



TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY J HENRY FAIR

The Gulf Between Us

*Stories of terror and beauty from the
world's largest accidental offshore oil disaster*

THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE BEEN TOLD:

◆ April 20, 2010: the Macondo well blowout occurred approximately five thousand feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, causing the BP-Transocean drilling platform Deepwater Horizon to explode, killing eleven workers and injuring seventeen others.

◆ 5 million barrels of crude oil were released into the sea from the BP blowout. On average, sixty thousand barrels a day were escaping from the well before the gusher was capped on July 15, 2010.

◆ 632 miles of Gulf Coast shoreline have been oiled: 365 miles in Louisiana; 110 miles in Mississippi; 69 miles in Alabama; and 88 miles in Florida.

◆ There have been 411 controlled burns on the surface of the sea, killing hundreds of sea turtles and untold numbers of dolphins. The number of deaths has been greatly underreported.

◆ Four hundred species of wildlife are threatened by the spill, including marine life from plankton to whales, dolphins, sea turtles, tuna, and shrimp; dozens of species of birds,

including brown pelicans and piping plovers; land animals such as the gray fox and white-tailed deer; and amphibians, the alligator, and the snapping turtle.

- ◆ 8 million feet of absorbent boom have been used to contain the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico; 3 million feet of containment boom have also been set around islands and shorelines for protection.

- ◆ 2 million gallons of a dispersant called Corexit have been applied on and beneath the surface of the sea to break up the oil. It is produced by Nalco Holding Company, which has corporate ties to BP and ExxonMobil. The EPA, on May 20, 2010, gave BP twenty-four hours to find a less toxic alternative. Corexit's known toxicity, acknowledged following its use in the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, was denied by BP. The EPA's request was ignored.

- ◆ On May 25, the EPA gave BP a directive to scale back their spraying of the sea with dispersants. The Coast Guard overlooked the EPA's edict and granted BP seventy-four exemptions in forty-eight days, essentially rubber-stamping their continued routine use of Corexit.

- ◆ Defense Secretary Robert Gates authorized 17,500 National Guard troops "to fight the massive oil spill," alongside an army of 42,500 individuals paid by BP to protect and clean up vital shorelines in the Gulf of Mexico. Over 5,300 "vessels of opportunity" have registered with BP, captains with their own boats being paid to look for oil.

- ◆ August 5, 2010: BP officials reported a permanent stop to the spill. Crews used a "static well kill" to plug the gusher with drilling mud and then concrete. Two relief wells at depths of 17,864 feet and 15,963 feet are being drilled to ensure a secure and final closure of the well.

- ◆ Amid reports of the oil in the Gulf being nearly gone, an article in the August 19 issue of *Science* describes the presence of a plume of hydrocarbons at least twenty-two miles long and more than three thousand feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, residue from the Macondo well blowout. The plume was said to be moving in a southwesterly direction at a rate of about 6.5 kilometers a day.

I AM ANGRY. I AM OUTRAGED. And I am in love with this beautiful, blue planet we call home.

This story in the Gulf of Mexico is not a new story. Living in the American West, I understand the oil and gas industry, both its political power in a state like Wyoming and its lack of regard for the safety of workers. Broken necks and backs are commonplace injuries. So are lost fingers. Occasional blow-outs occur on land as well, resulting in fatalities. Production is paramount at the expense of almost everything else.

And I have seen the environmental degradation that is left in the wake of collusion between government agencies and oil companies. Federal regulations are relaxed or ignored, putting the integrity of our public lands at risk. Ecological health is sacrificed for financial gain. This sense of entitlement among oil companies is supported by the U.S. Congress. It has direct results on the ground: burning slag pools;

ozone warnings; contaminated water wells flushed with benzene; and loss of habitat for sage grouse, prairie dogs, and pronghorn antelope. The scars on the fragile desert of southeastern Utah, from endless road cuts to the sheared oil patches themselves, will take decades to heal. These are self-inflicted wounds made by a lethal economic system running in overdrive.

After months of watching the news coverage on the blowout and subsequent oil spill, I had to see for myself what I felt from afar: this catastrophic moment belongs to all of us.

On July 28, 2010, I traveled to the Gulf Coast with two friends: Avery Resor, a recent environmental science graduate from

Duke University, and Bill Weaver, a seasoned filmmaker from Montgomery, Alabama, who now lives in British Columbia. Avery grew up on her family's cattle ranch in Wilson, Wyoming, where she continues to live in a log cabin without running water or electricity. She is twenty-four years old and bikes wherever and whenever she can. Her name ties her to a deep family history rooted in Louisiana: Avery Island, famous for Tabasco Sauce made from hot peppers, vinegar, and salt. Bill has dedicated his life to making films that illuminate issues of environmental and social justice. He facilitates Media that Matters, a yearly conference committed to more transparent journalism. He is more cat than human, quiet and nimble. When he rolls his camera, you don't know it. He has learned how to disappear so the authentic story can be told.

We arrived on the hundredth day of the oil spill and stayed until the "static kill" was complete. We sniffed out stories and

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followed them. We listened and we engaged. I took notes. Avery took pictures. Bill filmed.

The oil is not gone. This story is not over. We smelled it in the air. We felt it in the water. People along the Gulf Coast are getting sick and sicker. Marshes are burned. Oysters are scarce and shrimp are tainted. Jobs are gone and stress is high. What is now hidden will surface over time.

Meanwhile, 1 billion birds are migrating through the Gulf of Mexico this fall, resting, feeding, and finding sanctuary as they have always done, generation after generation. The endangered piping plover will be among them. Seventy percent of all waterfowl in North America fly through the Mississippi Delta. Their energy will be compromised, with food not as plentiful. Their health will be vulnerable to the toxic traces of oil and dispersants lingering in the marshes.

The blowout from the Macondo well has created a terminal condition: denial. We don't want to own, much less accept, the cost of our actions. We don't want to see, much less feel, the results of our inactions. And so, as Americans, we continue to live as though these 5 million barrels of oil spilled in the Gulf have nothing to do with us. The only skill I know how to employ in the magnitude of this political, ecological, and spiritual crisis is to share the stories that were shared with me by the people who live here. I simply wish to bear witness to the places we traveled and the people we met, and give voice to the beauty and devastation of both.

To bear witness is not a passive act.

GALATOIRE'S 209 BOURBON STREET NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

"All worlds meet at Galatoire's," David Barr Gooch tells us as we are escorted to our table. He is the great-grandnephew of the original proprietor, Jean Galatoire, who first opened these doors on Bourbon Street in 1905. Mr. Gooch assures us that they do have oysters and that all the shrimp, crab, and local fish is safe to eat. "Our local suppliers take care of us first, so please enjoy yourself."

Our waiter's name is Shawn Perry, a native of New Orleans. He dotes on us as if we are the only diners in the restaurant. When he finds out that we are from Utah and Wyoming, he says, "Will you allow me to order for you?" What comes to our table is Galatoire's Grand Gouté, which includes shrimp rémoulade, crabmeat maison, and shrimp maison with their signature French bread.

For an entrée, he orders redfish prepared both ways for us to try: broiled and fried, with vegetables on a bed of couscous and a side dish of creamed spinach. "You have to have creamed

spinach in the South," Shawn says. The food is delicious, especially the redfish, heightened by our waiter's *joie de vivre*.

"How is the Gulf spill affecting business?" I ask. He pauses.

"The people aren't coming." He looks around the dining room. "Usually on a summer night, this place is packed. The wait can be long, an hour or more, outside on the street. You walked right in. As you can see, the dining room is only a third full. As far as the food goes, we've got what we need. But the oysters are the thing—everybody's scrambling."

For a split second, Shawn sheds his elegance as a waiter, and his eyes deepen. "It's another blow to the region, and I don't know how many more we can take. We're resilient, we make do, but this spill is scaring everybody because we just don't know."

"Don't know?" Avery asks.

"We just don't know what the long-term effects are going to be to the fisheries, to the people, to the Gulf." He pauses again. "There's not a lot of trust in this city about what we're being told." He looks over at another one of his tables. "Would you like some more bread?"

Avery and I finish our redfish. The gold fans with exposed light bulbs help distribute the air and conversation around the room. Green wallpaper decorated with gold fleur-de-lis rises above the mirrored panels, which create the illusion that the dining room is larger than it is. This is not a pretentious place.

Suddenly, a waiter in the far corner of Galatoire's announces with great gusto that it is "Charles's birthday." The room breaks into song. Charles stands and takes a bow. I note that all the patrons are white and the waitstaff is black.

Shawn surprises us with bread pudding. "One should do," he says smiling. One between us could actually be shared with another party of four. It is decadent and rich and we take our time with slow, small bites. Shawn is pleased by our unabashed joy.

We hug and kiss both cheeks after dinner, not common behavior for me with a waiter, complete with the exchange of addresses. Galatoire's lives up to its reputation. We indulge in the tradition, saying goodnight to Mr. Gooch, who sees us out the door and watches until we disappear into the glare of Bourbon Street on a hot, steamy night in New Orleans.

MARGARET AND KEVIN CUROLE ST. CHARLES PARISH NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Kevin is working on his daughter's motor scooter, taking it apart in the middle of the sidewalk. I can't help but stare at the extravagantly colored tattoo on his back, a narrative needled and inked on flesh that depicts Godzilla standing on a shrimp-boat battling other boats, with oil rigs looming in the background. He gets up, catches my eyes on his back, and shakes

my hand. “It’s a helluva good story if ya wanna hear about it.”

