

New Orleans Review

31:2





# New Orleans Review

Volume 31 Number 2

FRONTISPIECE:

*Lonely Mary*

David Rae Morris

BOOK DESIGN:

Christopher Chambers

*New Orleans Review*, founded in 1968, is published by Loyola University New Orleans. Loyola University is a charter member of the Association of Jesuit University Presses. *New Orleans Review* considers unsolicited submissions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, art, and translations year round. Subscriptions \$14 per year; \$20 outside U.S. Send all correspondence to *New Orleans Review*, Box 195, Loyola University, New Orleans, LA 70118. For more information, visit us at [www.loyno.edu/~noreview](http://www.loyno.edu/~noreview). Contents listed in the PMLA Bibliography, the Index of American Periodical Verse, and the American Humanities Index. Printed in the United States on recycled paper. Copyright 2006 by Loyola University New Orleans. All rights reserved. Distributed by Ingram Periodicals. ISSN: 0028-6400.

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*They Call This Quarter French*

They call this quarter French,  
though blessings here are colder  
than their beer who loot the runeless  
and convert the commerce of my closet  
hour to base sandwiched coin.

They call this quarter French,  
where currency is fenced from black  
iron hearts and every gate gapes wide  
on neon ghosts, a bitter loaf carved  
from time's long bones.

They call this quarter French,  
where no one has died for love or art  
or made a masterpiece of either  
since both became the meat of Fortune's  
grope.

I am alien, from a corner of this state  
where they would say, without a parson  
love is the soul's death by misadventure,  
whiskey for wounds of one kind  
or another, and nothing is sold  
except what can be bought.

Art there is rare as the Roc's  
prodigious turd, and pain and sun

and Jesus choked always within  
a single lost blind testament,  
stitched into the homespun of our souls.

But I have seen bodies fused by  
fire in a motel, the black bed blazed,  
they guessed, by some great spark  
without a certain cause. There  
should be monuments to the stark brew  
we drank and, one drained day bleeding a  
pinestench rain, I yet may find  
the words to tell you why.

Up there my father paid insurance  
claims on artful madmen's broken cars,  
on whiplash lies, on  
those whose word was better than their bond,  
and roughnecks who swore chunks  
of crumbling derrick in their eyes.

None of my old neighbors would grasp  
this place or do well in its midst.  
For them sin is the undertow of  
our blood's goal: those who drown  
in painting or in gin or voyagers  
past Hercules, lost on the way to Nineveh,  
gone down in the sea's sharp groin.

For them, sin and its capaciousness,  
grand as the fiend's wide cloak,

is a form of art, a mean demanding love,  
a long dive beyond fearing.

To find a place where it is counterfeit,  
offered in a stall, would make them  
question grace and doom and fists and sanity.  
Which is most likely why they write to me  
and ask about The Quarter, is it French?  
I write back and say, come see,  
not surprised to see they never come.

JAMES NOLAN

### *Acts of God*

Outside, rowboats paddled up Canal Street  
while I was delivered howling by lantern  
in a hospital called Hôtel Dieu during  
a hurricane that knocked out New Orleans.  
I have a feel for rattling windowpanes,  
for rivers racing through sky, for heaven

flung endlessly down. This year August ends  
with God banging on the door like the police.  
Venetian blinds clatter against glass,  
gusts ripple through calendar pages back  
to the day of my birth, the steel wok hung  
by a hook from the rafter chimes an Angelus

against the skillet, curtains billow as I  
follow from bed to bed, room to room, city  
to city, continent to continent, capturing  
the wind like a spinnaker, covering weather  
maps with cyclonic swirls and arrows, over-  
flowing boundaries, sexes and time zones.

My kitchen globe brightens as the sky blackens  
and rising with the steam of a boiling kettle  
I approach my glory, the air finally matching  
my emergency, reaching for the same velocity,  
announcing ourselves with a loosened shutter  
back and forth against the side of the house.

*Adieu to New Orleans*

Perhaps a mile downriver from the Moon Walk,  
Louisa Street, maybe,  
she was just getting under way.  
The casual tourists did not notice  
a faded freighter,  
long in the water,  
loaded to the Plimsoll,  
inching away from the wharf  
into the invisible currents off Algiers Point,  
heading upriver to a destination no more exciting  
than Burnside or LaPlace or Baton Rouge;

didn't notice because  
from the sun deck of the Brewery  
they saw her abeam.  
Eyes peeled for hyperbole in the Quarter  
would miss the subtle separation,  
cables cast, booms retracted, bulkheads sealed,  
because her full hull was moving closer, not her bow.

Poised, motionless, over the burnished surface,  
an hour passed at least  
before she began making headway upriver.  
For the longest time she seemed suspended,  
as if still at anchor  
in the grey water.

Only the silent expanse of exorbitant power  
paced her deliberate advance.

But in the quiet sunlight she eventually rounded the point  
and was almost up to speed, excusing herself  
as she plodded across the dance floor  
at the foot of Canal Street,  
her wake just brushing the hems of the decked-out  
Queen, the white Princess, this and that Belle,  
partnered with the polished Admiral,  
and the dutiful shuttling ferries, the petty officers  
that sashayed and reeled between the point and the twin bridges.  
Her departure went unmarked.

*St. Roch Campo Santo, New Orleans*

*The iron-grating gates stand ajar. It is St. Roch's Cemetery, known of old as the Campo Santo...[A]fter the awesome yellow fever epidemic of 1878, people began to flock to the shrine of the saint who was especially invoked in cases of affliction, disease and deformities.*

—from the guidebook to the St. Roch Chapel and Campo Santo

The saint lifts the hem of his robe  
to show me the wound on his right leg.

In the festering light of five or six candles  
and the steady hiss of rain eroding the day,

I've come back alone as if for comfort  
to this cemetery's half-forgotten shrine.

