground that it built as its banks on either side steadily contracts, narrowing to nearly nothing around Golden Meadow. All along the bayou’s broad upper shoulders, European, Acadian, and African settlers cultivated their crops and assembled their villages, much like their Indian neighbors had; these grew to become today’s towns. But just beyond this diminishing strip of dry ground there is only soft marsh; a vast expanse of sun-blasted grass that’s continually thinned by the pull and push of the tides. By the time Bayou Lafourche finally empties itself into the Gulf at Belle Pass, it has frayed out into those surrounding marshes through a tightening maze of channels, canals, and tiny capillaries—all pulsing invisibly, once, with the same life the bayou derived from its source, the Mississippi.

Levees and Controls.

At one time, the waters of Bayou Lafourche must have looked very different from the inert stretch I see now. Englishmen, after all, thought highly enough of it to call it a river on their maps, and the French regarded it as close kin to the Father of Waters. It was a strategic prize battled over by Union and Confederate forces. Then, in 1905, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers amputated this arm of the big river. To control flooding, the Corps dammed the Mississippi’s flow into Lafourche at Donaldsonville, walling off the river with a tall new levee. The bayou was left to drain away into little more than a ditch. And, like the occlusion of a vital artery, the Corps’ levee also stanchied the circulation of fresh water and rich sediments that continuously fed the estuaries, filled the marshes, and fanned out new land down to the edge of the open sea.

The first ones to question the wisdom of this move were the tens of thousands of people who lived down the bayou from Donaldsonville. They depended on the Lafourche as the source of their drinking water. Although their towns no longer flooded as much, it’s true, their bayou had become like something left unburied outside the city walls.

So, in 1950, the Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District was founded, and pumps were constructed at Donaldsonville to pull water up from the Mississippi and push it down once more into the stagnant bayou. It was enough to satisfy the thirsty towns, and even if the water in the Lafourche didn’t move anymore, at least it was still deep enough to dock towboats and shrimping skiffs. All was well again. Well enough, anyway. For now.

It would be a long time before anyone noticed what was happening away from the bayou’s banks —out past the back of town, beyond the cane fields growing on the outskirts of solid earth that the bayou had built long ago. Unseen, or unremarked at least, the marshes were choked off, starving, and rapidly starting to drown under the invading Gulf.

Trade and Commerce.

If Bayou Lafourche boasts being known among locals as “the longest Main Street in the world,” then I suppose LA 1 can take

pride in the name it's been given by Congress: "High Priority Corridor."

Admittedly, not very colorful. Even for Congress.

Still, of all America's highways, LA 1 is among only sixty-six to be federally designated by that title. Civic leaders in lower Lafourche Parish prefer to call it "America's Access to Energy."

That's because the narrow road I'm on is the only land route to Port Fourchon and the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP), which, together, constitute the nucleus of American energy production in the Gulf of Mexico. With supertankers coming from around the world to offload oil, this port complex sits like a bloated spider at the center of a vast, invisible web of pipeline that moves fuel to the nation's refineries. Fully 18 percent of our country's total supply of oil and gas depends on this place, and it is connected to the rest of the American mainland by only the fragile strand of LA 1.

The Department of Homeland Security conducted a study in 2011 to predict the consequences of a 90-day shutdown of Port Fourchon if LA 1 were to be washed out by an especially bad hurricane. The report concluded that the interruption would ripple through the country's entire gross domestic product with losses measured in the billions of dollars and would significantly shrink domestic oil and gas supplies for ten years.

I have no reason to doubt these things are true.

Other Trade and Commerce.

All along the road to Galliano, I've seen hand-painted signs tacked to telephone poles, lettered with just a word or two, spelled correctly more often than not: *Pecans. Shrimp. Satsumas. Mustard Greens. Grapefruit. Oysters.* Maybe *Chickens 4 Sale.* Under each are local phone numbers. Often, the signs last longer than the produce, and so even now, in November, the weathered cardboard keeps a record of the previous season's yield: *Figs. Fresh Corn. Garfish. Merlitons. Live Crabs.*

Just as it was when I was a kid, the Lafourche country advertises its abundance along the roadside. For the people who live here, the land and water can be counted on to give them more than they need; the rest they'll trade with their neighbors, or sell to passersby driving LA 1.