Margaret and Kevin Curole are Cajun shrimpers. They have lived along the bayous in Galliano all their lives. Today, they are staying at their daughter’s place in New Orleans, adjacent to a large cemetery. It’s beyond humid and the searing heat leaves me drenched. Margaret has agreed to talk to us about the Gulf crisis as both a resident of the region and an activist who serves on the executive board of the Commercial Fishermen of America. She also serves as the North American coordinator of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, an NGO that works with the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization to protect the rights of fishing communities around the world.

“It is a good story,” she says, smiling at Kevin. She has a flower tattoo on her right breast showcased by her low-cut black t-shirt. “Let’s get a couple of chairs and sit out back.” Her dark, layered hair, shoulder length, accentuates her yellow-brown eyes. “Are you cool enough today?” she asks, smiling.

On May 16, 2010, Margaret Curole joined aerial artist John Quigley and sent three text messages, spelled out with human bodies on the beach in Grand Isle, Louisiana, to BP, the federal government, Congress, and other officials, calling for immediate action to address the economic and environmental devastation from the spill. Their message was simple and direct: *Never Again; Paradise Lost; WTF?!*

This last sentiment is where Margaret picks up with our conversation. “Did you see that there’s another spill today, a barge hit ground off of Port Fourchon, not far from Grand Isle? That’s in the Lafourche Parish where we’re from.” Margaret is referring to headlines in the *Daily Comet*: “New Oil Spill Sullies Locust Bayou Near Border of Terrebonne, St. Mary.”

“About five hundred gallons of light crude. It’s the second spill this week in southeast Louisiana,” she says. “It’s endless and ongoing all over the world. I’m on my way tomorrow to a conference in Norway to talk about the state of fisheries and oil spills. Part of my job with the UN.”

Margaret tells me that her father was an oilman. In the 1950s, before she was born, her parents lived inside the British Petroleum compound in Saudi Arabia. “I was adopted. My birth mother was Cajun. I’m Cajun. The transaction was completed for the price of five hundred dollars and two new dresses for my mother. My parents are dead now, but I’ve lived in the same house in Galliano for fifty years.”

“And your husband?” I ask.

“My husband has shrimped all his life, until the local fishing industry collapsed in 2000. Ask him about separating shrimp from a bucket for his grandmother when he was three years old. It’s in his blood. He was fishing those waters as a kid. Loved it. Lived for it. We all did. It’s how we raised our daughter. You

know why he quit in 2000? ‘Cuz he was feelin’ violent—violent toward the government, violent for them not valuing an honest day’s work. He just left what he loved and went and worked for oil. At least we were one of the ones who had options.”

Margaret explains to us how the local shrimping industry has crashed in the bayous since 2000, due to America “dumping” Asian shrimp into the market. “Our shrimp aren’t worth anything, certainly not worth all the effort that goes into harvesting them. My husband used to sell a pound of shrimp all cleaned up and put on a bucket of ice for seven dollars. Then, after the Asian shrimp came in all covered with white blight and crowded out our own southern Louisiana shrimp, he’d get paid under a dollar. They treat our shrimp like trash. It’s not just the money, it’s our dignity. The ability to work hard is at the heart of Cajun culture.

“We are one generation removed from those speaking French, although Kevin still speaks the dialect. What you need to understand is that for us Cajun folk, fishing isn’t a business, it’s a way of life. It’s something beautiful. We may be poor, but we never went hungry. We had shrimp, crabs, and coon oysters. We had a free and abundant food supply. In these parts, you either fish or you work in the oil fields. So if you take away the oil job, with the moratorium on deep-well drilling, and the fishing is gone, we’re down to nothin’.”

Margaret’s fast speaking clip slows down. “And then you’ve probably already heard about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico created by all the dumping of pesticides from farming—the nitrates from farms upriver?” She pauses. “My sense of hope is fading fast.”

She looks away and then her gaze becomes direct. “Don’t believe 75 percent of what you hear about this blowout down here. Ask the people on the ground. People are not being allowed to talk. My husband has been working on the water for the past three months. Most of what is being done to clean up the oil is to make the American people think something is being done.”

“So what’s the story that isn’t being told?” I ask.

“Two things: how much oil actually has gone into the sea and the amount of dispersants used to make it disappear,” she says.

“The workers are getting sick with contact dermatitis, respiratory infections, nausea, and god knows what else. The BP representatives say all it is is food poisoning or dehydration. If it was just food poisoning or not enough water, why were the workers’ clothes confiscated? As we say in these parts, Answer me dat!

“I never really got nervous until I got a call at nine-thirty on a Sunday night from the BP claims office telling me to back off. But I’m speaking out. I kid my friends and family and say I’ll leave bread crumbs. The other day, two guys from Homeland Security called to take me to lunch. I’m a chef. They tried to talk food with me, to cozy up and all, and one of



them told me he was a pastry chef.” Margaret shakes her head. “But I knew what they was up to, I’m not stupid. They just wanted to let me know I was bein’ watched.”

“Here’s the truth,” Margaret says, now emotional. “Where are the animals? There’s no too-da-loos, the little one-armed fiddler crabs. Ya don’t hear birds. From Amelia to Alabama, Kevin never saw a fish jump, never heard a bird sing. This is their nestin’ season. Those babies, they’re not goin’ nowhere. We had a very small pod of sperm whales in the Gulf, nobody’s seen ’em. Guys on the water say they died in the spill and their bodies were hacked up and taken away. BP and our government don’t want nobody to see the bodies of dead sea mammals. Dolphins are choking on the surface. Fish are swimming in circles, gasping. It’s ugly, I’m tellin’ you. And nobody’s talkin’ about it. You’re not hearing nothin’ about it. As far as the media is reportin’, everythin’s being cleaned up and it’s not a problem. But you know what, unless I know where my fish is coming from, I’m eatin’ nothin’ from here.”

Margaret and I sit in silence. I am suddenly aware of the shabbiness of the neighborhood, the cracking paint on the wooden slats, the weariness of the ivy in this dripping heat.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I haven’t cried in a long time. I’ve been tough, I’ve been holding it all together, but it breaks me up.” She looks at me with unwavering eyes, “Have you read ‘Evangeline’ by Longfellow?”

I can’t speak.

“Read it. Read it again,” Margaret says to me. “It’s our story as exiles. If I wasn’t speakin’ out about this, I’d be havin’ a nervous breakdown. I’ll tell you another thing that nobody is talkin’ about. At night, people sittin’ outside on their porches see planes comin’ into the marshes where they live, and these planes are sprayin’ them with the dispersant. That’s the truth. But hey, we’re Cajuns, who cares about us?”

“I don’t feel like an American anymore,” Margaret says. “I don’t trust our government. I don’t trust anybody in power.”

She leans forward in the heat as the pitch and fervor of frogs intensifies. “We might not be the most educated people schoolwise, but we know more about nature than any PhD. We know. We know what’s goin’ on.”

FIN’S BAR 27900 HIGHWAY I PORT FOURCHON, LOUISIANA

The sun, a bright orange orb, slowly sinks into the horizon of golden grasses. Flocks of great white egrets are flying to roosting trees, mostly dead cypress that have drowned from rising waters. We are stopped by the side of the road, struck by beauty in Lafourche Parish, “Gateway to the Gulf.”

There is a sense that you are standing flush with the sea. Wooden houses are on blocks above lawns, some on stilts. Every half mile or so, there seem to be signs advertising BAYOU LOANS OR APARTMENTS FOR RENT. One billboard with a large image of the Virgin Mary reads, THIS IS MY TIME. But the blessed trinity of shrimp, crab, and oysters is no longer a vision to be taken for granted. Between fields of sugar cane, seafood café after seafood café is closed, in spite of banners advertising, TAILS AND SCALES FOR SALE. Shrimp boats named *Bywater Liberty* and *Daddy’s Angels* remain idle on the sides of the canals.

In small coastal communities like Golden Meadow and Larose, local artists have turned the sides of abandoned buildings into murals: BP TOOK OUR ARMS, THE GOVERNMENT IS TAKING OUR LEGS, HOW WILL WE STAND? And then an image of the iconic Barack Obama poster by Shepard Fairey, revised with floating question marks and the words WHAT NOW? Another mural has BP portrayed as the grim reaper, rising toward the statement YOU KILLED OUR GULF, OUR WAY OF LIFE. In front stands a mannequin wearing a gas mask holding a placard: GOD HELP US ALL.

In twilight, we soar over the marshes on a graceful freeway bridge that brings Port Fourchon into full view. It is a horizon of lights rising out of the wetlands, what Avery calls “a city that is not a city.” It reminds us both of the oil fields in Wyoming where one can read a newspaper at night in what was once a wilderness of stars at the base of the Wind River Range.

We stop at Fin’s Bar for a drink. Once inside, we could be in Pinedale, Wyoming, or Rifle, Colorado, or Vernal, Utah. All oil towns breed the same kind of culture, hard-drinking drifters following the money. Avery and Bill sit down at the bar and talk to the bartender whose name is Angel. A circle of men are sitting on stools with pints of beer in hand.

Having grown up in the oil and gas industry, I recognize the men as kin. I walk over and ask if I might join them. Turns out they are captains working with the NRC, the National Response Center, hired by BP as skimmers. They follow the oil spills wherever they occur worldwide. Some had been in Kuwait, others had worked the *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, and others had been in South America last year. They came from Seattle, New Jersey, Texas, from all over the United States.