I touch the wound, where robbers stabbed him,  
then the small dog at his feet, his earthly companion

as he wandered, destitute, healing plague  
until he found his way home; his townsmen

took him for a spy, jailed him and let him die.  
Patron of this yellow fever parish, he intercedes

for the terminal and invalid; even filmed  
with dust, his skin looks youthful, alive:

I would kiss his dark sore if it would give  
either of us solace, if it would bring back whole

companions who died from the wrong touch,  
whatever killer stole their love. He watches

as I walk to the locked grate of the alcove  
where the sick have left their offerings:

a baby's shoes, a baby's back brace,  
a corset with stained laces and rusted stays,

plaster casts of organs—heart, lung, liver—  
dentures, a plaster hand hung upside down

from a hook in the wall; scattered on the floor,  
age-bleached polaroids of smiling loved ones,

grimy stuffed animals, prayers scrawled  
on business cards, post-its, scraps—

*suffer us, who are nothing, and live  
knowing you cannot help but see*

*yourself in our broken image, a body  
imprisoned in terminal hope, like God.*

*Memento N. O.*

what I have kept is  
this scar on my left knee  
& the shard of green glass  
you teased from my flesh

me kneeling & you kneeling  
me pressing into you  
in the alley behind the bar  
our beers lukewarming upstairs

we return repentant  
two prodigals all apologies  
& our friends plug us back  
into the same conversation

same song on the jukebox  
still the same *please*  
*let me introduce myself*  
or pleading again & again

you seek out my knee  
under the table  
squeeze gently  
smile & squeeze harder

& I swear right then  
I could feel god himself

beaming down on us  
blessing my bleeding wound

we were praying so hard  
back there in the dark

*tattoo*

in the small of his back  
i saw your tattoo  
remembering that cold ass mardi gras  
your holy kneed blue jeans  
that dirty old motorcycle jacket  
smelling of backroom bar sex and secrets  
your liquored whispering voice  
asking for a light  
for a sign  
for forgiveness  
asking not to be forgotten

in the small of his back  
i saw your tattoo  
the red heart  
carried between wings  
at the gospel tent  
on the last sunday of jazz fest  
where jesus asked not to be forgotten

in the small of his back  
sweaty black women  
sing sweet songs to jesus  
mixed with hot ass beer  
and crawfish sacks  
and the gospel tent sways  
with drunken sun-fried friends  
dancing with their savior  
asking for nothing





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Much has been written and published about New Orleans in the months since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. And much of it, though often heartfelt and eloquent, has been written by writers from elsewhere. So it seems an appropriate time for an issue of this journal dedicated to New Orleans, by New Orleans writers. Richard Ford, in the *New York Times* in early September, wrote an elegy for the city in which he closed by saying: "I write in place of others today, for the ones who can't be found. And there is a blunt ending now, one we always feared, never wished for, do not deserve...But today is a beginning. There's no better way to think of it now. Those others will surely be writing soon." We are still in that beginning, still living in the aftermath, and no one knows quite what New Orleans will become in the years ahead. But New Orleans has survived, the writers are back, and they are surely writing. The number of submissions we received was overwhelming, and makes clear that this is still a place with a vibrant literary community, still a place that inspires the writers and artists and musicians who call this city home. We are honored to include among our contributors two important voices from the past—a poem by John William Corrington from the first issue of the *New Orleans Review*, and an excerpt from an essay by Walker Percy first published in *Harper's*, also in 1968—both remarkably relevant still. This issue is a testament to the city and her people, remembering the past, mourning what has been lost, and celebrating the unique culture that yet endures.

—Christopher Chambers

### *New Orleans Mon Amour*

Somebody said that the only interesting thing about New Orleans was that it smelled different. There are whiffs of ground coffee and a congeries of smells which one imagines to be the "naval stores" that geography books were always speaking of. Yet the peculiar flavor of New Orleans is more than a smell. It has something to do with the South and with a cutting off of the South, with the River and with history. New Orleans is both intimately related to the South and yet in a real sense cut adrift not only from the South but from the rest of Louisiana, somewhat like Mont-Saint-Michel awash at high tide. One comes upon it, moreover, in the unlikeliest of places, by penetrating the depths of the Bible Belt, running the gauntlet of Klan territory, the pine barrens of south Mississippi, Bogalusa and the Florida parishes of Louisiana. Out and over a watery waste and there it is, a proper enough American city and yet within the next few hours the tourist is apt to see more nuns and naked women than he ever saw before. And when he opens the sports pages to follow the Packers, he comes across such enigmatic headlines as HOLY ANGELS SLAUGHTER SACRED HEART. It is as if Marseilles had been plucked up off the Midi, monkeyed with by Robert Moses and Hugh Hefner, and set down off John O'Groats in Scotland.

The River confers a peculiar dispensation upon the space of New Orleans. Arriving from Memphis or Cincinnati one feels the way Huck Finn did shoving off from Illinois, going from an encompassed place to an in-between zone, a sector of contending or lapsing jurisdictions. On New Orleans' ordinary streets one savors a sense both of easement and of unspecified possibilities, in fine a latitude of

which notoriety and raffishness—particularly its well-known sexual license—are only the more patent abuses.

Steeped in official quaintness and self-labeled “the most interesting city in America,” New Orleans conceives of itself in the language of the old Fitzpatrick Traveltalks as a city of contrasts: thriving metropolis, quaint French Quarter, gracious old Garden District. Actually the city is a most peculiar concoction of exotic and American ingredients, a gumbo of stray chunks of the South, of Latin and Negro oddments, German and Irish morsels, all swimming in a fairly standard American soup. What is interesting is that none of the ingredients has overpowered the gumbo yet each has flavored the others and been flavored. The Negro hit upon jazz not in Africa but on Perdido Street, a lost nowhere place, an interstice between the Creoles and the Americans where he could hear not only the airs of the French Opera House, but also the hoedowns of the Kaintucks, and the salon music uptown. Neither Creole nor Scotch-Irish quite prevailed in New Orleans and here perhaps was the luck of it.

If the French had kept the city it would today be a Martinique, a Latin confection. If the Americans had got there first we’d have Houston or Jackson sitting athwart the great American watershed. As it happened, there may have occurred just enough of a cultural stand-off to give one room to turn around in, a public space which is delicately balanced between the Northern vacuum and the Southern pressure cooker.