I would stop if I could, buy a sack of sweet, easy-to-peel satsumas

to take home to my kids. But I know that I'm already running late as it is.

Cemeteries.

Passing St. Joseph's Church in Galliano, I see the raised graves and whitewashed crypts behind the wrought-iron fence, arrayed in neat rows and alleyways like a little neighborhood of homes. Even without slowing to look, I know that the tombs are all freshly swept and adorned with yellow chrysanthemums and flickering votives; it's early November, and people in these parts still carry on the traditions of *la fête de la Toussaint*. All Saints, all souls. Here, the dead are interred in vaults above ground, kept close to the living, and the remains of the generations are piled atop one another inside each family's crypt.

And I know, too, that if I were to stop and inspect the inscriptions on the graves, I would find my own surname over and over. A great many of the people who first settled the Lafourche country in the 1700s arrived here in exile, descended from the same French Acadian families that gave me my name; forking into a different tributary, to be sure, but flowing from the same source around the same time.

Before that and since then, many others, varying in number and kind, trickled into this territory from different directions, leaving themselves on the landscape in layer upon layer, lineage upon lineage, building up a unique people unlike any other Americans. Their society, like the far-off swell of anomalous mounds spotted unexpectedly amid endless flat marshes, has managed to rise above the surrounding sameness of sea level. But only a little.

Measurements.

Maybe it's our failure to grasp what's really being lost.

That's what I'm wondering now as I move through Galliano. White-hulled shrimp boats sit docked by the roadside, their arms up and stripped of their nets for the coming winter. I remember reading that, over the next few decades, the erosion of our estuaries will cause a loss of more than a half-billion dollars to commercial fishermen here, every year. But I have no idea how much money that really is, or what this figure means.

The loss of our coastlands is being measured in miles. We calculate the changing acreage of the marshlands, look at the movement of lines on the map, watch color graphics on the websites shift from green to blue over time. Fully 40 percent of the nation's wetlands are reckoned within Louisiana's coastal countryside, for instance, but the rate of erosion puts 90 percent of America's wetland loss happening here. Powerful supercomputers are used to chew down Big Data to make these measurements, to predict the future.

This is important work. I understand what these numbers signify. But I want to understand their significance. What I am looking for, I think, is little data. Not the big picture. Small sketches.

At some point, this crisis becomes personal.

More Levees and Controls.

Down farther, south of Galliano, below Golden Meadow, just outside the city limits, I feel the slight rise of the road under me, up an artificial hill. Stretching off to my left and to my right is the South Lafourche Levee, a low hummock crowned by a little wall of concrete and corrugated steel. It reaches out inconspicuously into the marshes and rings the settled areas along the Lafourche, up to this point. A narrow opening in the wall allows LA 1 to move through on its way southward. Next to the road, the bayou has its own opening to squeeze through too—the Leon Theriot Lock.

As I top the little rounded crest of the levee, I think I spot the heavy iron gate that surely hides behind this wall, resting on wheels that allow it to roll forward on short notice and shut this opening when the waters rise. Short and hunched, the levee seems like such a small thing, a bump in the road rising under my car, and the wall appears thin and insignificant. But even tucked away, it's the ponderous iron gate that draws my eyes, and I know that the dip down I feel now, back onto the flat of the other side, means that I have passed outside the protections we have made for ourselves here.

Fortresses.

Coastal Louisiana was the most heavily fortified place in America, right up until the time we stopped building seaside fortresses at all. That was around the start of the Civil War. Today, the region is

littered with the abandoned red brick remains of the castles Americans built to defend themselves against foreign enemies that never arrived.

