

# Burden sharing at the water's edge



## Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore

By Elizabeth Rush

**RISING**  
DISPATCHES from the  
NEW AMERICAN SHORE  
ELIZABETH RUSH

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Both elegy and eulogy, *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore* is a compelling portrait of life in a changing climate. Author Elizabeth Rush's work of creative non-fiction brings you in — experientially, scientifically, emotionally, aesthetically, viscerally — to US communities grappling with the realities of human-induced climate change in the twenty-first century.

Moving from the Gulf Coast to New York's Staten Island and Maine's outer banks to the Pacific Northwest and the San Francisco Bay, the book includes testimonials from inhabitants of these communities — stakeholders if you will. Rush intersperses these first-person accounts with her own. Along the way, she reveals personal details while also profiling the struggles of people like Richard Santos in Alviso, California, Marilyn Wiggings in Pensacola, Florida and Laura Sewall in Small Point, Maine. Most striking in this work is the power of Rush's storytelling; from it, we as readers gain insights into the climate challenges experienced by people living at the water's edge.

There is a tragic beauty to these stories. Rush conveys the attachment to place, as well as attachment to the past, that leads to a set of tragic choices: lose what you have or organize a retreat. There is a dire two-fold freedom facing people in these

communities: the freedom to lose your 'home' or the freedom to be destitute in what's left of it. For example, through Chris Brunet, Rush takes us through the plight of residents in Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, who are lamenting their loss of place as well as recognizing that the future will look nothing like the past. Simply put, the Isle de Jean Charles is disappearing. Remaining residents are losing both places and place names. Rush notes that due to retreating shores in the bayou, the area has been remapped with thirty-one places removed, and "less than half a century ago, the island was ten times larger".

Rush skilfully captures similarities between cases; similarities of aesthetics as well as struggle. When visiting Alviso, California, Rush writes "immediately it reminds me of Oakwood Beach: the working-class housing stock, the salty-sweet air that sweeps through the streets, the feeling of being somehow removed from the bustle of big-city life. Most importantly, like Oakwood, Alviso juts out into the surrounding marsh like a swollen thumb". Rush is in Alviso to bear witness to the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. This is an ambitious effort that seeks to keep wetlands — and the residents in and around them — from being swallowed up by the sea.

*Rising* confronts many grim paradoxes associated with people and places at the forefront of climate impacts. For example: (1) those at the forefront of impacts are those with the least capacity to address them; (2) those most impacted are often those with the least influential voices in decision-making; and (3) governance mechanisms to deal with the problem are often weak, under-resourced and coordinate poorly across spatial scales. Elizabeth Rush considers these impacts, features these voices and asks questions of the policies designed to help them.

She describes inequalities embedded in a key set of policies in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), which is managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The NFIP is designed as a subsidized insurance scheme for high-risk, flood-prone areas — but there are a number of hidden imperfections. She writes "too many times I have been told that there will never be enough money in the federal coffers to relocate everyone away from the risk of rising tides. This is true until we decide to make it untrue".

But Rush does not characterize the people and places in these stories as mere victims or passive actors. "They are less victims than agents. More rhizomes than rampikes". These are not people who are encountering and simply accepting a troubled world as it is; they are people who are struggling to re-make their realities in the face of worldly change.

The approach taken by Rush through creative non-fiction is not one I am accustomed to. My reading time is generally taken up by news and peer-reviewed research, but I was pleased to be left with the feeling that I know these places and have met these people. I have shared their burdens and better understand their perspectives. Elizabeth Rush's *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore* is a departure from the usual way of knowing about climate change, but a departure that is highly recommended. □

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