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## CROSSING

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Out on the open water, finally, they see all  
seven deltas and their depositions,  
mouth bars and inlets

running like childhood scars across the coast.

All night while the shrimp run  
and into the next hot day,  
the last generation sits on Igloos

picking shrimp, following the ones before them  
till the nets are empty, passing the time  
coaxing loggerheads close, while bored porpoises

drift, with no wake to spin.

A certain quiet fills the hull  
for a proper discernment  
of the shore, a certain sweat while they scan

for the new order of things,  
which is the old order renewed, things

moving swiftly but weighed immovable  
in their eyes. Someone might forget  
to declare “good” or “very good” or “evil”

as they drift between their last breath, their burial,  
and this third death that frees the soul,  
this idle wisdom ignorant of its crossing.

Who knows what God will breathe out  
after our last breath is drawn?

Some might see estuaries that unite  
the brackish bath and fluvial birth,  
sandy islands that split the tide,

cypresses both grasping the bank and stretching  
their slender shadows on the channel

when God remembers the interstice  
of our muddy ossuary and our exhalations—  
cordgrass and bulrush, bulltongue  
and shellfish, sawgrass and maidencane—

a white coast of grass and salt and dragonflies.

Don't seal me in a marble card catalog  
to which no borrowers come.  
Let the ferry go. Let me join  
the trawlers and gather my broad nets alone.

- Martha Serpas

I have always liked the accoutrements of strenuous outdoor activities—boots, backpacks, pocketknives, flashlights—but I am a poser. Outdoor sports look too much like work and too much like a plunge into the unknown. (I never cared for roller coasters as a child.) So I was somewhat stunned by the epic headwinds we encountered kayaking in the fall of 2011. Pride can be a useful deadly vice, though. Only the refusal to be humiliated in front of my students got me back to the dock.

One unseasonably chilly morning we planted marsh grass with the Audubon Society. (I had on a very convincing Carhartt jacket.) We hesitated over the digging. Is this the designated spot? Are we digging deep enough? Is the pattern we were instructed to follow being maintained? We worried, as if we could stop the erosion ourselves if we could just do it right. We took the ferry toward Anahuac. Another harsh wind and a dousing. We get more and more acquainted with the bay. These students were patient and enduring, and challenged, though, when we tried to get out of the van at High Island for a different view of the water. The mosquitoes swarmed us the way filings race to a magnet. When I was a kid, we only encountered parasites that huge in the swamp. Now because of coastal erosion, they have marched ten miles north of my hometown of Galliano, Louisiana. Saltwater has chased them into our bayous as it overwhelms desalination plants. Poison gas couldn't have gotten us back into the van any faster.

It seems the students grow to love the marsh, the beach, the dirty water. Almost everyone welcomes pelicans into new poems. How unselfconscious the big birds are, flying like rusty loppers and diving with little composure. We are drawn to the successes they achieve despite their awkwardness. The poets sense that the Gulf has to be taken fully, on its own terms, before it will offer its own metaphor, or better before it can be revealed as a mystery that encompasses us all.

Ultimately, compassion is the goal, and that requires imagination. I must imagine what the undefiled land looked like, smelled like, even what a loggerhead feels struggling in a net. What black tip sharks think of the bloated turtle as it floats on the water. Exactly when the backshore became the shoreline. It's a kind of an Ignatian Spiritual Exercise. Compose the scene with all your senses. Sit with it, reflect on it, and let the immersion be to your gain. Let your imagination transform you. This is no disrespect to genuine emotion, no failure to perceive reality. Pathetic fallacy should be scorned by poets,

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we are taught, but why are we so often drawn to understand ourselves through nature or nature through ourselves? It is sloppy observation and a closed mind that abuses our connection to life's full expression, not the impulse toward relation. We are human: What we can't see ourselves in, we don't see.

This past spring Eric and Zach invited me to ride in the Blessing of the Fleet in Kemah. I felt as if I'd been invited to a celebrity wedding. I imagined the Blessings of my childhood: Regal trawlers and oyster boats—one with a polished mahogany deck—jammed into the bayou, lots of fried chicken and shrimp, gumbo, accordion music, my father sweaty with a sweaty can of Schlitz. The priest praying and shaking the wand towards us as we pass, and all hopeful for both seasons—shrimp and hurricane.

I imagined the Discovery—Eric and Zach's boat—flying crisp streamers and maybe a funny flag. When I arrived, boats were few. Eric and Zach had boiled 10/20 shrimp for us, ritual food for the trip. The feeling was happy but not euphoric, except for one loud boat practicing the Dionysian art of abandon. Speakers shot out music, partiers wore costumes, and everyone danced. A stranger once told me, "At the Last Judgment, God will ask how we liked the party She threw us."

The ride to the Boardwalk was so short we chugged it twice, the second time coming close enough to the pilings that I high-fived a woman in the crowd. The priest was a tiny dot on the Boardwalk. I saw her hand shake the wand, but I couldn't hear what she said, the prayer over the first boat, no doubt, covering us all. **C**



× *RIGHT* Photo by Ship  
Channel pilot Lou Vest.



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The photographs on this spread (except when noted) were taken by Harbeer Sandhu as a participant of Shrimp Boat Projects' program, the Regional Artist Exchange. Sandhu's full piece on the experience is available at [texphrastic.com](http://texphrastic.com). Created by Eric Leshinsky and Zach Moser, Shrimp Boat Projects is a conceptual art work that provides a platform for viewing the Houston region from the deck of a shrimp boat working the waters of Galveston Bay. Participants were invited to join them on their daily shrimping trips beginning at 3 a.m., spending the day helping to sort the catch and experiencing a particular view of the region

which they believe affords a true understanding of its nuance and complexity. Toward providing this platform, Eric and Zach have spent the past three years becoming full-time commercial fishermen, to the point of it becoming their sole livelihood. They bought a boat in early 2011, spent seven months rehabbing it, and spent the last two seasons fishing full-time. While engaged in this personal transformation that began with a residency at the University of Houston Mitchell Center for the Arts, they have exposed the processes and investigations of the work through public events, classes, exhibitions, and commerce.