What makes New Orleans interesting is not its celebrated quaint folk, who are all gone anyway—Johnny Crapaud, the Kaintucks, the Louis Armstrongs—but the unquaint folk who followed them. The Creoles now are indistinguishable from the Americans except by name.... Yet being unquaint in New Orleans is still different from being unquaint in Dallas. Indeed the most recent chunk added to the gumbo are the unquaint emigrés from the heartland, who, ever

since Sherwood Anderson left Ohio, have come down in droves. What happens to these pilgrims? Do they get caught upon the wheel of the quaint, use up New Orleans, and move on to Cuernavaca? Do they inform the quaint or are they informed? Those who stay often follow a recognizable dialectic, a reaction against the seedy and a reversion to the old civic virtues of Ohio which culminates in a valuable proprietorship of the quaint, a curator’s zeal to preserve the best of the old and also to promote new “cultural facilities.” It is often the ex-heartlanders who save jazz, save the old buildings, save the symphony. Sometimes an outlander, a member of the business-professional establishment, who has succeeded in the Protestant ethic of hard work and corporate wheeling-and-dealing, even gets to be king of Mardi Gras these days, replacing old Creoles for whom Fat Tuesday bore the traditional relation to Ash Wednesday. There has occurred a kind of innocent re-paganization of Mardi Gras in virtue of which the successful man not only reaps the earthly reward of money but also achieves his kingdom here and now. The life of the American businessman in New Orleans is ameliorated by the quasi-liturgical rhythm of Mardi Gras, two months of Carnival and ten months of Lent.

Here, in the marriage of George Babbitt and Marianne, has always resided the best hope and worst risk of New Orleans. The hope, often fulfilled, is that the union will bring together the virtues of each, the best of the two lifestyles, industry and grace, political morality and racial toleration. Of course, as in the projected marriage of George Bernard Shaw and his lady admirer, the wrong genes can just as easily combine. Unfortunately and all too often the Latins learned Anglo-Saxon racial morality and the Americans learned Latin political morality. The fruit of such a mismatch is something to behold: Baptist governors and state legislators who loot with Catholic gaiety and Protestant industry. Transplant the worst of Mississippi to the delta and what do you get? Plaquemines

Parish, which is something like Neshoba County run by Trujillo. Reincarnate Senator Eastland in the Latin tradition and you end up with Leander Perez, segregationist boss of the lowlands between New Orleans and the Gulf.

For any number of reasons New Orleans should be less habitable than Albany or Atlanta. Many of its streets look like the alleys of Warsaw. It's garbage collection is whimsical and sporadic. Its tax assessment system is absurd. It spends more money on professional football and less on its public library than any other major city. It has some of the cruelest slums in America and blood-sucking landlords right out of Dickens, and its lazy complacent judges won't put them in jail. It plans the largest air-conditioned domed sports stadium in the world and has no urban renewal to speak of. Its Jefferson Parish is the newest sanctuary for Mafia hoods. Its Bourbon Street is as lewd and joyless a place as Dante's Second Circle of Hell, lewd with that special sad voyeur lewdness which marks the less felicitous encounters between Latin permissiveness and Anglo-Saxon sex morality.

Its business establishments and hotelmen-restaurateurs are content that lewdness be peddled with one hand and Old World charm with the other—Bourbon Street for the conventioneer, Royal Street for his wife—while everyone looks ahead with clear-eyed all-American optimism for new industry and the progress of the port. Yet there are even now signs that cynical commercialization will kill the goose. The Chamber of Commerce type reasons so: if all the tourists like the Vieux Carré, the patio-cum-slave-quarter bit, let's do it up brown with super slave quarters, huge but quaint hives of hundreds of cells laced with miles of wrought iron and lit by forests of gas lamps. An elevated expressway is planned along the riverbank in front of Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral, with a suitable décor, perhaps a wrought-iron façade and more gas lamps. Twenty

years from now and the Vieux Carré may well be a Disneyland Française of high-rise slave quarters full of Yankee tourists looking out at other Yankee tourists, the whole nestled in the neutral ground between expressways. The only catch is that the Yankee is not that dumb. When he wants synthetic charm, he can buy it in Anaheim and he can find the real thing in Mexico.

If New Orleans has the good sense of St. Louis and Pittsburgh, which had much less to work with, it will at whatever cost save the Quarter and open it to the River, thus creating the most charming European enclave, indeed the only one, in the country.

These are some of the troubles, and there are many others. But the luck of New Orleans is that its troubles usually have their saving graces. New Orleans was the original slave market, a name to frighten Tidewater Negroes, the place where people were sold like hogs, families dismembered, and males commercially exploited, the females sexually exploited. And yet it was New Orleans which hit upon jazz, a truly happy and truly American sound which bears little relation to the chamber music of Brubeck and Mulligan.

The peculiar virtue of New Orleans, like St. Theresa, may be that of the Little Way, a talent for everyday life rather than the heroic deed. If in its two-hundred and fifty years of history it has produced no giants, no Lincolns, no Lees, no Faulkners, no Thoreaus, it has nurtured a great many people who live tolerably, like to talk and eat, laugh a good deal, manage generally to be civil and at the same time mind their own business. Such virtues may have their use nowadays....New Orleans' people—black and white—may yet manage to get on the right road. The city may still detour hell but it will take some doing. Le Craps was introduced to the New World by a Creole. Now, the stakes are too high to let ride on the roll of the dice. If they do, Johnny Crapaud and his American cousin will surely crap out.

*New Orleans Elegies*

I

The shape of the loss is fretted but not mapped.  
You cannot say Elenore and have it so, nor Lindell.  
But pluck the unpromising chord, pull back  
the hammer, pour the residual face, listen:  
an ancient bridge emerges from your heart  
across whose stone logs a loud commerce rattles  
day and night, of earnings lost in sport,  
lives waged against a broken treadle,  
the sunny loneliness of the next drink,  
a picturesque adhesion at the core  
where all the voices versed against the blank  
look crap out and once more you've gone to war.