“Do you think BP is doing a good job?”

They look at each other. One captain named Phil says, “They’re sure throwing a lot of money at it.” The men begin talking among themselves about all the bogus boats in the Gulf registered as “vessels of opportunity” that are supposed to be collecting oil.

“What they’re collecting is a hefty paycheck for driving around in circles,” a captain named Bruce says, laughing. “They’ve got nothing to do.”

"Where is the oil?" I ask.

"We sank it," one of them says matter-of-factly.

"How?"

"Dispersants, above and below."

"Carpet-bombed the whole fuckin' ocean," says another captain, who by now is drunk.

"Yeah, above and below and deep, man, I mean way deep," the man sitting next to him says. It was as though the captains were competing with one another for who could tell the most unbelievable story.

"It's called Corexit—corrects-it—get it?"

"Wonder how many millions some asshole in corporate America got for coming up with that one?"

"Is it safe?" I ask.

"Who in the hell knows, but it got rid of the oil—at least on the surface. We just got told by BP that they'll be sending us home in another week or so."

"But don't count on it," says another. "We'll probably get called right back for duty after the first hurricane dredges up all the oil sitting at the bottom of the ocean and throws it inland."

The captain seated across from me seemed troubled. He didn't say much. He told me later when we were at the bar alone that he had worked on the *Exxon Valdez* spill. He said he had watched fish eat the dispersant as it gathered along the tide line in Alaska. He said he had seen the mullet doing exactly the same thing out in the Gulf.

"They're probably just eatin' the microbes that are eatin' up the oil after the dispersants have broken it up," he said. "But it can't be good for 'em."

"I don't know, I think that stuff really fucks up the food chain," he said. "The herring never did bounce back in Prince William Sound. I've been up there fishing since the spill. Almost killed every last one of them."

JORDAN'S MINI STORE AND DELI 17611 EAST MAIN STREET GALLIANO, LOUISIANA

When we asked Margaret Curole where we could get some good Cajun food, she told us to go to Galliano, her hometown, and look for a little café with a large red awning across from the church. By the time we get there, it is after ten o'clock, but the lights are still on.

"Welcome," Becky Duet says warmly, a woman in her early fifties who is cleaning up. "It's late and the grill is down." We strike up a conversation, and before we know it we are sitting down at a table with Becky, her husband, Earl, and their son, Jordan. The convenience store and deli were named after him.

"He was conceived three days after my granddaddy died and

I knew he'd be a boy. He's our miracle baby," Becky says. Jordan, now twenty, smiles, his multiple piercings shining under the direct lights. Just then, a person dressed in a white t-shirt, black pants, and silver chains, with a geometric haircut, walks in.

"This is my brother, Donna," Jordan says with a mischievous smile.

"Yeah, I raised her, too," Becky says. "That's the way it is in these parts."

Becky offers us a ham and cheese po' boy on French bread. It is the best sandwich I have ever eaten.

"Eatin's important to us, makin' the gumbo and jambalaya. We feast in the bayou. We say, All you need to survive is some rice, some potatoes, and bread. Nature provides the rest." She looks at her boy. "But not now."

"I knew the oil spill wasn't any good the minute it happened," Becky says, stroking her ponytail tied loosely at the nape of her neck. "So I stocked up on local shrimp and put 'em in freezers all over. Good thing I did, too, 'cuz you can't find any shrimp now, and if you could, you wouldn't wanna eat it."

"Be afraid to now," says Earl. "Them sprayin' us and the bayous at night."

"Who?" Bill asks, since we'd been hearing about Coast Guard planes doing the spraying.

"BP. We've all seen 'em, heard 'em. They're sprayin' the marshes—everything. People are gonna get sick."

"They already are," Becky says.

Becky and Earl were both raised in the bayous. They speak Cajun French (derived from Acadian French, as it was spoken in what are now the Maritime Provinces of Canada—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island—where Cajun ancestors lived before they were dispersed in 1755 by the French and found a home in the bayou country of southern Louisiana). They can hardly understand their son's French, and so they settle on a hybrid Cajun-English between the three of them.

Becky served on the school board, working to create a bilingual English-Cajun program for children growing up in the bayou, where the average annual household income is \$31,419.

She echoed Margaret's sentiments about the bayous offering them a bounty of food in all seasons of the year. "We're wealthy if you look at the food we can eat right here in our own homes. I mean, you just put a chicken neck on a hook and throw your line in the canal and you've got everything you need."

"What's a redfish?" I ask Becky, curious about the origins of our main course from the night before.

"We've got 'em here. They're a fish that likes to give you a fight. They're real pretty with gold scales and a dot on their tail, a big burgundy spot." She pauses. "We might see some in the canal below the bridge?"

It's been raining. The wet parking lot reflects the lights of Galliano, a town of barely eight thousand people. Jordan and Donna run ahead of us and disappear. I now see Becky's uncommon beauty, the lines in her face.

She and I walk toward the bridge talking about sons. I tell her I became a mother at fifty, that our son is from Rwanda. "You'll love your son like no other," she says. "It's a different kind of love than you have for your husband." Becky then shares a Cajun tradition. "When you have a baby, you invite the women of the community over and each one writes some words of wisdom in red magic marker on a set of diapers, so that every time you change one, you are reminded of a thought or a wish that gives you confidence as a new mother. What I just told you about the love you have for your son, well, that was written on one of Jordan's diapers. I still remember that because it's still true."

Jordan and Donna are already in their row-boat, fishing. We step onto the green-painted bridge that spans the bayou and stare into the tea-colored water. The canal is crowded with gar, recognizable by their long, peculiar snouts visible in the waning full moon of July, now emerging from the clouds. Leaning on the railing of the bridge, Becky points out that each gar has its own distinctive markings, some spotted like leopards, others marked like a maze on their backs. They slowly tread water, lazily, seductively, some three feet long, all facing the same direction.

Jordan screams, "I caught a redfish!"

Donna leans over to see. "Wow, on your second cast!"

Becky calmly says to reel it in so we can see the fish for ourselves. Jordan and Donna carefully bring the twelve-inch fish into the boat, but not without a fight. "Those redfish really give you a hard time," Becky says. "It's why the fishermen like them so much. They can live to be forty years old, weigh thirty-five pounds, and can grow to be three feet long. But we like the little ones."

Jordan and Donna row the boat to bayou's edge, tie it to some grasses, and bring the fish to Becky. Becky holds the redfish in her hands with its gold, glistening scales.

"See the burgundy spot?" Becky asks. It appears as a single unblinking eye.

At Galatoire's, I didn't know what a redfish was or where it lived. Twenty-four hours later, I am stroking the side of a redfish that will eventually find its way from these moonlit marshes to the sea. Magic lives in the world when we surrender ourselves

to a place. Jordan doesn't just know a redfish, he can think like one. The line he dangles into his home waters is his lifeline.

Becky gently returns the gift back to the bayou, and we watch as the redfish's side fins propel it forward into the murky depths.

COMFORT ISLAND BRETON SOUND, LOUISIANA

The marsh grasses are burnt. The mud flats hold an iridescent sheen, and it looks like a painter came to shore with buckets of oil and dipped his brush in it, then spattered the island with drops, not black or brown, but red drops, like blood. Comfort Island looks like the scene of a crime.

Jumping off the boat, I sink into the muck. It is my first look at an oiled beach. Shells are strewn across the shore, angel wings, whelks, and tiny, hinged sunrise shells. Brown pelicans and royal terns are standing three, four deep on the edge of the island. One pelican is standing on the yellow boom, now a broken circle.

"Amateur hour," grumbles the boat captain, Danny Diecidue, who has fished these waters for over thirty years. "The boom is fucked. It absolutely does no good. The island's too big and the workers have gotten it all wrong. At least the pelicans get a perch to fish from out of this incompetence."

I bend down and touch the oil, spread it over the pages of my journal so I won't forget. It burns my finger. White curled feathers cartwheel across the beach until they become heavy with oil. I find a small bed of oysters saturated in crude.

"The oil comes in with the high tide," says Danny, a native of Hopedale, in the St. Bernard Parish, an hour from New Orleans. "That would have been around two o'clock this morning."

Farther down the beach, a television reporter from the CBS Evening News stands with perfectly coiffed hair, sporting a flak jacket. He wants a shot with the yellow boom in the background. He is about to interview Dr. Paul Kemp, vice-president of the National Audubon Society's Louisiana Coastal Initiative. He asks his cameraman if he is ready. The cameraman gives him the go sign: "It's Day 100 and I am on Comfort Island in the Breton Sound with Dr. Paul Kemp of the National Audubon Society. Dr. Kemp, would you agree this is not the environmental disaster we were all expecting?"

"It's too early to tell," says Dr. Kemp. "We just don't know what the effects of the dispersants are going to be on the overall ecosystem."

IT LOOKS LIKE
A PAINTER
WITH BUCKETS
OF OIL
SPATTERED
THE ISLAND
WITH DROPS.

“But wouldn’t you agree that the oil spill isn’t as bad as was initially predicted?”

“No, I don’t agree. It’s just too early to tell.”

“What *do* you know?”