The road now is long and flat and straight ahead of me, all the way down until I reach unguarded little Leeville on my way to the island. With its portentous iron gate, the South Lafourche Levee falls away and flattens into the horizon behind me. I've driven through that opening in the wall many times without paying it any attention at all, just like I used to ride my bike atop the levee around Lake Pontchartrain as a kid, never really noticing that, in New Orleans, I lived inside a walled city. It's easy enough to overlook. But the urgent work of building fortresses, ramparts, and redoubts to defend this place has been an ongoing effort, I realize, that never really ended at all.

The Marsh.

It will be good to see Frank again.

This stretch of LA 1 is unpeopled. Outside the levee, the road plunges southward alongside Bayou Lafourche with barely a bend or turn, a band of blacktop trimmed by crushed white shell on either shoulder. The marsh spreads in all directions, interlaced with a maze of adjoining waterways, lakes, and lagoons. The grassy islands in between them were often described by visitors as "trembling prairie." I've been told that's because the mat of roots and muddy earth underneath gives the deceptive appearance of being land when, in fact, these islands are prone to float.

In trying to describe the marsh to his readers, Hearn writes, "It will seem to you that the low land must have once been rent asunder by the sea, and strewn about the Gulf in fantastic tatters."

Coastal Louisiana has always been a ragged place, but never more than now. Dredged, crisscrossed with pipeline and cut up with canals, the grassland falls away in great patches to leave behind bald spots of open water.

This area below Golden Meadow was apparently never fit for permanent settlement. There are only camps here. Or what used to be camps when I was a kid. Now they are all deserted; the glass gone from their windows, tin roofs rusted over. Empty shells of white clapboard. Some collapse inward on themselves atop their tall stilted legs. Others look as if what little land there was has now abandoned them

altogether, leaving the hulks to sit stupidly in the middle of the channel.

This place seems inescapably lonely to me now. It never struck me that way as a child, riding behind the Vezina family on our way to vacation at the beach. But I suppose this quality has always been here, part of its nature. Again, I think of Du Quesnay's character of Olivier in *A Summer at Grand Isle*. Although he spent only one season in this place, he seems to have seen things in these marshes that I missed for much of my life:

These waters are beautiful: the entire landscape breathes serenity and vastness. But the absence of sails makes it seem as if this quiet and magnificent region has been abandoned. Traveling through the region, one's heart tightens, one has a painful feeling of isolation, and it is as if one were at the ends of the earth.

I have since noticed, however, a tendency among people living in remote places throughout coastal Louisiana to describe their home as located "at the end of the world." Isleño fishermen from around Delacroix and Ycloskey. Oystermen whose Slavic ancestors settled lower Plaquemines Parish. Acadians here at the bottom of Bayou Lafourche, and even the cattle ranchers of Cameron Parish far to the west—they all conclude with the same joke when you ask them for directions: just drive until you reach the end of the world. Before this trip, I never considered the apocalyptic undertones of that phrase for a people watching their home vanish around them.

Choices.

There is, of course, one change to come to this place that cannot be overlooked or imagined away in nostalgic fog. When you arrive in Leeville, the last stop before Grand Isle, the traveler is presented with a choice. You can either go by way of the old road, or you can take the newly built, elevated highway. Both are still identified as LA 1. Either way, it's not far from this place where, at last, the Lafourche and the road will part, with the bayou bending westward around the back side of Port Fourchon and the highway hooking east, eventually to catch the upslope of the islands.

When locals began to notice that marsh waters were washing over LA 1, deeper and more often, a couple of studies were commissioned to understand what was happening and what could be done.

The conclusions were clear: the land on which LA 1 was built—indeed *all* the land in the entire region—was sinking lower and lower, a natural phenomenon known as subsidence. Meanwhile, sea levels were rising, which meant higher tides, more water flooding into the marshes from the Gulf, and seawater washing over the roadway from time to time when the winds were right. This merely confirmed what most folks had long ago observed with their own eyes. What surprised many, however, about these studies is that they proved it was all happening much, much faster than anyone realized.

