



× IMAGINE AN UNDEFINED LAND

REFLECTIONS OF A POET ON THE GULF COAST

BY MARTHA SERPAS
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LEFT "GPS Tracks, April 20–October 4, 2013" shows in black the routes Eric Leshinsky and Zach Moser took as they shrimped Galveston Bay. The map is composed of a satellite image from Google and a recent NOAA nautical chart.
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MY ALMA MATER IS THE GULF OF MEXICO. EVERYTHING I KNOW I LEARNED FROM THE NEARLY IMPENETRABLE SALT WATER: THAT THE SAME JETTY WHICH ALLOWS US TO EXPLORE THE WAVES CAN MASK A VICIOUS UNDERTOW; THAT WHAT FLOATS BY CAN STING; THAT FLOATING IN BATHWATER UNDER AN APPROVING SKY IS EVERY KID'S FREEDOM; THAT TAR BALLS CLING EVEN WHEN THEY AREN'T ON TV; THAT BREAKERS LAUGH AND TOUSLE; THAT REDFISH AND DRUM GRILL QUICKLY; THAT ICE BAG IS A GUY WHO RETURNS TO THE DOCK WITH NOTHING IN HIS COOLER BUT EMPTY PLASTIC; THAT BLUE CRABS LOVE CHICKEN NECKS; AND THAT THOSE WHO WORK OFFSHORE SEVEN-AND-SEVEN CHOOSE TO FISH EVEN BEFORE THEY RETIRE. REAL WISDOM.



× ABOVE [Eric Leshinsky](#)
[picks through a catch.](#)

I teach what still puzzles me, and ideally students puzzle with me. Those students, at the University of Houston, are creative writers from all over the country. They love Montrose—so do I, but it breaks my heart to think of them coming to UH and leaving without knowing where they really are: what was here before the tragically hip coffeehouses and the bars, before even the museums or the Medical Center (that mammoth shelter dedicated to health yet bordered by unredressed environmental degradation). Before all that was the Gulf—its barrier islands (what’s left of them); its distributaries (Bayou Lafourche, my home, was once the Mississippi’s primary outlet); and its seafood and oil stores once undisturbed by human insatiability.

Where you are affects who you are (and what you write) without your always realizing it. Of course, when some storm provokes the Gulf, awareness is unavoidable: Your life stops. After the preparation (please

pick up your yard furniture, Houston), the water jugs, canned food, plywood boards, and batteries or solar radios, there is the waiting. If you stay, your house should be weighted against the wind by family, friends, cards, and beer. Board games and candles in mayonnaise jar lids for the kids. Some of us find it shameful to admit, but hurricanes can be fun, restorative. What should I be doing? What errand should I be running? What calls need making? Nothing and none. Only togetherness, meditation, and prayer. Food from that silo of a freezer emptied for a cookout with neighbors. The moment of fear-tinged equilibrium between the before and the after.

I’m thinking about two kinds of groundedness here: the importance of place as made clear in memory through the “enhancement of distance” (Updike) and groundedness in the present through free choice or through the arm-twist of necessity. The images of our

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past can serve as emotional gravity. Certainly, bodily memory of our sensory impressions inform who we are. (I now understand our minds can revise the images in our memories, but not the physical sensations that originally accompanied them.) We were, and we still are. The tomorrow we spoke of has come after all and another could very well come again. The other kind of groundedness is dependent on our attention. "The art of our necessities is strange. Which makes vile things precious" (*King Lear*). Certainly a tornado renders the fallen, once overlooked telephone poles precious the way exhaust fumes change our perception of August's oppressive air. We notice what survives and mourn what has been dismembered—even the ugliest house, the diseased tree, the scrub brush marsh.

So I take my students to Galveston. Some have never even been on a boat let alone trawled. When I first met the artists Zach Moser and Eric Leshinsky, they looked like trawlers to me: pocket T-shirts, sunburns so red they turned to roux, fingernails lined with diesel. But they said they felt like interlopers, wanting to get inside this singular vocation and free a living work of art. They called their vision the Shrimp Boat Projects: "... the project melds the daily work aboard a commercial shrimp boat ... to inspire the creation of art that can more effectively communicate a knowledge of the Houston region that is derived from a true connection to the landscape." UH's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts supported the idea with vigor, as the Center now supports my continued efforts to offer students an artistic connection to the Gulf.

After Eric and Zach rehabbed a docked shrimp

boat and started trawling regularly, they invited us to join them on Dickinson Bayou predawn. At that hour the water and sky seem like halves of a gray curtain about to part as the trawlers hoist the nets—all mystery and anticipation about the day's harvest. We hear the chug of the engines and little else. The seagulls are quiet for now. They know when to ask for a freebie. Not to be out-Cajuned by my new friends, I show my crew how to pick shrimp. Once the nets are emptied into plastic baskets, I dump them in a large wooden tray and separate the shrimp from the grass, minnows, squid, and crabs (carefully grabbed at their abdomens). I take great care to toss everything alive overboard. (My "care" is not necessary to the process, slows things down, and seems futile, if not sentimental.) I don't use a net, but chase and pinch the slimy silverfish until I can "save" them, too. Finally, I give up and chuck the remaining small fish up to the gulls. Why be a hypocrite and ignore that everyone's meal has a cost?

Before we head out, though, the students get some grounding in ecogeology and Galveston's history from Sally Antrobus's book *Galveston Bay*, Jim Blackburn's *The Book of Texas Bays*, and other texts. How did the Gulf and its shores take shape? We watch *Veins in the Gulf*, a documentary by Elizabeth Coffman and Ted Hardin, about coastal erosion in southern Louisiana. In the aerial shots, what's left of the land looks like floating velour, and the barrier islands are margined with oily boom. All the Gulf States share the same degradation: lost bird migration, hundreds of species imperiled, oil gushers, impaired marsh filtration and storm surge absorption, reduced economic activity, depleted seafood harvest, lost jobs, lost

beauty. Because of the unnaturally channeled and polluted Mississippi River (and some catastrophic early twentieth-century political hubris), Louisiana suffers most. I'm honored my poetry shows up in the film, my small contribution to encouraging awareness. It's invaluable to see your sacred ground through someone else's eyes.

We focus on other Gulf Coast poets, like Darrell Bourque and John Gorman, and other American poets who have written powerful poems about the shore: Elizabeth Bishop, Amy Clampitt, Hart Crane, Walt Whitman, and many more. Most of these compositions are meditations on connectedness, change, and loss. These students venturing into the marsh are primarily poets although we get the occasional fiction writer, painter, or photographer. Experiencing the intersections between the art forms has been powerful. Each artist's sense perception overlaps and diverges. We use similar vocabulary—image, composition, form, representation, context, discovery—and challenge each other.

We meet up with Artist Boat, a group dedicated to integrating the arts and sciences with exploration of coastal habitats, and kayak out to a slender island for sketching and painting. Some in our group collect debris for installation projects. Our guide identifies wax myrtle and anhinga, flora and fauna of all kinds. We look back at the refineries on the Channel and marvel—hubris, necessity, paradox? We take pictures and tell stories of our other encounters on other coasts. As the sharing of wider artistic practice deepens our poetic composition, sharing observations of other coasts help us "see" the Gulf Coast more vibrantly.