“What we do know is that the Mississippi Delta is the only world-class river delta we have in North America. It really requires our attention. People think this will be here forever, but that is not the case. The system is in collapse. It will not survive another generation unless we change our point of view and move it to one of restoration. We need to restore the Mississippi River and engage in something as large in scale and vision as the Marshall Plan, so it can deposit the sediments it once did into the delta and is meant to do. These extraordinary marshlands cannot afford to be cut up by canals to serve the oil industry or covered in oil when a spill occurs.”

The CBS anchorman is getting frustrated. This is not the story he wanted. He tries again. “So, what is the impact of oil on this system?”

Dr. Kemp: “No one can say. We can see that this system will come through it, but if we don’t change the way we manage these wetlands, this is the beginning of the end.”

“You are saying this is *the beginning of the end?*”

“Yes. Not because of the oil disaster, but because of the navigational canals. They are fragmenting marsh grasses creating more erosion. And coastal erosion is the issue. Since 1930, we have lost more than 2,300 square miles of land. In 2010, we are losing one football field of land every thirty minutes. If we do not change the way we think about the Mississippi Delta, it will all be underwater very soon.” He pauses. “America’s Gulf Coast is in cardiac arrest.”

“That’s a wrap,” the newsman says to his cameraman.

If only it were that simple. Take a few pictures. Speak a few words. End of story. Meanwhile, oil reaches the beach, the mud, the grasses, sullyng the feet of birds now preening their feathers with oiled beaks, cleaning their feathers and ingesting the oil that will sicken them.

The system is breaking down not from one thing but everything.

Dr. Kemp and I walk along the edge of the wetlands. He is a thoughtful marine scientist who worked at Louisiana State University before joining the environmental group. We are the same age, both of us now white haired, and share similar concerns. Where we step down, oil oozes up.

“This oiling extends across six hundred square miles,” he says. “Nobody knows. Nobody knows what these oil particles will do that are hanging just below the surface. Nobody knows how this will affect the animals living in the mud or the spawning of species in the sea or the planktonic absorption

of oil or how the toxicity levels held in coral reefs will impact their health. Nobody knows what this means to the whole ecology of the Gulf Coast and the Delta.

“We need actions going forward, not incremental steps, that will change our whole outlook of how we see the Mississippi River. We have to start implementing this plan to restore the river now and get the Army Corps of Engineers on board—today.”

I look at him and smile. “You know what you are advocating . . . ?”

“What?” he asks quietly.

“You are basically calling for a complete restructuring of Western civilization.”

He doesn’t flinch.

FISH CAMP LANDING A GATED COMMUNITY ORANGE BEACH, ALABAMA

Jerry Cope is pale, very ill, and barely able to speak. “I’m not the only one sick down here,” he says. We first met on March 2, 2009, at the Capitol Climate Action demonstration in Washington DC, where more than twenty-five hundred activists successfully blockaded all five entrances to the Capitol Power Plant that fuels the United States Capitol building.

Cope works on climate issues, from stopping mountaintop removal in Appalachia to halting a uranium mine in Colorado, where he lives. He came to the Gulf with Charles Hambleton, a producer and member of the team featured in the Academy Award-winning documentary *The Cove*. Having secured evidence that BP had been both burying dead dolphins in landfills and shipping corpses to Mexico in refrigerated trucks to be sold as food, they were investigating what was happening to the bodies of other dead sea mammals, including a pod of sperm whales. Jerry had spent three weeks following this story up and down the Gulf Coast with little sleep. He was now suffering from chemically induced pneumonia and staying with friends in Orange Beach, Alabama.

“I’ve got some amazing activists I think you should meet,” he had said to me over the phone. “They’ve been tracking the spill in Alabama very closely. It’s become a serious health issue.”

We enter Robin Young’s condominium to find a house filled with people. With oil still on my feet and blood on my shin from Comfort Island, I discretely ask if I might use the bathroom to quickly rinse off.

I have not been in the living room three minutes before meeting a man with strong shoulders and bare arms tattooed with Maori tribal designs that resemble waves.

“My name is Gregg Hall and I’m an activist from Pensacola Beach, Florida.” He shows us a six-minute video titled “The

Truth: My Hometown,” with Michael Jackson’s “Earth Song” as a soundtrack. It isn’t just the huge tar balls on the beautiful Pensacola beach that are disturbing, or the ghastly brown sheets of oil smeared on the white sands, but the boiling water, thick with chemicals from the dispersants, that gives me goose flesh.

“It’s a color I’ve never seen before in the water,” Gregg says. “You could believe you were in the Caribbean. Call it Corexit green.”

Gregg describes himself as part Native American and Cajun. He is a diver and has been documenting the disaster every day since the first oil appeared on Pensacola Beach. Many of his images were taken underwater: streaks of black crude that look like dead seals congregating on white rippled sand; dead fish and dead crabs rolling back and forth on the bottom of the sea.

We move to the screened porch. The sizzling sound of insects outside reminds me I am a long way from home in the arid Southwest.

“My name is Ashley Hughes and I’m an activist from Magnolia Springs, Alabama. I’m interested in public health. If you go out to Gulf Shores, twenty minutes from here, you’ll still see people swimming in the water, even as the oil sheen circles them,” she says. “Mothers are just sitting on the beach watching their kids splash around in the surf. It’s crazy.”

“I’m not a conspiracy theorist,” says Ashley, an attractive woman in her forties, part Blackfoot Indian. “But you have to wonder what’s going on when no red zones have been established on our beaches. No warnings posted but pitiful little signs that look more like LIFEGUARD OFF DUTY than TOXIC BEACH AND WATER. Instead, Governor Riley says, ‘Swimming is a personal decision.’”

“My name is Robin Young and I work in guest services for a property management company called Relax on the Beach. This is my house. I started Guardians of the Gulf with the single goal of educating the community as to the possible effects of the oil spill on their lives and businesses. As people have become increasingly ill, however, we’ve been forced to find the proper medical people to help us conduct blood tests and treatment. We are now organizing a class action suit against BP in Baldwin County for all those individuals who have become sick,” Robin says, her blue eyes intensifying. “We were down on those beaches Ashley is talking about on Father’s Day. All that red oil swirling around. Kids playing in the surf. Crazy.”

“Night after night, we watched this tourism booster named Rebecca Wilson tell us how clean the beaches were and how safe. Finally, a bunch of us got sick of listening to her propaganda and so we made a video spoof of her asinine statements,” Ashley says. “We filmed it on Perdido Beach in Gulf Shores. Our friend, David Crosby, dressed in drag and called himself

Rebecca Spillson. He spouted all the lovely wonders of an oil-drenched beach. We got in our bikinis, covered ourselves in chocolate syrup to look like we were dripping in oil, and played volleyball in the background—all this with the Beach Boys singing ‘Let’s Go Surfing.’”

Robin turns on her computer and we watch the video on YouTube.

“We didn’t make any friends in the Office of Tourism,” Ashley says. “But we did get their attention. It ran on all the networks.” She looks at the other women in the room. “We just don’t want people to get hurt.”

Robin interjects, “We’ve demanded that the air quality be tested. We’ve all had our blood tested. I’ve got elevated readings of benzene and cadmium. The toxins are inside us. People are sick and the doctors tell them it’s a summer cold or flu.”

Robin explains how Guardians of the Gulf demanded that water samples be taken along Alabama’s Gulf Coast, to see just how much oil was in the water and sand. Studies were done at Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, Katrina Key, and Dauphin Island. Samples were then taken to an independent chemist named Bob Newman, who doubted there would be anything more than five parts per million in each study.

To his surprise, the lowest quantity of oil and petroleum in the samples was sixteen parts per million from the water at Katrina Key; Orange Beach yielded the highest, 221 parts per million, where children were playing in the sand; and the water sample from Dauphin Island exploded in the lab.

“Nobody was more surprised than the chemist,” Robin says. “He thinks that the reason it exploded was because of the presence of methane gas or a chemical dispersant in the water. Because the sample blew up, that particular test was deemed inconclusive.”

“You couldn’t make this stuff up,” I say.