By the late 2020s, the researchers showed, big parts of the highway would be inundated and closed on a monthly basis, cutting off the industrial energy hub of Port Fourchon and, beyond it, the thousands of people who live, work, and play in the vicinity of Grand Isle. According to officials, "The existing LA Highway 1 between Golden Meadow and Leeville has less than 40 years of life left before being covered in water and impassible for more than 300 days per year."

I slow my car, turn to the right away from the old road, and pause to pay my two-dollar toll before riding the full rise of the elevated new LA 1. It's a fine, smooth cement bridge that climbs more than 22 feet above the marsh. Allegedly. To me, it looks to be quite a bit higher in some places. I'm not certain. It's a very strange road. You see strange things. Or, to be precise, you see things strangely.

The View from Here.

Even on a clear November morning, it's dizzying and disconcerting up here on the new LA 1. At some point, I must have crossed over Bayou Lafourche without knowing it. Driving south on this road, following the course of the water's flow most of the way, the bayou is always firmly fixed to your left. But now, somehow, the Lafourche has materialized on my right, and I can't be sure exactly when or how it happened, but it has, and after a moment the bayou begins its westward turn, away from me and toward its unseen end at Belle Pass, while LA 1 continues onward south and slightly east.

I glance out the passenger's side window and gaze over the wide spread of the landscape. To see the marsh from any elevation, I find, is to lose all sense of proportion and perspective; my mind is tricked, and for a moment I'm entirely unsure how high up I really am: each little waterlogged tatter of ragged grassland below, each smooth black

mirror of lagoon, could be a great acreage, it seems. Or it could be about the size of my bath mat at home. I don't know. Looked at from above, any small parcel of marsh looks like a microcosm of the larger coast, identical to the images I've seen from high-flying aerial photographers and satellites.

I noticed this trick of perception some years back, long before the new bridge was built. Once, while working on a student film in graduate school, I sent my cinematographer to climb to the top of the observation tower inside the state park at Grand Isle and pan the camera over the thickets of low scrub and mangrove that grew below. It proved to be an amazing camera illusion—the best part of a really bad movie, in fact—because everyone in the audience was persuaded that those low bushes and shrubs were the island's oak groves, captured as aerial photography from a helicopter.

When American naval officers used to pursue the pirate Jean Lafitte through these very same Baratavia waters, right here below me, they would become hopelessly disoriented and lost more often than not. They reported that they would be close behind the fugitive all night when, suddenly, he would turn and vanish like a ghost in the fog, and the way they'd come no longer seemed the same behind them. That sounds irrational, I know. But I've gotten myself lost in the swamps too, and I've come to wonder if maybe it's because, somehow, there's something about Louisiana's coastal marshes that interferes with one's natural sense of scale and relative dimension.

And perhaps that's partly what baffles us in trying to grasp the erosion of our coast, a place of trembling prairie, where nothing stays fixed or certain for very long, but is prone to float.

The Road.

"There's something weird about that new bridge," Frank commented to me once when we first met at Grand Isle. We were eating shrimp poboyos at a little local grocery, getting to know each other, and chatting about the routes we'd taken to get there.

"It's like there's always a slight incline ahead of you and you can't quite see what's over it," I suggested. "Some kind of optical illusion, I guess."

Frank nodded and ate his sandwich. He told me he'd photographed the 11.2-mile high-rise bridge while it was still under

construction, and he remembered unfinished portions where the pavement halted abruptly in midair. "Now I sometimes get this creepy feeling like I've turned onto an interchange that they didn't finish and I'm about to drive off the end."

He's right. The road is unfamiliar under me here. This bright white stretch of concrete, high above the marshes, is the only part of LA 1 that I haven't known all my life, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm about to arrive at the unexpected edge of something, dropping off into nothing.



Galliano

Golden Meadow

Leeville

Port Fourchon

Grand Isle

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90° 100°