II

All work is not the same as the work of love  
when the mind changes, as it does now,  
looking up in a room suddenly not quiet—  
the trill of comprehension from her page  
a sound like madness—reasonable, familiar—  
close enough to mine but still not touching.  
But love is shy work, the clapper in a bell.  
I should be scared to talk, with what I've said.

Does love press an image in her page,  
this desiccated, wakeful old celebrant

of the invisible, breaking the law  
with her mind that levels language,  
with her eyes that cannot light anywhere,  
with her hands that rip god out of your throat—  
why would her meekness not terrify me?

III

Once or twice in the song I swear I was sleeping,  
my head hanging from a single thread that no longer  
looked much like luck or the formula for dreams,  
the shy end of her toward me, a festival, a borrowing.

Once in the clear of the melody one loses the key,  
it is impossible to lock the music up, a theme strikes  
that this one is still helpless to close or open  
although there seems to be no trick to it, no joke.

Always it yields in time to be forgotten.  
I wish once we could sleep like two horses  
standing side by side after a twilight feed,  
eyes lashed for the night, forelegs atremble,

but just barely, with being so strongly still.

### *Other Real Girls*

Allie tried to imagine it Marin's way. Marin said it was akin to losing a tooth, just a little blood. That it was not a loss, but a gain. That sex did not change you any more than any new experience changed you—eating olives on the roof of a blue car, for example. That the word “virginity” was a lie, and sin, sin was the Assyrian name for the moon.

Marin had just come home from college for the Christmas holidays, but Allie still felt that she was far away. Every word she said seemed shouted as if it had to cross some great distance. The cheese man at Whole Foods *was* hot. At least that was true.

Allie and Lille would go there after school to eat the samples, and then Lille would puke in the bathrooms along Magazine Street and Allie would keep a lookout. The cheese man liked their school skirts, and they would unbutton their second buttons and pull their Wigwams up to their knees for him. “Hey, Academy,” he would whisper at them, while they ate the cubes of Gruyere in front of the plebeian, packaged cheeses, “You want some six-month-old Manchego? It's out of happy, organic sheep who live in Montana...” They would clamor over to him, and he'd teach them about different sorts of rind and the appropriate temperatures of caves and tell them about some farmers on the North Shore who had begun seeding their fields with particular plants—onions or low thyme or lemon grass—so that their animals' milk took on a light flavoring. Lille turned up her turned-up nose at him because he was a Yat. He came from the West Bank—he had the accent, the flat, Brooklyn vowels—and so Allie had tried to keep from getting a crush on him.

Besides, she had Scottie. Scottie lived on State Street and he was the captain of the Thurbur basketball team. Lille had gone out with their quarterback, which was, of course, better, because that put her into the lineage of the Clayton boys, a direct descendant of the fabulous Miss Killiman, but Rob had broken up with her when Fran Hemmick came available, so Allie still had the upper hand, despite the fact that Scottie was stupid and drank too much. It was true that Scottie didn't deserve it—she argued with her sister in her head—not that it was really so valuable that it had to go to somebody oh-so-special, but Scottie had everything already. Like a lot of the kids in his class, he got a Land Rover on his sixteenth birthday and drove it to the Fly from the DMV to have a kegger in the grass. Scottie wouldn't appreciate—well, no, it wasn't that it was so appreciable, but that it wouldn't be so different for him from jacking off to the models in his mother's lingerie catalog.

The cheese man, on the other hand, the cheese man loved cheese. She watched him love it. She watched him hold a nugget of golden Roquefort on the back of his tongue and try real hard to keep talking to them. The cheese man had all the girls he wanted, too, she was pretty sure. He had one of the bakery girls and probably a couple of the cashiers and a Tulane girl with a green bicycle, for whom he cut bigger slices of cheese than he did for them. But that didn't matter, Marin would say. Sex was about the moment, about now; it was not about eternity or about wherever he went next, or with whom. That's what contraception has done for women, she would say.

Allie saw the school nurse sitting in Miss Bremmer's chair in the religion classroom in front of the picture of the little girl with pig-tails she'd drawn for the eighth year in a row on the whiteboard. She pointed to the various parts of a girl's internal anatomy upon which the various methods of contraception worked. “The IUD is inserted in a surgical procedure through the vagina into the uterus,”

she said, running two cold fingers up the little girl's neck and over her blank face, "where it works by periodically scraping down the uterine walls to prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg. Now, can anyone remember what IUD stands for?" The class was always too busy playing with the contraceptives being passed around to raise their hands. The condom always made the chorus girls titter and, this year, Maria Catalda had failed to blush when it came around to her. Lille passed the foam as if it were a can of whipped cream someone might make her eat—her mother kept the exact same brand in the bathroom closet, and she had believed until she was twelve that it was a remedy for yeast infection. It was the pill, though, that everyone scrutinized—the least scary of all of them, one of the hardest to get (you'd have to be examined and, even if you could pass that off, still there'd be the strange charge on the VISA at Majoria's), but the most intriguing. All the anorexics in the class were being prescribed progesterone to get their periods back on track, and everyone knew that not a one of them was taking it—why deal with that crap if you didn't have to? Pretending to take self-affirming notes on the benefits of abstinence, Laurie McGovern copied down the hormone levels from the back of the pill pack, and by break of the next day, the skinny girls were dealing. Allie bought three days worth with a cheat on the history midterm, just to see if it made her feel different, like a whore or something. But, just as Marin said, nothing at all changed about her—it was that something had changed with what she could do, or could if she had a month's worth of the pills.

With thirty times the pills she could do anything she wanted—well, thirty times the pills and some condoms, and sending whoever-he-was to the doctor for a full STD work-up, including the three months for the HIV results to be valid, then condoms still, because of the Tulane girl and the cashiers and whomever else and whether or not he was doing heroin. Marin made Allie watch *Gone*

*with the Wind* again, because Marin wanted to prepare herself for the "season," and Marin shuddered when Scarlet had to tell Rhett she wouldn't sleep with him anymore because she didn't want any more babies to add inches to her waist. It seemed strange to have to worry about babies.