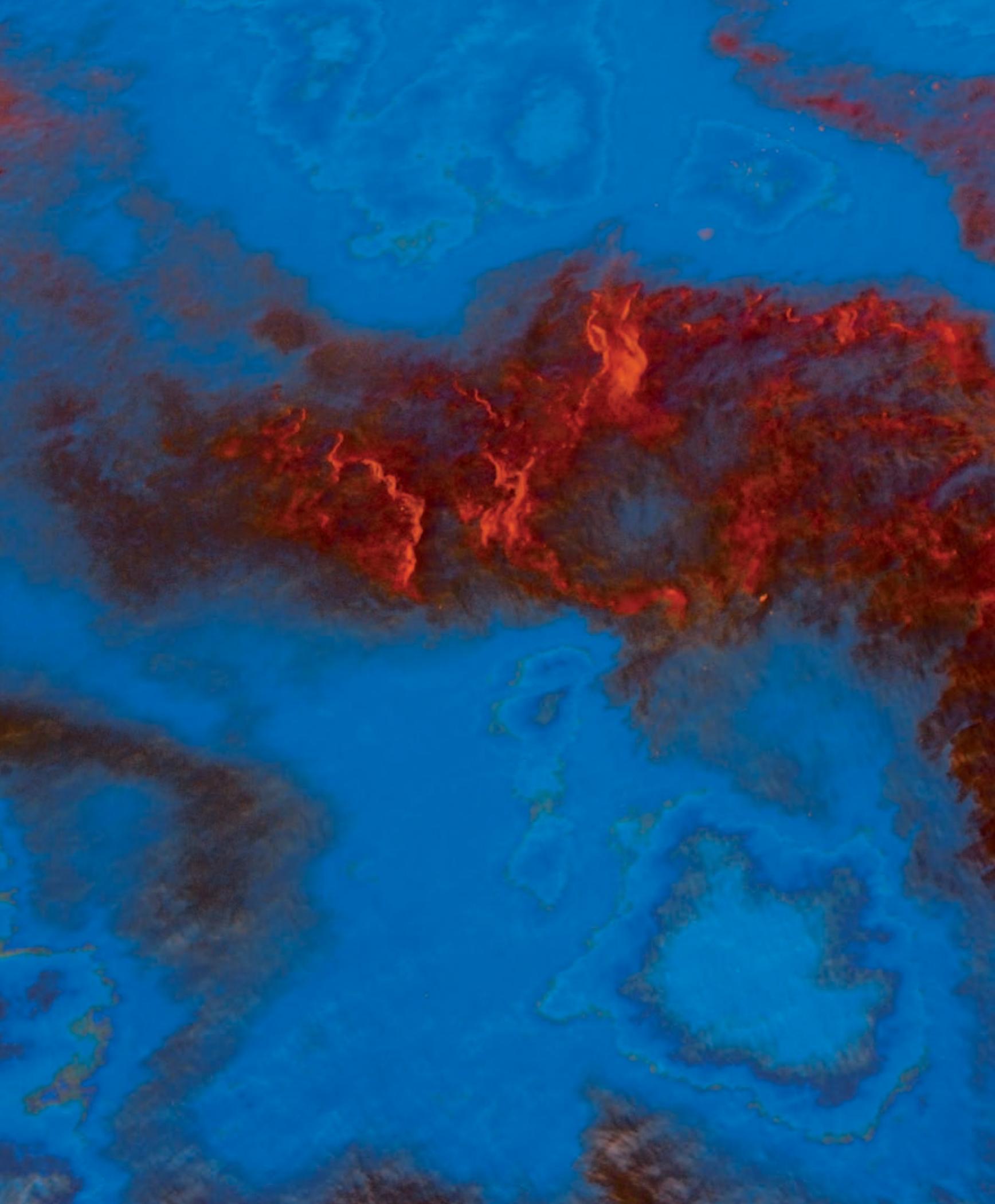
“You wouldn’t want to make this stuff up, it’s such a friggin’ nightmare,” Robin says. “All our lives have been turned upside down.”

“My name is Lori DeAngelis and I am the captain of the *Dolphin Queen*. I run educational dolphin tours in Alabama’s back bays. This is my ninth year in business. I’ve lived here for sixteen.”

“My name is Mike DeAngelis. I am Lori’s husband.”

Both Lori and Mike look shellshocked and exhausted. Lori, like Robin, has long, blond hair and is tanned and weathered. She wears a tight turquoise t-shirt that reads, SALT LIFE. Lori’s blood test also came back with high levels of benzene and cadmium. Like Jerry, she too has pneumonia.

“We were a bad idea on the planet,” Lori says bluntly. “Humans.” She stares past us. “This oil spill—it goes beyond



breaking your heart. It breaks your soul. To have no remorse. To say it's under control. You can't put your arms around it."

"Where are the animals?" she asks. "Dead. Burned. Buried in landfills at night. It's common knowledge. I've been out in the water with my boat saying, 'Damn, where are my dolphins?' The dolphins I've known for years are either gone, dead, or disappeared. The ones I have seen are acting lethargic or like they're drunk. I know it's the Corexit. The ocean's a toxic soup. It doesn't look right. The color's all wrong." She starts to cry.

Robin takes over. "How many times have we been told to stand down, that we are overreacting and asking too many questions?"

"It started with money and it's ending with money," Gregg says.

Robin looks at Avery and Bill. "It feels like we're in a John Grisham movie and we can't wake up."

Lori tells me she's bleeding from her vagina and it makes no sense. "I had a hysterectomy years ago." She then leans forward and whispers in my ear, "I'm bleeding from my anus, too, but I don't dare tell Mike. This thing is killing me."

"So what's the story that's not being told?" I ask the room of activists.

"Which one do you want?" Robin asks. "The misappropriation of funds? The dead animal coverup with local dumps smelling like rotting flesh? The dispersants and public health issues? Or how about the decapitated birds?"

"You can't run toxicology tests on birds without their heads," Lori says. "I worked for six years with the Alabama Sea Rescue Unit collecting dead dolphins and seabirds. If you don't have the bird's head, you can't run the test. The reason BP and the government have disposed of all the dead sea mammals is because they are federally protected by law. Each dolphin costs you a shitload of money if you kill it. Again, it's about money. The BP website says there are three hundred-plus dolphins that have died so far. That's bullshit, trust me, it's in the thousands. And the number of sea turtles—"

"Ask me what I'm doing with our boat?" interrupts Mike DeAngelis, raising his glass as Robin fills it. "Go ahead, ask me what I'm doing with our boat."

"What are you doing with your boat?"

"I'm a voo-dude."

"A what?"

"A voo-dude. Our boat is registered with BP as a 'vessel of opportunity.' We were called into action on Sunday. BP called me at eight-thirty p.m. They said, Are you so and so? I said, Yeah. So is this your boat? I said, Yeah. Can you be activated in the morning? I had applied for the program and said, Sure. The mayor of Orange Beach has encouraged locals with a boat

to apply for the program so BP money can go to locals instead of scammers who are coming from out of state with recently purchased boats just to cash in on the money."

"It's complicated for us," Lori says, "because Mike owns the boat in name, but I use the boat for my business. *Dolphin Queen* is my love. I take her out for my dolphin cruises. People love how she's decorated with mermaids and all."

"But we need the money," Mike says. He turns to his wife, "Baby, I'm not out there 'cuz I *wanna* do this—I *gotta* do this."

"I know. But it hurts me that I can't—" Lori breaks down. "That I can't be out checking on my dolphins."

Mike explains that BP is paying \$1,200 a day for a twenty-four-foot boat like the DeAngelises' craft, plus an extra \$200 a day for every crew member. They pay \$2,000 a day for thirty-to forty-foot boats and \$3,000 a day for fifty-foot boats.

"It's a scam," Mike says. "People have come out of the woodwork, bringing ten boats down to Mobile Bay and registering them in the program, guys who don't even live here. I met one guy from New Jersey who's making \$12,000 a day with ten little Jon boats, twelve-foot aluminum boats, while local fishermen struggling just to make ends meet were trying to keep their suppliers loaded with shrimp before it all got shut down. By the time the fishermen realized what was going on, the program was saturated."

"Tell 'em what happened to you, honey," Lori urges.

Mike takes another sip from his drink. "It was Monday morning, six a.m., I'm headed out to Fort Morgan in my car, thirty miles from here, which is where they told me to go to launch my boat. Just as I get there, my phone rings and it's another call from the BP representative, who says, 'I'm anchored east side of Pensacola Naval Station. Can you run on over here, we'll do a face to face?' I tell him I'm three to four hours away. He says, 'Okay, just forget about it. We'll see you tomorrow.' I was paid and never entered the water.

"On day two, the BP guy is still in Pensacola. He tells me to call him at eleven for instructions. I call him and he says, 'Just get in your boat and go look for oil.' No instructions. No equipment. Nothing. Just go look for oil. When I asked him what I should do if I see any, he says, 'Just call me.'

"Day three, we just get up early and go. I turn on my radio to channel eleven and let the captain know I'm there. We do circles in the Gulf. The water was as pretty as I've ever seen it, scary pretty, that emerald color you see in the Bahamas, not typical to the Gulf. But you're not goin' to see me swimmin' in it. The waves are all wrong. I can't describe it. Spooky as hell. And then coming back, we went, 'Whoa, fliers!' Bunches of flying fish appeared way too close to shore. Usually, you don't see them until you're two miles out. Here they were,

three hundred yards in. Betcha it's lack of oxygen in the water. They're coming in for air. God, it's strange out there, bubbles coming up from who knows where." He pauses. "I've never seen this kinda shit out in the bay.

"And then today, we're told to go to a safety meeting, the first one. The BP guy stands up and chuckles. 'You just need to know three things. Don't eat the oil. Keep your PPs on. And go have fun, kids.'"

"What are PPs?" I ask.

"Personal protection," Mike says. "They want you to keep your pants on, your shirt on, and your shoes. Oh yeah—and your hat."

"So is anyone wearing hazmat suits?" Bill asks, having seen BP workers on the beach wearing white Tyvek coveralls.

"Only the hazwhoppers—that's what they call them, the guys who've been through the forty hours of hazmat training. They're the ones certified to collect oil on the beaches, right next to the people in bathing suits."

Jerry is lying down on the couch, listening. He looks worse than he did earlier.

Mike looks at his wife. "We've got a pirated boat held hostage in BP's name, Lori can't run her business, and the checks we're receiving feel dirty."

"We're at each other's throats," she says. "Fightin' all the time." She stops. "We need the money, but I want my boat back. I wanna see if my dolphins are still out there. I know they're dying."

"It ain't right," Mike says. "None of it. The irony is we still haven't spent the money yet. It feels like hush money and we ain't hushin' up."

"I've thought about writin' my own story," Lori says. "But tell me, how in God's name do you end it?"

GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE PERDIDO KEY, FLORIDA

Voluminous thunderheads are building themselves into a vertical column against a deep indigo sky with god-streaks breaking through the clouds. Lightning bolts cut into the sublimity of the moment and it is hard to know whether to stay or flee.

We stay. Avery and I sit and face the ocean on the white sand beach at Perdido Key, while Bill photographs clouds. A plane flies over the abandoned coast carrying a red streamer that reads, THANK YOU FOR VISITING OUR BEACHES.

The sea is translucent, the color of emeralds, just as Mike DeAngelis said. There is orange boom farther out. Sanderlings forage along the beach, scurrying in and out of the wrack line.

Earlier, we were at Gulf Shores, now a ghost resort with high-rise hotels, one after another, empty. There were a half

dozen rainbow-colored umbrellas staked in the sand with mothers reading novels while their children played in the surf. A few couples were walking hand in hand, ignoring the posted warning signs. A large cross of weathered wood had been erected in front of the red flag, stilted in the heat, raised as a danger alert. Our eyes were burning. We moved on to Perdido Key, part of the Gulf Island National Seashore, naively believing it might be safer.

"We are sweating our prayers," says Bill as he continues to photograph the unfolding storm. It is 104 degrees without the heat index. We wear the humidity as wet clothing.

Clouds erupt into white-masted schooners—light in the presence of shadow, shadow in the presence of light. Nothing is as it appears. What is true and what is not? The white of these sands is true. A flock of pelicans gliding over an oiled sea is true. Oil dispersed and out of sight is also true.

Lightning strikes very close. I half expect to see the ocean burst into flames.

Just as we get up to leave, a BP bus pulls up. It is five o'clock. Forty workers in yellow and green vests rush onto the beach. They are met by a convoy of dune buggies and backhoes, poised to dig in the sand. We learn from two of the workers that the night before, from sundown to sunrise, two thousand pounds of oil were recovered from the beach in a hundred-yard swatch. The oil is buried in the sand—a build-up from Bonnie, the tropical storm that came through a couple of weeks earlier. On a hot day, the tar balls, some of them too big for a man to carry, will soften and melt, turning into something like gooey peanut butter that percolates through the sand. The workers dig it up.

When we ask two of the workers, both African American, what happens with the ton of oil they collect in a night's work, they say, "We truck it away."

"BP says they're going to cook it, turn it into asphalt to pave roads, but if you ask me, I think it's just sitting there in some landfill, hot as hell," one of the workers says. "I've got kids. They build sand castles. What's going to happen when they run into buckets of oil on the beach down there?" He points toward Gulf Shores. "Are they safe? I think about that."

We watch the two men walk down the wooden plank to the white beach, where they will be digging through the night with thunder and lightning flashing all around them.

THE SOURCE BP-TRANSOCEAN DEEPWATER HORIZON MACONDO WELL, GULF OF MEXICO

Tom Hutchings is flying barefoot over the open sea. We are on our way to "The Source," the Macondo well, ninety miles south of the mouth of Mobile Bay, Alabama. Coordinates: lati-

tude 28°45'12" N; longitude 88°15'53" W. Destination time: forty-five minutes.

Avery and Bill are positioned in the rear of the small, agile Cessna 182, ready to take photographs from the open baggage door. I'm seated in front with Tom, able to talk with him through a headset.

"I don't use the word *evil* often, but what's going on here in the Gulf is evil," Tom says.

This is flight number twenty-eight since April 20. Hutchings has clocked in more than ninety hours in the air as a volunteer SouthWings pilot, taking public officials, photographers, and journalists to the site of the blowout to witness for themselves the magnitude of the calamity. Hutchings's previous trip was twelve days earlier. He is interested in seeing how things have changed.

"Given all the reports, I won't be surprised if we just see a lot of beautiful ocean today, which would be fine by me," he says, looking out the window. "But if the oil is to be seen, we'll see it."

Tom Hutchings is a Gulf Coast native who grew up spending summers in Josephine, Alabama, next to the water. His father and brother were both lost at sea when Tom was nine years old. "We suspect pirates, although nothing was ever certain." His fierce sense of responsibility toward his remaining family has never left him. Married, divorced, and married again, his devotion to his daughter, Brinkley, as a single parent has been a constant. She is now a student at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

"When I flew Brinkley to The Source in the early days of the blowout, she didn't say a word, not a word. A couple days later, she looked at me and simply said, 'Dad, get out of the way. Your generation screwed it up and we are going to have to fix it.' She's now working for Greenpeace. I told her, 'Look, you're twenty years old, you've got a long life ahead of you. Be careful.' But she's angry and I don't blame her. I'm angry, too."

Tom is filling out his flight log. I look down and see the wrinkled skin of the sea, blue-gray. Early morning haze creates a mesmerizing effect of no horizon. Orange boom on the water appears as script, a free-form writing exercise in futility. We pass Fort Morgan and Dauphin Island, where the exploding water sample was taken.

"There's the vessels of opportunity bunched together doing nothing," Tom says. "Have you heard the phrase, 'We're on BP time?'"

Tom points out the huge rafts of sargassum floating on the surface of the sea.

"This is an incredibly important seaweed, similar to the kelp forests in the Pacific, a critical habitat for aquatic larvae of all kinds, myriads of fish, and juvenile turtles, and a resting platform for marine birds. They're like floating islands of life. The oil is killing it, breaking it up. You can see both a change in color and a change in structure from the air. We'll see more, the closer we get to Deepwater. Strangely, we've not been seeing it wash up on shore this summer like it usually does. Don't know why."

We fly over shallow-water rig platforms, one after another. We are now twelve miles offshore, seventy-eight miles from The Source.

"It's disconcerting to hear one thing on shore and then fly out here and see something completely different," Tom says.

"It's important to trust what you see, not what you hear. The plane for me is my own personal ground-truthing."

Tom runs a consulting firm called Eco-Solutions, helping various organizations and agencies come to better decision making through collaboration. But he is a known and respected agitator, one who isn't afraid to speak his mind. I recognize him as Coyote, a trickster. I am glad he is on my side.

"What seems unnatural to me is the wave action. Can you see what I'm talking about?" Tom asks. "There are usually peaks to the waves. But see those rolling waves? Normally, you'd say they belong to the wake of a boat, but they don't. They're just long rolling folds in the sea. I've never seen them

before. There's got to be oil on the surface here—" He pauses.

And there it is. Oil. Lots of it. Sickening sheets of iridescent sheen with sargassum floating inside.

"It's such a perverse reflection," Tom says.

His comment strikes me as both a physical observation and a psychological one. BP is only partially to blame. Our hunger is also responsible. This is the horror of what we are witnessing—the magnitude of our addiction and its lethal consequences for those who have no part or say in the decision.

"Dolphins," Tom says. Avery points her camera through the opening. Bill is rolling film. It is a terrible beauty.

We are thirty-two miles from The Source.

The oil now appears like miles of stretchmarks on the pregnant belly of the sea. What lies below, we cannot tell, but surface stress is apparent. We see dead fish and birds on the sargassum mats. Trash, as well.

LIGHTNING
STRIKES VERY
CLOSE. I HALF
EXPECT TO SEE
THE OCEAN
BURST INTO
FLAMES.

Tom continues to read the ocean. Oil. Oil. Oil. The headphones I am wearing become heavy hands pressing against my ears reminding me of *The Scream*. If Robin Young feels she is living inside a Grisham novel, I have just stepped into Edvard Munch's painting. The swirls of red toxins below sicken me inside the confinement of this moth of a plane juxtaposed against the vastness of the soiled sea. Outrage. Agony. Helplessness. I cannot track the disturbance in me. This is new territory.

The plane continues south by southwest. We are eighteen miles from The Source.

I turn to Tom, my rage erupting. "Why is this not being reported? Why aren't there more planes out here filming these huge sheets of oil? How can anyone say this is over?"

"Shore-based reporting, I assure you," he says, looking out. "See what I'm talking about, the laziness of the waves? It's like the ocean is drugged."

"Is it lies?" I ask desperately, my heart racing. "Or do Americans just not want to know the truth?"

Avery, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the plane, points below. "What is that?"

Tom banks the plane and circles the gray-white body. "Looks like a dolphin. Dead." I strain to see the animal over Tom's shoulders. Next, we see three large pods of dolphins.

Tom tells us of flying with photographers John Wathen and J Henry Fair filming the oil burning. "It was apocalyptic," he says. "But the image that continues to haunt me was the group of dolphins facing the fires, perfectly lined up on the edge of the flames, together, watching."

Silence envelops us again. Enormous mats of oil-soaked sargassum hold our gaze in the midst of the oil shoals and swirls.

Finally, The Source comes into view. The familiar television images do not match the reality. The remaining BP-Transocean rigs look like LEGO constructions surrounded by a child's Matchbox collection of orange-bottomed barges and ships. After the shock and weight of seeing oil stretching as far as one can see, as wide as one can look, for as long as one dares, these man-made platforms are anticlimactic. The irony that something seemingly this small and tenuous has created such lethal death blows, and not just to those who died, but putting an entire ecosystem at risk, is difficult to fathom. We have entered a corporate play zone that kills.

