

Flood waters

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue



Beasts of the Southern Wild, directed by newcomer Benh Zeitlin, has drawn a lot of attention in this awards season, including an Oscar nomination for best actress for its young star, Quvenzhané Wallis, who is a gorgeous little light in this strange film that blends fantasy with social commentary.

Wallis plays Hushpuppy, an indomitable child who lives in a backwater community called the Bathtub. Her father and other adults in town stress the superiority of the Bathtub over the industrialized city beyond the levee, which has a dearth of holidays and where meat comes wrapped in plastic. The people of the Bathtub, Hushpuppy is certain, have more holidays than the rest of the world, and these are fabulous celebrations. The unbridled Hushpuppy runs toward the viewer with joy, sparklers in both hands.

Hushpuppy also meditates on the interdependence of all things and the importance of each tiny bit of the universe. Her lessons at school fit the locality: all creatures are meat, she learns, and the most important thing is to learn to take care of “people smaller and sweeter than you are.”

Hushpuppy's father, Wink, stops a neighbor who is giving a lesson on how to open a crab delicately with a knife and proceeds to demonstrate the Bathtub way. "Beast it!" the community yells to Hushpuppy—which means rip the crab open with your bare hands and tear out the goodness with your teeth. Hushpuppy beasts the crab, cheered on by the whole table.

The Bathtub is a place of beauty and joy but also of terrible and terrifying poverty. Hushpuppy's mama is long gone. Her father loves her and wants to protect her, but he can't hold back the beasts that threaten his home and his daughter. He has a drinking problem and is slowly dying. Even before the floodwaters come, as the people beyond the levee knew they would, Wink disappears for a stretch, leaving Hushpuppy to fend for herself. "If my daddy don't come back soon," she says, "I'm gonna have to start eatin' my pets."

Wink does come home. When the storm hits, most Bathtub residents flee, but Wink stays put. Hushpuppy and her daddy emerge from the storm on Wink's boat, surveying the desolation. The aching truth of Hushpuppy's dependence is in her observation: "For the animals that didn't have a dad to put them in a boat, the end of the world already happened."

For all the beauties of the Bathtub and of Hushpuppy, her story is one of abuse and neglect. It is certainly not a story of childhood that any loving parent would write. Part of the impact of the movie comes from the colossal gap between Hushpuppy's experience and what middle-class American parents want for their own children. It's the gap between organic tofu and a can of dog food in a dirty pan; between academically ambitious schools and a hut full of crustaceans; between a warm bed and a dirty floor in a flooded shack; and between two involved parents and Hushpuppy's absent mother and disintegrating father.

That gap is a major one, but one effect of the film is to narrow it somehow. I can watch *Beasts* only as a parent, seeing Hushpuppy through the faces of my own kids. Living firmly on what is supposed to be the "safe" side of the gap, I felt for Wink and his inability to keep the chaos at bay.

American parents are committed to keeping children safe at almost any cost, but the reality of parenting is always closer to Wink's world than we care to admit—or are allowed to admit. Chaos threatens. The beasts are at our door. The situation is tenuous and out of our control.

“I’m your daddy,” Wink tells his little girl, “and it’s my job to make sure you don’t die.” There is truth in those words, but there is desperation too. In a broken world—and *Beasts* depicts plenty of brokenness—all of us fail at caring for those who are “smaller and sweeter,” and all of us have been failed in our time of need. The film left me aching for Hushpuppy and all those like her—and calling on the name of the one who “dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over” (Isa. 51:10).