

“Here She Comes”
Open Door MCC
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Once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub.

In the beginning, water covered everything, and the voice of God hovered over it.

In the beginning, there was water, darkness, wind, and chaos.

In the beginning, God's voice created life.

In the beginning, the water receded from the earth and dry land appeared.

In the beginning, there was only water, and then there was land, then plants, light, animals.

In the beginning, the garden, and humans lived close to the earth and were in and of and with the earth.

Then water again covered the whole earth, for forty times forty days it wiped away all of the life, save what was on the boat.

And the waters subsided so that the trees were uncovered and life returned. Only water under the boat, then land, plants, light, animals. Life again followed water, chaos, death.

And it was good.

The film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* begins with a six-year-old girl building a birds nest from mud and sticks. More or less, I suppose, the way God made the first people, roughly. Before she puts the baby chick on the nest she made, she holds it to her ear to listen. Her voice narrates the film. Her voice is the word of God, it is God's breath, in the beginning was the word, and the word was in *Hushpuppy* and the word was of *Hushpuppy*. Her first words are, “All the time, everywhere, everything's hearts are beating and squirting and talking to each other in ways I can't understand. Most of the time they probably be saying, 'I'm hungry.' 'I gotta poop.' But sometimes they be talking in codes.”

I think the rest of the film and the rest of our lives are about listening, deciphering the codes. It's not very hard to understand, at least on the level as far as what she's listening to when she puts her ear to the chick's body, when she puts her ear to the pig's body, what she's hearing is their heartbeat. The codes she is deciphering are their life.

This child is learning to live. For her, for the people around her, this looks a lot like subsistence. It looks a lot like survival. She lives on a small island off the coast of Louisiana, they call it the Bathtub. The mainland city has built levees that separate and isolated the little community in the bay. She lives alone in a ramshackle mobile home, her father a little ways away in a tumbledown wooden shack. Other people scattered about in crumbleback huts and shanties on high ground. Everything they have and wear and own is used, dirty, broken, repurposed. She sleeps on the floor or a couch, with a blanket. She wears rain boots through the wet ground between buildings. To many of us, maybe this doesn't count as living.

We see them eat. Her daddy roasts a plucked chicken, which he pulls from an empty cooler. There is nothing else in the cooler but tin foil, no ice, no other meat, no other food. Like manna, there's just the one chicken for this one meal, and when it's ready he rings the bell and hollers, “Feed up time. Feed up.” He reminds her to share with the dog, but she is already sharing. The dog, the pig, the chickens are her pets. Her friends. She sits on the ground among the pylons with the animals under the shack, eating a plain roasted chicken, tearing off limbs with her teeth, sharing with the dog. It looks like survival, and not much more than that.

But the filmmakers want us to know that there is more, that there is much more than that. In the next scene, Hushpuppy and her daddy are out on the water in a boat recycled from a truck bed, admiring their island, "Ain't that ugly over there?" he says, looking at the city on the mainland. "We got the prettiest place on earth." And the following scene is a celebration; the camera soars across the beach to a parade of old cars and tractors, crowds cheering, bands fiddling, babies and children crawling and playing, and wagonloads of shrimp, crawfish, crayfish, and crabs. Hushpuppy makes sure that we understand that this life is more than survival, more than sufficient, that this life is full, and celebrative. "The Bathtub's got more holiday than the whole rest of the world."

She says, "Daddy always saying that up in the dry world they got none of what we got. They only got holidays once a year. They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers. They got their babies stuck in carriages. And chicken on sticks and all that kind of stuff." The people parade and then dance and then light fireworks, which explode and illuminate the island and light the night sky and dance in the eyes of Hushpuppy and her daddy, and she says, "But me and my Daddy, we stay right here. We's who the earth is for."

It's important that we know this from the outset. It's important that we see the stark simplicity of their lives, the dramatic differences between their home and ours, their possessions and ours, their meals and ours. And then it's essential that we understand that it isn't *they* who are just surviving. It isn't *them* for whom life is shallow and superficial and empty. That it may be our things and our cravings and our accumulation that is keeping us from living as fully as the folks in the Bathtub.

It's important to recognize that in this world, and in *our* world, value and meaning comes from living close to the earth, close to the plants, the animals, close to the community, hearing their heartbeats, listening to their codes.