As Tom circles the two remaining rigs, I have this eerie sense that we are seeing something we are not supposed to see, that somehow, by viewing the blue steel structures that have wreaked such havoc on the Gulf, I am being robbed of an innocence I would have wished to preserve in order to go about my life as usual, unaware of the consequences of my

privilege. This is the place where eleven men loved by their families were catapulted into a fiery hell witnessed by their co-workers. Only some of their bodies were found. Five thousand feet below is the site of the violent blowout that created a geyser of oil for more than one hundred days, fouling the seas, floating onto shore, into the wetlands, into the food chain, into our bodies. Here is the source of our unconscious lives, where we remain blind to the harm we are causing to all that is alive and breathing and beautiful.

"All oil," Tom says as we circle the petroleum complex for the sixth time. Our eyes are red and burning. The stench of gasoline is strong. I have a headache and hold some pressure points on my right hand for relief.

Some scientists believe there is leaking beyond the Macondo well. That there just couldn't be this much oil coming from one opening. That pressure from the rogue well could have caused a fracturing of the seafloor, creating more fissures exacting more oil.

"That would make sense," Tom says. "Nobody knows. That's the bottom line. Nobody fucking knows anything. We're in the middle of a goddamn science experiment."

We circle The Source one last time. My eyes are saturated in oil: horizons of oil. The brown-red crude is a deadly seam along the tide lines, where it congregates as poison. Smaller pools of crude have attached themselves to the sargassum, now dark as honeycomb. A film of oil floats along the surface of the sea. We are seeing rivers of oil, rivers of oil as wide as the Mississippi braiding themselves into the currents creating their own morbid shorelines. A striated sea drenched in a psychedelic sheen reflects a blinding light back to us.

As I look down, I keep hearing the captain's declaration at Port Fourchon: "We sank it."

"There is still oil on the surface, Omaha 99," Tom reports over his radio to the air traffic control aircraft circling overhead.

"I just want to make sure the government aircraft working this event knows that someone else is seeing what is actually going on," he says to me.

Tom picks up speed and gains elevation. "Let's go see some beauty!" We leave The Source and fly off toward the Mississippi Delta.

"Frigate birds," Tom says. "And two pelicans to our right. We are entering the great marshes of the Mississippi."

I watch the magnificent frigate birds soar below like black crossbows.

The scenery changes dramatically. Now we are flying over vast wetlands, a tapestry of greens and yellows woven into the sea. The Mississippi Delta comes into full view like a great nurturing hand smoothing the edge of the continent.

“The untold story,” Tom says, “is that this beauty is still here, in spite of hurricanes, oil spills, and a sinking landscape. We’re looking at the most productive system of wetlands in North America.”

White lilies are blooming in ponds. Miles and miles of spartina, marsh grass, is shimmering in shallow water, creating a different kind of reflective mirror. Enormous flocks of gulls are flying over the buoyant landscape. This is a perspective of grace, and I feel my soul lighten.

“Verdant,” Tom says. “I have probably used that word once in my life, but since I’ve been flying these past three months, I bet I’ve used it a hundred times. The contrast is stunning.”

We cross over the tip of Louisiana’s boot. If Tom is thinking about the word *verdant*, I am holding the word *resilient*. The resiliency of these wetlands is a testament to the enduring strength of wildness.

But we can’t continue to count on it.

“The vastness of this place . . .” Tom says.

Outside my window, there is a windswept island beaded with birds.

“That’s Breton Island,” Tom says.

“Can we circle it?” I ask.

Teddy Roosevelt visited Breton Island in June 1915. It was the only refuge he ever visited, and the second one he committed to the National Wildlife Refuge system. Piping plovers nest here, as do least terns, both threatened species. This critical nesting site is also home to thousands of brown pelicans and royal terns. There is still boom draped around one of the promontories for protection.

Tom circumnavigates the island, giving us a closer look at the pelican population. The numbers are large, which is reassuring.

We fly toward the Chandeleur Islands, also part of the Breton Island National Wildlife Refuge, which stretch across the Gulf of Mexico for fifty miles, forming the eastern point of the state of Louisiana. This vast matrix of freshwater marshes adjacent to the sea appears enduring and fragile at once.

From above, we can see through the water. Constellations of cownose rays speckle the sea with brown-red diamonds. Pods of dolphins race ahead of us. Tom sees a large shark that we miss. And schools of shimmering fish congregate in the shallow turquoise waters closer to shore.

“This is good,” Tom says. “If the bait fish are doing well, the whole system will do well.” His mood is shifting. “This is good, this is really, really good. I’ve not seen this much wildlife in the water since this whole mess started.” Tom’s eyes flash a joy recovered from the past weeks of gloom. “What a day.”

Tom tips the wings of the plane abruptly and makes a sharp turn. My stomach drops. “I think I just saw a manta

ray.” He circles back around. “Yes, right there.” I lean over his shoulders. Avery and Bill can see it through the opening. Then I see it too. Even from the air, it is enormous. A manta ray can be as large as twenty-five feet across and weigh up to three thousand pounds.

“That is grace,” Tom says as we watch its black wings undulate in blue waters.

Tom circles one more time so we can all get a good view. This time, I see its white horns. As the plane moves ahead, leaving the ray behind, he points. “There’s two dolphins.” He smiles. “They’re mating.”

He turns the plane around again and sure enough, as he banks the wings, we see two dolphins as one, a yin-yang of gray-white, an equipoise upon the waters.

BP DECONTAMINATION UNIT GRAND ISLE, LOUISIANA

WELCOME TO GRAND OIL! announces a freshly painted sign in the coastal community of Grand Isle, Louisiana. The artist, Darleen Taylor, has a Burma-Shave run of billboards written from the sea creatures’ points of view: SAVE OUR HOMES: SAVE JELLYFISH FIELDS; SMALL PEOPLE MATTER TOO—EVEN CHUBS; DON’T WISH YOU WERE HERE! SERIOUSLY, WHEN CAN WE GET BACK IN THE WATER? ask the starfish.

Grand Isle was among the first shorelines to take the hit from the blowout. Brown pelicans were drowning in oil, oysters were saturated. Louisiana native James Carville and his wife, Mary Matalin, filled their empty water bottles with thick, brown crude from the oil-soaked marshes and shamed the president of the United States for doing nothing.

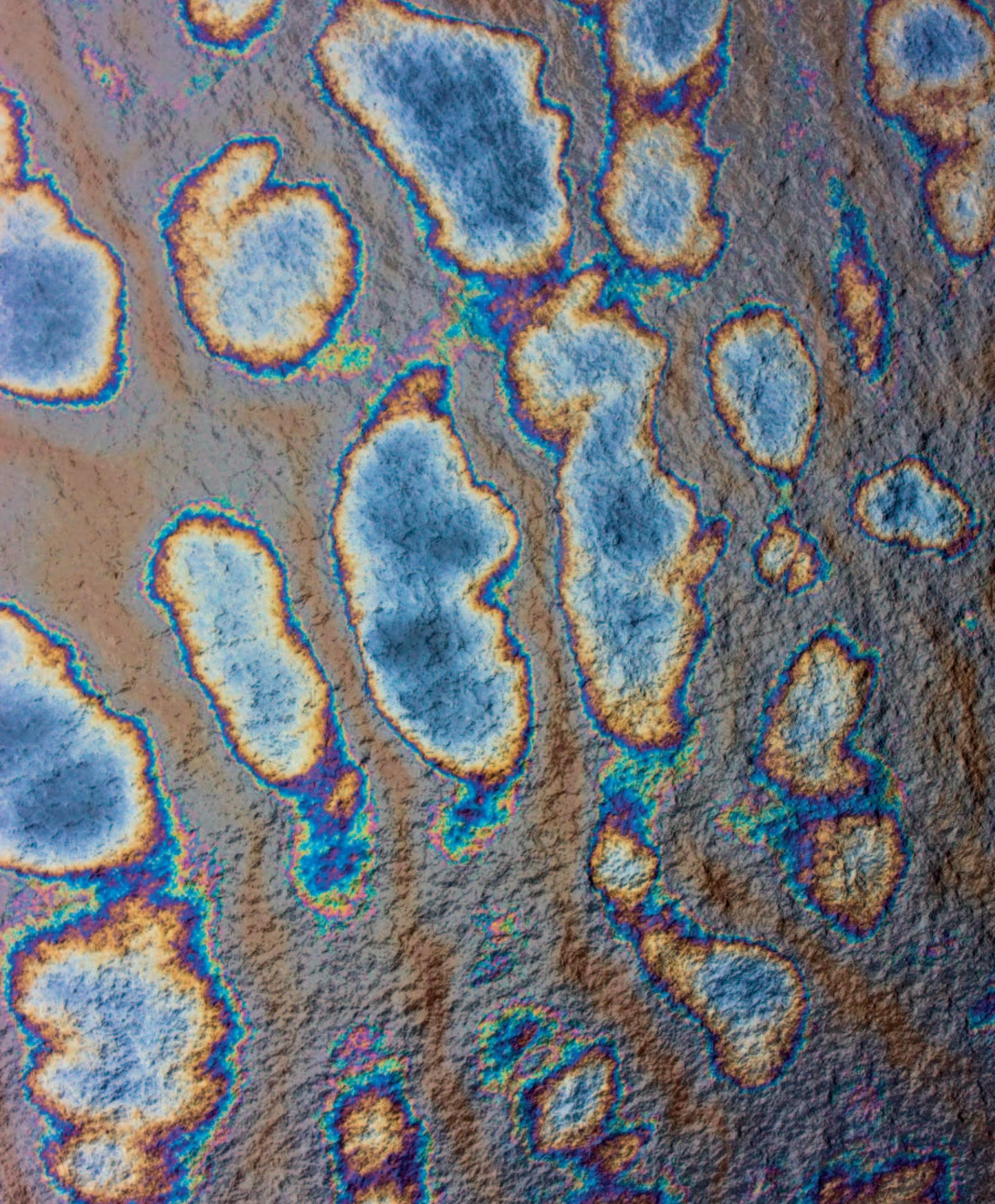
Real estate signs now read, OIL SPILL SPECIAL, with \$150,000 slashed to \$115,000. Most of the vacation homes on stilts are shuttered up.