With thirty times the pills, she could leave Lille hovering in front of the herbal laxative teas and trounce over to the cheese section alone, and the cheese man would lean out over the wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano and whisper, "Hey, Academy, where's your friend?" And Allie would shrug her shoulders. "Testing sweet potatoes," she would lie, to make him think she was sophisticated—hardly anybody knew how to test sweet potatoes. "All the better," the cheese man would say. "Don't tell her I said this, but she's sort of a snob." And Allie would nod. "I've got something special for you to try today," he'd say, and, suddenly, in his outstretched hand, there'd be a huge, white-papered bulb, round and tipped like a milk-white breast, and he would unwrap it slowly, his long fingers delicate with the parchment, as though he were touching something holy. "We won't be getting too many of these," he'd say. "They spoil too easy, and no one understands them, but I know you'll appreciate it." The cheese would sit, damp and quivering on his hand among its discarded vestments, the white mozzarella-like skin pleated like a raw silk skirt. "Burrata," they would say in unison, and he would look at her baffled. "My sister has been to Sicily," she'd say, and he'd understand, though Burrata was from Puglia. "You'll have to come back here," he'd say, and she'd walk around the case of olives, enter the stock room and come to him. She could smell him, how deep he smelled, thick like clotted cream, and he would have her touch the skin of the cheese, the light scud of softness against her fingertips. He would dip the long, thin-bladed knife in the bucket of water at his feet and hold it carefully above the cheese before cutting, right where her fingers had been. A burgeoning tension would arise in the

slit and he'd angle the knife and cut again—one quick movement, as if he were pulling the tablecloth off of a set table, leaving the crystal glasses upright, intact, and in their accustomed places. He would run his second and third fingers under the triangle of cheese and lift it out slowly. She would take it off his fingers with her lips as if it were the host, but this was much better than communion, just like Marin said it would be, the light skin concealing a heavy depth of cream, curd as one thought of curd, her whole body drenched in warm, fresh milk. And in the instant that the bit of cheese overtook her mouth, he would come into it too, and the store would suddenly grow empty and absolutely quiet, and he would lay her down on the floor spread with parchment paper, and he would unbutton each and every button slowly, his mouth following, sanctifying every inch of her nakedness.

They'd built the Whole Foods into the shell of the old Uptown bus barn, with its high tin roof. The parking lot was always packed. Marin and Allie slung themselves out of the Peugeot and bumped down the long corridor lined with potted herbs and square, powdered marshmallows to the front of the store. Allie wanted to see him badly—a fist-sized thing smoldered just above her navel. She sauntered through the produce section, teasing the Plaquemines citrus fruit, and had a hard time not drowning her hands in the boxes of mixed baby greens. As she stood in front of the lobster tank, watching them—black and sort of puny—crawl over one another, their claws cuffed with fat blue rubber bands, her sister came up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder with a bunch of lemongrass.

"I'm not the one who wanted it," she said, shoving it into Allie's hands. "Can we go?"

"We've got to make the tour for the samples," Allie said.

"Alright, but stop mooning at the crustaceans, would you?"

There was shrimp salad by the smoked salmon and the soups were turkey rice, tomato, and broccoli cream. In front of the display bank of Chiantis there were cubes of domestic Gruyere. Allie tried to be nonchalant, spearing two on one toothpick and not looking at the cheese counter to see if he was there. She thought she felt him looking at her. There was a density in the air, and when somebody said "Hey" behind her, she nearly jumped. She turned around slowly. Scottie was standing in front of the tubs of ricotta with his mother, who was wearing her tennis skirt and one of Scottie's brother's old sweatshirts—*T-Rob* was written in the white band across her stomach.

"Hello, Allie," she said. Embarrassed, she gave Scottie her Gruyere and he ate it.

"How are you, Mrs. Parker?"

"Just fine, honey. Oh, look, there's your sister," she said and turned away from them.

Scottie was pushing on Allie's arm, and she preceded him into the wine aisles, where he backed her up against the California Sauvignon Blancs. He laid the heel of his hand on her stomach. "Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"My parents are going to some Christmas party at the Fosters' tonight. You wanna come over?"

"I don't know," Allie said.

"Come on."

"I don't know," Allie said. "I might not feel like it."

"Cooper and Billy might bring over some beer. Get Lille to come too, would ya? Billy wants her to," he said and winked, which made Allie angry. Lille hadn't said anything to her.

"I said I don't know if I can come or not, Scottie."

He ran his hand around to her back and down to the crest of her ass. He changed his tack. "Please come," he said. "I feel like I never see you. Please come."

"I said I don't know, but I'll call you when I decide," Allie said and pushed him away from her with her pelvis, the bottles of wine rattling on their shelves behind them.

"PMS?" he said.

"No, Scottie," she said, and she would've kicked him in the shin if his mother hadn't been coming down the aisle, trouncing a little behind her basket.

"Your sister's at the cheese counter," Mrs. Parker said. "We've got to get our little butts home so I can take a shower. Come on, Scott. Good to see you, Al!"

"Good to see you too, Mrs. Parker," Allie said. Scottie kissed her on the cheek and she turned away from it.

In front of the cheese counter, Marin had her hands knitted together across her stomach, which did bulge a little over the low waist of her jeans. As Allie walked towards her, and there was no one behind the counter, not even the black guy with the dreads. She watched her sister shake her shoulders a little, as if bucking something off, and deliberately place her hand on the oily skin of the Pecorino Romano. Marin turned and blinked her eyes as if she were trying to bring Allie into focus.

"Where's your cheese man, Allie? I want a hunk of Gouda."

"My who?" Allie was embarrassed. She imagined him rising from his knees behind the counter and looking at her confused, *How can I help you*, he'd say, not recognizing her without her uniform, or dismayed at her plump sister. "Stand up straight, Marin, you look like ass."

Marin raised her eyebrows at her sister. "Excuse me?" she said and turned away. She began to rap dully on the top of the wheel of Pecorino. "Yo," she hollered.

"Yo?" Allie heard herself being a bitch.

Marin didn't look at her. "Hey," she shouted. The door opened and Allie's cheese man came out of the back room, his eyebrows

raised, as if saying, *Excuse me, is it really necessary to holler at me? Allie, please teach your sister some manners.*

"How can I help you, ma'am?" he asked Marin. "Oh, hey, Catholic School Girl."

