

Once in the water, I slip down into our pirogue and sit on a netted pile of duck decoys. Peter’s golden Lab Marly jumps in after me and we slink into the shallow waters of the marsh, kicking up black mud with our propeller engine as we move farther away from land.

“Seven sounds like a lot to me,” I say to Peter, watching the boys disappear into the bayou.

“For some people, if you haven’t bagged your limit, then it’s a bad hunt,” he says. “Not everyone is as enlightened as we are,” he chuckles.

More than anything, it is the thought of a crisply roasted duck that wakes Peter at three a.m. on a Saturday morning. It is the thought of the sweet and salty tang of thinly sliced duck prosciutto that makes those early dark mornings worthwhile. A true academic at heart, he will study and research for hours how best to treat his kill; he will experiment in earnest and tell you all about his findings. He is a walking encyclopedia of well-researched thoughts and conclusions. He is the kind of person you want to be hunting with when your ultimate destination is the dinner table.

Bayou Terra Buff that we propel through is a naturally occurring swampy inlet that was once solid earth. The name came about because there were once many bison here, on the rare, firmer ground that could support such large animals. Now it has a shallow layer of water that moves like black hills of oil behind us, as smooth and uniform as mercury, with only a sliver of a moon to reflect on its motion.

On Bayou Terra Buff, it all seems a bit like an alternative world: water higher than earth, pelicans rising diagonally in a rope of pearls in the tall smartweed ahead. We are at sea level, higher than the city of New Orleans in the distance. As our boat sends ripples through the marsh, speckled coot,

looking like a cross between seagulls and ducks, begin to walk on water in groups, their thick legs a blur of frenzied motion.

Peter banks the pirogue into the mud and I step out in my waders. I try to keep from sinking deeper and deeper into the marsh, which dances the line between stable ground and quicksand. Marly dives in, too, as Peter throws plastic duck decoys into the water, one by one, where they bob, peering down at their flawless reflections in the pink morning water. These decoys will hopefully signal to the real ducks that there is food here and they should come pay a visit.

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There is a whole upside-down world in the reflection, even prettier than the one swimming right side up. The sky is a spectrum of color that repeats itself from up high to deep in the water, while the leafy green vegetation called floatant quakes, lights up green and incandescent on the surface.

The killdeer and snipe begin to streak low just where the upside-down