We park our car on the edge of the public beach. It too is empty, cordoned off by an orange plastic fence: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Since Doug Suttles, the chief operating officer of BP, had just gone on national television to say he would feed Gulf shrimp to his children and to declare all Louisiana beaches open, we ignore the airy fence.

The beach feels desolate, tamped down by enormous vehicle tracks. I bend down and fit my hand into the individual tread marks. Gulls and terns are standing on black sand, and it’s hard to tell whether the dark color has been caused by oil or not. Avery goes in one direction and I go in the other, each of us appreciating a rare moment of solace. Bill is filming terns hovering above the surf.

Along the edge of the sea, there is no wrack line, no sea-



weed. Dead blue crabs are rolling in the small waves as if communicating a secret. I touch the water. It is oily. A silky sheen emanates off the surface, made more extreme by the severity of the heat. The stench of oil hangs in the humid air. Even so, the lure of the long empty expanse propels me forward.

I stop to pick up a few broken shells and continue walking, still weak from having gotten violently ill following our flight the day before. I retched my guts out while Avery drove us from Alabama to Mississippi to Louisiana. And each time I was on my knees by the side of the road, I thought, Is this dehydration, or a toxic hell from too much intake of oil fumes during our four-and-a-half-hour flight over the sea?

A vehicle with a red flashing light interrupts the stillness and I hear someone yelling. A man dressed in black, head to foot, gets out of the truck and motions me toward him.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am. You are contaminated.” I begin to walk past the fence. “Step back, ma’am. You are now contaminated, I cannot allow you to step out from the fence.”

“Who do you work for?” I ask, seeing the Talon Private Security Guard insignia on his black sweatshirt.

“No comment.”

“Where are you from?”

“The United States of America, ma’am.” He pauses and looks past me. “Louisiana.”

Avery starts to cross the imaginary line as well. “Step back. Stay on the beach. You’re contaminated and we are going to have to take you to the BP Decon Unit.”

“The Decon Unit?” I ask.

“To be decontaminated, ma’am.”

“And what are we contaminated with?”

“I am not at liberty to say, ma’am.”

“Dispersants?”

“No comment, ma’am.”

“Why isn’t there a warning posted?”

By now, another man has joined the Talon guard. “Didn’t you see the sign?”

“I didn’t see any sign,” Avery says.

“I did see the sign,” I say. “But since Doug Suttles announced this morning that all Louisiana beaches were open, we took him at his word.”

We are marched in military fashion half a mile down the “contaminated beach,” the Talon guard and the BP worker leading us onward from the other side of the fence as a stifling afternoon breeze blows hot sand across their footprints, erasing them.

Up ahead, we see two men dressed in full-body, white Tyvek coveralls with gloves and boots secured with duct tape. They are stoically standing near two kiddie pools filled with a clear, bubbling liquid. I want to say the pools had multicolored balloons on them, but I can’t be sure.

“Welcome to the BP Decontamination Unit,” one of the hazwhoppers says as the other unwinds a roll of white paper towels. He tears off six sheets and places them carefully on the blue tarp, evidently one for each of our feet. He puts the towels down and grabs a metal brush, asking for our flip-flops, which we dutifully take off. Seemingly, our hands ought to be contaminated as well now, but that does not seem to disturb them. He dips our sandals in the fluid and scrubs them hard.

“Please step in the pool,” the other hazwhopper instructs.

“What’s in the water?” Avery asks politely.

“Don’t worry, it’s all natural,” he says.

“Looks like it, especially the bubbles,” Avery says laughing.

I am next, and as I step into the water, my feet begin to burn, especially the cut on my ankle from Comfort Island.

“Is this about dispersants?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Bill is standing on the edge of the tarp, quietly filming the whole thing. When it’s his turn, they ask him to also put the legs of his tripod in the liquid. He remains quiet and continues the washing and rinsing with his camera running.

As we wipe our feet on the paper towels and step off the tarp, a BP worker asks for our names and phone numbers.

I write down my name and number, figuring they have both, since I had already received two unsolicited phone calls from BP representatives on my cell phone while traveling in the Gulf. Each left a message and a name, requesting I get in touch with their public relations department. When I returned their calls, one of the men said curtly, “I’m busy right now. I don’t have time to talk to you.” It was clear their calls were for intimidation, not information, my number most likely acquired from tapped phone lines of Jerry Cole and Robin Young.

Bill gives his name and a bogus number.

Avery surprises both of us with her acerbic rebuttal, delivered in utter cheerfulness. “I’ll give *you* my name and number, but I’m not giving either to BP.”

The worker, charmed, whispers, “Just give me another name

WE SEE
RIVERS OF OIL
AS WIDE AS THE
MISSISSIPPI
BRAIDING
THEMSELVES
INTO CURRENTS.

and some numbers for me to write down.” And so she does.

Across from the Decon Unit is a white tent where a dozen or more cleanup workers are taking a break from the heat. Amused by what we were just put through, they ask if we want some water or Gatorade. We take them up on their offer, sit down and join them, at the extreme displeasure of the Talon security guard. He disappears.

What we hear for the next fifteen minutes are tales of oil on the beach and of more oil to come. Dispersants dominate the discussion, how they were used repeatedly. Again, the phrase *carpet-bombed* is used. Fear for their own safety emerges. They share BP’s instructions, given to them a few weeks earlier, that should tropical storm Bonnie materialize, the whole island would be evacuated because it would turn into “a hot zone.” The workers were told there was a high probability of huge amounts of oil being dredged up from the deep and deposited on shore.

“We were on high alert,” one worker says.

The Talon guard returns with his radio in hand and says sternly, “You need to go. Now.”

I want to ask, “By whose authority?” But I don’t.

We are returned to our car in an official dune buggy driven by a former soldier who had served two tours in Iraq, a half-tour in Afghanistan, and one in Somalia. When we ask him his opinion about President Obama’s speech, delivered that morning, announcing the withdrawal of all troops from Iraq by August 31, 2011, he says, “It’s a mistake to take the troops out.”

“What do you think we should do?” Bill asks.

“We should have done what George Bush wanted us to do, but couldn’t. Bomb the hell out of both Iraq and Afghanistan.”

THE CONFLICT IN THE PERSIAN GULF and the conflict in the Gulf of Mexico are the same story, predicated on our collective thirst for oil. Our inability to connect the dots, the same oily dots that cover Comfort Island and the bodies of the dead in Iraq, is our unwillingness to see the world we are both creating and destroying simultaneously.

In 2010 alone, there have been major oil disasters off the coasts of China, Australia, and India. The people of the Niger Delta are drenched in oil, at risk physically and politically, every day. Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged for his protesting voice. And in 2009, forty-seven indigenous communities were decimated by an oil spill on the Santa Rosa River in Ecuador’s Amazon rainforest. Our consumption of oil is murdering life.

We know what is required. Change. Change that is both personal and political, creating an uprising among us that

will hold our government and corporations accountable for the warming of the seas and the disordering of Earth’s natural processes. We must also hold ourselves accountable for the choices we continue to make.

What are the 5 million barrels of oil that have spilled into the Gulf of Mexico worth to America? The oil now sullyng shorelines and sea would have powered the U.S. economy for a total of four hours.

I am sick. I am tired. And I am shattered by what I saw: an ocean of oil that we had been told was nearly gone. But the people who live and work in the Gulf of Mexico give me great heart because they are speaking forcefully and truthfully—asking us to listen.

While preparing this article for publication, I received a letter from Becky Duet, who is now a friend. She writes:

I have a deeper and different feeling now. It’s hard to explain—the bayous, the boats, the people, and all our lives. I always said if you starved down here it was because you were lazy. Well, since April 20, 2010, we have been starving!!!! An act caused by humans changed our lives. We can’t fish, ride our boats, entertain our friends with Cajun foods. Someone else is in charge of us.

She goes on to say: “I have not felt like a Cajun lately. When you see boats with oil booms instead of shrimp nets, crab cages on the banks, oyster boats with port-a-lets on them, and bait shops empty, we have lost our freedom.”

This is not just Becky’s story. It is our story.

The redfish on my plate is the redfish in the bayou is the redfish in the sea.

We are losing our minds if we believe that the source of our power lies in a circle of rigs named Deepwater Horizon. The source of authentic power is housed in the sacred nature of life, interdependent and whole, where a reverence for what is both human and wild is not only cultivated but honored. We must see our denial of this truth for what it is: madness.

On our way back to New Orleans, Avery, Bill, and I stop at the edge of the marsh to get our bearings before returning to the city. Tree swallows are in a feeding frenzy, and white egrets are returning to their nightly roosts along the bayou. It is twilight. The sky is crimson. My eyes focus on a large oyster bed, where each shell is poised upright in the black-tainted mud. I see them as hands, our own splayed hands, reaching beyond the oil. 🐚

To see more of J Henry Fair’s images and hear the photographer’s take on the story they tell, go to orionmagazine.org.