Allie waved. "Hey," she said.

"Can you cut me a piece of Gouda like this?" She made a v in the air with her hands.

"Yup," he said and stretched his long body over the bank of cheeses, not looking at Allie, and pulled the Gouda into himself. He cradled it like a baby and turned, dipped the long cheese knife in the white bucket of water. Allie watched him draw the knife slowly through the pale golden cheese, and the backs of her shoulders and her neck began to glimmer the way they did when anyone did anything for her with too much care, a shopkeeper sliding her hands along quick-creased wrapping paper, a seamstress taking in the waist of her dress with pins she took from her mouth. The cheese man began to fold the sulferized paper around the wedge. Allie realized that her underwear was wet. She couldn't stop watching him.

"So," Marin said, and Allie's chest tightened, she stepped back. Marin's famous non sequiturs made her ribs hurt. "Why are you the cheese man?" The cheese man's hands, bearing their package across the air, slowed.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"My sister says you know a great deal about cheese. She has said, in fact, that you are the god of cheese, but I'm curious. If you do, in fact, have a superhuman aptitude for cheese, why are you working for this Texan big box? Oh, I know it's hip and often organic, but it's still a big ol' corporation, and you are but a serf to the organic cowboy. You could be making cheese, or running your own fromagerie—you could set up next to Bruno's Boulangerie," she made a downtown motion, "and not be a serf. So, I want to know why you are the cheese man. And my sister would like to know your name."

"My name's Jerome." He handed the cheese across the counter into Marin's hands, open towards him as though she were expecting water. "And I'm not the cheese man," he said. He reached deep in his pants beneath his apron, and handed Allie a hot orange rectangle of paper. *Moloko*, it said on it, *Maple Leaf*, *Wednesday*.

Marin's first ball was the Thursday between Christmas and New Years, and everything smelled of pine needles and burnt hair. In the back of the limo, Marin buried her still somehow damp face in Allie's shoulder. "I'm not wearing any underwear," she whispered.

"That's disgusting," said Allie.

"Are you saying that my body is disgusting?" Marin said, more loudly, and Mrs. Hopkins who was sitting across from them with her perfect Charlotte looked at them, confused.

"It's subversive," Marin bounced, proud of herself. She had had too much of her mother's pre-celebratory champagne.

"Not if no one knows about it."

"You know about it."

The limo driver took them downtown along a strange, slow route, as if he could make them believe that their city was nothing but what they saw from their tinted windows—the whole world made up of people like them, living in big, wooden houses dressed up for Christmas with white string-lights and twelve-foot trees, as if two blocks beyond the avenue there weren't housing projects where a black man between eighteen and twenty-five was shot every day, as if just on the other side of the Garden District the non-Irish of the Irish Channel were not sitting on the stone foundations of next year's Wal-Mart and looking out across the gray lots where there once were houses.

Three guards stood at the gates to the Municipal Auditorium, a building that had in recent years given refuge to a temporary casino and a provisional hockey arena. Inside, the professional ball-organizers were squawking, and Allie and her mother gave her sister over

to be feathered. Part of an old torture, Allie couldn't help thinking, though here the bodily pain of hot tar was foregone, perhaps to make the humiliation more pure. She and Lille had been to Martin's for lunch earlier that day, and Lille had eaten ice until she couldn't talk. The bathrooms at Martin's were one-stallers and she'd left Lille to go alone this time, staying in the deli to talk to her old ballet teacher, who walked with a cane now but had grown slightly more substantial than she'd once been. Bodily pain was something that could be left up to the girls themselves.

Scottie was supposed to have met her there, but she could not find him behind the risers where golden ranks of assigned chairs waited for the women. The gold and purple curtains were down, and a light chill rose from the semi-circular stage—they'd laid the flooring down over the hockey rink, and Allie worried that Marin would take her shoes off too and freeze herself to death in front of everyone. Finally, Scottie's mother arrived looking truly elegant in her white gloves, until she opened her mouth and came over to Allie to relay apologies.

"Al, honey, Scott wanted me to tell you he was really sorry for not being able to make it tonight—he didn't get in touch with you, huh?" Her voice was still childish, if tobacco frayed, and she brought no emotion other than a bounciness to anything she said. "They had to bring Cooper to the hospital last night after they played too much Beirut on the porch, and Scottie just didn't get enough sleep. So, he's sorry, and I'm real excited to see your sister. Are you excited?"

The opera bells rang on her words, and she rushed back with a twitter of her white fingers to her seat. Allie folded her hands in her lap and watched the tableau—her father trounced out wearing pink polyester with gold sequins and the spotlights picked up the sweat on the back of his neck. They were trying to make jokes about Saddam Hussein. Someone played a donkey and a fat, bearded Monica Lewinsky was still around, and nobody, judging by the stillness in

the room, could quite figure out why. Tory entered finally, drawing her forty-pound Queen's train behind her on ball bearings and wielding her encrusted scepter with little grace or humor. Her king, a title partner of one of the bigger law firms, brandished his as if he were tossing holy water, and his opaque mask rode up on his face above his likely drunken smile. The debutantes followed, Marin somewhere towards the middle, and eventually it ended. No one had fallen, and Marin looked fat under the spotlights, and there was nothing to do about it other than get a plastic flute of champagne and find someone with a committee pin to dance with.

At the Queen's supper afterwards, everyone was congratulating the debutantes. Most of them had stopped curtseying to Tory, who remained sitting in her heavy dress at the court's table, and were making the rounds of the other white dresses on the dance floor. Allie had Mary, their usual waitress in the club's dining room, make her hefty Madrasses, and watched her sister smile at the various gentlemen coming up to give her her due felicitations. The band went on a break, slinking down the service corridor behind the elevators, and Marin came over to Allie along the narrow side of the bar.

"Would you get me a Jameson's in a champagne glass? Mom's told me to stop leaning over the bar, and I'm inclined to be nice for once." Allie got Mary's attention. As she waited—Mary was discrete, ducking into the cooler with whiskey and the flute—Bill Pettit, a raucous Garden District ass, offered her sister his congratulations.