Hushpuppy goes to school at the houseboat of Bathsheba, where she learns to grow plants in pots, learns geography from a map of Louisiana and a photograph of the polar ice cap, learns history from a tattoo of aurochs on her teacher's leg, ancient beasts who Bathsheba says slaughtered cave-babies with impunity because the cave men were too poor and too small. In Hushpuppy's imagination, these aurochs rampage through her home and the island with no mercy.

Because the looming storm comes, and the water covers everything she knew. It covers her ramshackle shack, it covers her daddy's tumbledown wooden shack, it covers her friends' crumbleback huts and shanties on high ground, it covers the tree that hid her treasures, it covers the old cars and tractors and the old roads where they celebrated the parade. The storm floods bring the saltwater over the levee and kill everything she needs for life. First the land, then the plants, then the animals. The aurochs rage through her imagination destroying her community, and her daddy's heart. Because her daddy is dying, too, of heart disease. He spends his days leaving the hospital against medical advice, forbidding her to cry, demanding that she be loud and strong and fierce and capable, blowing up the levee that traps the saltwater flood over their island, teaching Hushpuppy how to feed up herself with the riches of food in the bay, teaching her how to look after the people in the Bathtub.

It was important that we knew early on that this family and this community is full and jubilative, because it is only now that Hushpuppy is learning to survive. Survival isn't a matter of getting cleaned up by the evacuation camp, put in a blue dress, hair combed and braided with civilized, processed food and table utensils. Survival is about a six-year-old girl with no home and no daddy on the edge of the water living Lucille Clifton's poem

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.
("won't you celebrate with me," Lucille Clifton, 1936-2010)

It's not hard to understand this film as a parable. The polar ice cap is melting and will cover our homes and communities with water and kill first the land, then the plants, then the animals. The wealthy have erected walls and levees to protect themselves (ourselves?) from the unknown and unmanageable, the fearful, uncertain, chaos. Our church or our households or our health entering uncertain, seemingly catastrophic transitions. Change as loss. Uncertainty as loss. Loss as devastation.

It's not hard to understand the lessons of this fable as to listen to the heartbeat of the people, the animals, the trees, listen to the heartbeat of the living, decipher the code of life to share life, to celebrate life, to survive in the fullest possible sense. To recognize that almost surely this community and its resilience, repurposing, recycling will show us that uncertainty need not be catastrophe, that change need not ruin, even that loss may not be *Loss*.

As her father is dying, Hushpuppy says, "Everybody loses the thing that made them. It's even how it happens in nature. The brave men stay and watch it happen, they don't run."

Hushpuppy's father is dying. The island is recovering from the flood of salt. Externally, Hushpuppy escapes the forced evacuation camp and the bus to probably-foster-care in the mainland city. Internally, she begins to change from a child being cared for, being fed up by her daddy – but to a child not yet ready to feed up herself. In this transitional, liminal, seminal internal and external place, Hushpuppy leads the other girls of the island on a quest into the water. They shriek and run boldly in and swim to a bargeboat. They are carried by the bargeboat to a kind of floating juke joint-catfish shack-bobbing brothel in the sea. Hushpuppy goes, she says, to find her mother and to become cohesive, like the bargeboat captain who keeps the wrappers of his chicken biscuits because they remind him of who he was when he ate each one.

"Which way are we going?" Hushpuppy asks the bargeboat captain. "Don't matter, baby, this boat will take you exactly where you need to be. It's that kind of boat."

On the juke joint jazz boat, Hushpuppy is drawn to a woman in the lounge who asks what she needs, baby. The woman takes her to the kitchen and talks to her while frying up gator meat in cornmeal. It's the only story she knows about her mother, that she saved her daddy from a gator and fried up the meat in cornmeal. The woman tells her that life is like being a waitress when "everything on your plate

going to fall on the floor, and nobody going to be there to pick it up for you,” so, “Smile, girl, 'cause nobody like a pity-party-having-ass woman.” Back out in the lounge, the woman holds Hushpuppy close. All the other girls who came with Hushpuppy are also dancing with the women in the lounge, being held close, as Fats Waller sings “If that ain't love, it'll have to do until the real thing comes along.”