"For what?" Marin said, lengthening her vowels such that the gentility of her tone kept Mr. Pettit's appreciation of what she was saying slightly delayed. "I do believe tonight is the first night I've ever been congratulated for being alive and capable of curtseying. Or is it rather that in my big white skirts I seem to be a virgin and fertile?"

Mr. Pettit made a brief attempt at laughter and then began backing up slowly as if from a wild animal. Mary handed Allie the glass,

and Allie carried it to her sister, who took half of it in one sip. "I'm slipping," Marin said.

"On what?"

"I think I'm going to have a breakdown," she sighed. "I can't keep my selves separate. Oh, look, he's going over to talk to Bobby Cafert. That's just lovely. There's no chance now of your husband's being in Rex. I just told everyone off in one fell swoop." She took the remaining draught of her whisky. "Get me another will you, I want to go outside."

It was colder than it had been, and the stars were tamped by batting. They stood on the Club's back balcony, overlooking the swimming pool which was covered for the winter, its high dive forever abandoned after the McDowell kid gave himself brain damage doing a back flip two summers before. Marin sipped her Jameson's more slowly now that she was out in the air. She seemed to be paying attention to her own breath. Allie put her shoes on the railing.

"I'd like to be a tightrope walker," she said. "They get spangley polyester costumes too."

They could hear voices around the far corner of the balcony, out the windows of the muraled room. A girl was giggling and the boy's low voice hit Allie in the stomach. She would've kissed Scottie if he'd been around, and she was glad he wasn't.

"You know, when I was in high school I had these fantasies Hunter Crosby and I'd sneak in over the tennis court fences some night and make love in the middle of the swimming pool tarpaulin. Nothing around but the trees and the yards of green plastic, and the idea that we'd see each other maybe the next Sunday in the Oak Room with our parents and be civil. I spilled a beer on his feet the one time I talked to him. He wouldn't listen to me when I said he shouldn't go to West Point, and now they're going to send him to get car-bombed in Iraq. He was an idiot anyway, you know, but every time I saw him I couldn't handle it."

She stared out over the changing room's green-and-white tent roofs, beyond the banana leaves into the neighborhood. Neighborhood was a word that applied only to collections of poor, black-inhabited shotgun houses, where the people still sat on their porches in the summers with their dogs. White people in New Orleans didn't live in neighborhoods—they lived in quarters and districts, and no one sat out of their climate-controlled houses except during Mardi Gras. Allie wondered how the people of the neighborhoods around could stand the green-sheeted fence and the shiny Mercedes bumping through their streets on the way to tennis lessons. They had been stealing cars recently out of the back lot, but that just reinforced everything and the board was talking about more security. She wanted the neighborhood to climb the chain-link and make the golf courses into gigantic pleasure gardens, wanted to see the grandmothers basking like hippopotami around the water traps and the kids living in sand castles. Everybody could fuck in the big tree, in the walk-in refrigerators, in the sauna in the men's locker room—the women didn't have one, but they had square tables for playing bridge. It would be more dignified. The tennis courts would have barbeque pits, suckling pigs in them going round and round.

"We could take off our clothes," Allie said.

Marin threw her champagne glass out towards the pool, and it spiraled twice, wobbled and fell, thirty yards distant on the stairs leading up behind the lifeguard's stand. The sound it made shattering was bright and small.

"I want to go home," she said.

"You can't yet. I think we should take off our clothes."

Marin turned away from her. "I'm going to go talk to Mom and see if we can get the keys to the black car." Allie followed her, lagging, back into the party, where the band had begun to play again. In the far corridor, the waiters were taking down the half-emptied trays of grillades and grits. The Isabella woman who always wore

the same magenta dress with the feathers on the bosom followed Marin in with her neck, saying something about her to Mrs. Ellis, and Allie wanted to slap her. She felt the inside of her own cheek go hot and coppery. *Fuck you*, she started thinking, in loop. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

Marin found their mother sitting in the fireplace of the tree room with their Aunt Gwendolyn, who was looking very much like a candy cane under her black bob.

"Congratulations, Miss Marin," Gwendolyn said.

"Thank you," Marin said. Their mother looked at them. She had been neglecting her champagne. "We want to go home. Do you have the keys to the black car or does Daddy?"

"Oh, no, you're not driving home in that state. See if David will take you. David," she called. Their cousin was standing by the window with Hunter Crosby's older brother, Grant, a cigarette in one hand and a tumbler of gin in the other.

"Aunt Elizabeth, I'm talking," he said, without looking around at her. Gwendolyn said nothing, and Marin walked over to him, took the drink out of his hand, and shot it.

"You're going to take us home, David," she said. "I don't know why. And, in future, you will look at my mother when she speaks to you."

Grant looked at Marin, and then at David, and stepped backwards. "I am going to replenish my drink," he said, in his nicest duck-hunting voice. "Would you like anything?"

"Yes, thank you," Marin said.

"I'll come with you," Allie said.

"Just fine," he said and they walked out of the room together.

"Your sister is a little short tempered tonight," he said into her shoulder as they waited for Irving to pour two scotches and a glass of champagne. "I always admired that in her. You know, when Hunter was off to West Point, she gave him all sorts of trouble,

not that they'd spoken to each other since they were at Montessori together. Thank you, Irving," he said, and passed a neatly folded bill into his hand. "She certainly knows how to shake people off their balance."

"She doesn't like people's balance," Allie said.

"Well, I guess I can't say I blame her."

"That's kind of you."

Against the window, Marin was walking her fingers up David's chest and he was watching her do it, somewhat retracted. Marin perked for her Scotch and David let out his breath.

"Has there been any resolution to the issue?" said Grant.

"We were still hammering it out," said David.

"I would be more than happy to bring you young ladies home," Grant offered, and Marin turned to him, her face lightened.

"We'd like that," she said.