Hushpuppy asks the woman to take care of her. The woman says she can't, but Hushpuppy can stay. Hushpuppy says, “This is my favorite thing,” then says, “I need to go home,” then whispers into the woman's ear. And then the woman holds her long and close, and kisses her hair, and spins her around and around. And then the woman sets her down and walks away without ever looking back even once. As she walks away from Hushpuppy, all the other women in the lounge are dancing not with the girls but with the men they were with before.

Was that woman Hushpuppy's mother?

Did any of this actually happen to Hushpuppy?

What does “actually” mean?

Was the intimacy with the woman a fantasy sandwiched into the single instant after they make eye contact in the lounge?

Did they ever actually make eye contact?

What does “actually” mean?

Was all of it, every word, every instant, every heartbeat, the fantasy of a child longing for a mother, longing for a home?

Maybe. Probably. Fats Waller singing “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” is the same song playing when Hushpuppy had first arrived in the lounge.

It's easy to understand the floating juke joint as an allegory of an internal coming of age quest. It's easy to think that the girls are dancing with the women they will become. Or the story and the world is calling for balance between a daddy who demands strength and broils a plucked chicken while hollering “feed up” and a mother who encourages and comforts and nurtures while she cooks the gator she just saved you from.

These are moments that we recognize intimately: longing for the known and comfortable and even gentle, longing for safety and love from the unknown and unmanageable. Longing for levees from the fearful, the uncertain, from chaos. Yearning for stability, for assurance, for buoyance as our church or our households or our health enter uncertain, seemingly catastrophic transitions. Needing things to be sure and secure.

It is remarkable in this moment that, whether reality or fantasy, Hushpuppy doesn't stay in these soft, warm, languorous arms. She decides to go home, where the land is still sowed with salt, where the plants and pets are lost, where her daddy is dying. She decides to return, and she goes decisively, fiercely. She pumps her arms intensely, walks powerfully. The aurochs chase her, thunder behind her, questioning her, trying to frighten her, trying to make her unsure again, trying to devastate her again. At her daddy's door she turns, she stares it down defiantly, almost daring it to come closer. Her daddy watches as the aurochs kneel to her. As her face softens. As she says to it, “You're my friend, kind of. I gotta take care of mine.”

I am not about to say that change, loss, devastation is our friend, or that uncertainty is a friend, or that catastrophe is a gift, or that fear and chaos are anything other than fear and chaos.

What I will say is that in this film where reality and allegory and poetry and life meet and blend and wash with significance and meaning, a six-year-old child swam an ocean to return to her ruined home and her dying father, stared it down until it knelt before her, and said to it, "You're my friend, kind of. I gotta take care of mine."

You can decide what, if anything, that means to you outside of the story.

She brought her daddy cornmeal-fried catfish from the juke joint. (Gator?) She feeds him up, his last meal. She dipped it into tabasco with all the solemnity of the eucharist. The one who needed to be cared for has become one who cares for. The one who was fed up become the ones who feeds up. The one who had to be told at the beginning up the film to put her pants on becomes the one who brings a styrofoam carton of cornmeal-fried, tabasco-dipped food across an ocean. Her daddy says, "Real good."

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Among the last words of the film are the community reciting a funeral hymn as the burning bier of Hushpuppy's daddy floats away on the bay:

As I stand by the bayou,

I watch a ship as she disappears.

There, she is gone.

And we cry for this.

But she's not gone.

She's just as real as when she left me.

And somewhere else, other voices are calling out, "Here she comes!"

And that is dying.

"Here she comes!"

(Robert Hendrikson, adapted from "Midrash," in *The Ocean Almanac*).

Our church or our homes or our jobs or our families or our health are in the middle of uncertain, seemingly catastrophic transitions. Maybe we are experiencing these changes as loss, uncertainty as loss, loss as devastation.

Maybe, though, maybe she's not gone. Maybe she's just as real as when she left me. And somewhere else, other voices are calling out, "Here she comes!"

Here she comes.

The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If anything busts, even the smallest piece, then everything busts.

If you can fix the broken piece, everything can go right back.

When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. But when it all goes quiet, I see that they are all right here. I see that I am a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right. When I die the scientists of the future, they going to find it all. They going to know,

Once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.

And together the community walks down the island road, together, strong, carrying banners, and the water rolls and covers their feet and the land and they walk on.