"Well, then let's get you your coats." Grant took his Scotch in a long sip, left David by the window, and strode headlong to kiss the women in the fireplace, then slid out the door. His tailcoat was burnished and heavy on his hips, classic, he was, Allie thought, like a Greek sculpture in white tie. In the foyer, he had his car gone for and their furs brought up in one movement. Allie felt herself swaddled and deeply at peace, Grant emanating their father's cologne and grace. The car, too, smelled cleanly of leather, and he handled the big engine's gears delicately but with a sort of thrust that made Allie think of sex.

Marin had her hand across the center of the console between herself and Grant and asked about Hunter.

"He's fine," Grant said. "Given the way he's going, though, we're worried he'll see a tour when he graduates, and even as an officer, we're concerned about it."

"I understand," Marin said. "That must be frightening."

"Well, he'll have to do what he has to do, but I would've rather he'd made a different decision. Guess you were right when you spilled beer on his feet."

Marin started to laugh a little hysterically. "He told you about that?"

"Of course he did. He was a little ticked off you'd decided to tell him what you thought he should do with himself, but I think you were the only person who did, and it made an impression on him. Not to mention you stained his kicks." Marin laughed and she laughed. Her hand trailed along into the crevice between his seat and the console. Allie could see Grant's coat sleeve dragging along the top of her forearm. "You're a smart girl," he said. "You could perhaps have made a better decision." Marin let this sentence hang for a moment too long, so that alternate interpretations began to build around it.

"Hunter's smart too," she said, hesitating, "and I'm sure he's perfectly capable of making good decisions for himself. I just had these nasty dreams after I heard he was going—usually of him being gassed in low-ceilinged concrete buildings. Stupid, but I had to try to stop him."

Grant pulled into a stoplight, sighing vaguely. Again, Allie felt the strange buzz off being deliberately taken care of—the leather seats retained their cool, and Grant was taking them home in a way that was perfectly correct but that she was unaccustomed to. The light turned green, and he waited for a second in the empty street; he took his hand off the gearshift and patted Marin lightly twice on the wrist, and she drew it into her lap.

In the side-view mirror, Allie watched Marin open her mouth twice to speak and close it again. Allie thought of things to say—why wasn't Hunter home for Christmas and how were the Ingrams taking to Atlanta—but the inertia kept her pressed back into her seat and silent, and no one said anything more until they had pulled up in front of their house. The lights were all out, and Allie realized with a small panic that she did not have a key nor, probably, did Marin, in her hastily-packed silver purse. Allie tried to jump the gun on Grant's chivalry and got out of the car before he could turn off

the motor, saying thank you and good-night in one rushed breath. Marin was slower about it, leaning in painfully to be kissed on the cheeks, and Allie was terrified that he'd decide to walk them to the door and find them silly and helpless.

Marin finally got out of the car, and Grant stayed put, smiling and waving at Allie in the dark. He waited as Allie walked her sister around back, where they hid in the shadow of the tool shed until they heard him drive off.

"We're going to have to climb in the window," Allie said.

Marin said nothing but followed her, her shoes in her right hand. The window over the kitchen sink had no lock on it, but it was a good twelve feet off the ground, and so they stacked terracotta pots and boxes from various tools on top of each other in silence, climbing up as they stacked. Marin laid her hands flat against the window glass and pushed up, and the window shuddered and moved up, howling, giving them just enough room to squeeze in. Marin went in first, the foundations of their tower trembling beneath her, and as she pulled her hips through, the petticoats of her dress caught on one of the window nails, and a long, interrupted chatter accompanied the net's ripping. Allie tied her skirts in a blousy knot at her ass and followed her sister through the window, arriving in the sink with even her stockings intact.

Marin ascended the stairs, hauling herself slowly upwards. Allie followed in her wake, barred from passing by her sister's wide white train. The netting trailed down the stairs and Allie stepped on it, tripping over her own skirts, and felt the line of pops as her sister's petticoats split all the way to her waist. Marin achieved the second floor and deposited herself on her sister's bed, the easiest accessible, the door open and the blue sheets unmade. Allie began unzipping herself as she took the last two steps.

Marin pulled a pillow to her chest and breathed into it. Allie stepped out of her own dress and unzipped her sister, draping her

legs over Marin's substantial body. They had not turned on the house lights; only the streetlamps striped through the shutters. Marin pushed her dress down to her hips. Allie felt the tension of her held breath in her thighs—she was trying to suffocate something. Allie laid her head on the mattress and waited for Marin to give up.

"Oh, I am so shocking, I am so fucking shocking," Marin said. "Worse, they don't even believe me, as if I'm still in my First Communion dress, stringing together all the curse words I know just to be petulant." She lay back on the bed and breathed, something happening behind her face that Allie could not interpret. "But if Hunter told Grant about the beer on his shoes, he probably told him too about the rest of it, and no wonder half of Mom's friends weren't there to see me presented tonight."

"Catherine wanted me to go to the police and say it was rape. But it wasn't a rape." Marin stopped and turned her face away from her sister's. "Hunter sent him and his friend to me out of the blue for one of their long weekends so they could stay on the futon. I didn't say no. I was drunk, yeah, but I didn't say no. I think I may have even asked him into my bedroom. I'm not an idiot. He gave me a loaf of zucchini bread wrapped up in foil from his bag before he left."

She put her hand flat against the headboard and pulled it back. The temperature had dropped even further outside—it might even have been close to freezing—and no one had turned on the heater. Ribbons of light laid themselves over Marin's condensed handprint.

"Greg didn't rape me. But I didn't choose it either—I'd been made scared of choosing for myself. In that I was never given the choice unless I waited for a white dress and a hotel room in Sea Island, to walk into it sober, myself, and ask for it." She sat up and pulled her legs to her chest, her torn petticoat dragging out from under her like a trawl net or an afterbirth. She began pulling on it, ripping it out. "I either had to drink too much Jagermeister to strip myself of

culpability or hang around for maybe ever to find someone I loved. And virginity was getting in the way. Cumbersome white word.”

Marin laid the piece of netting across her sister’s face, and held it there, her hands on each side of her head. “You,” she said. “You are not a virgin.”

Allie said nothing.

“I never stopped being a virgin. I fuck and I fuck and I fuck hoping that at some point I’ll be able to see myself fucking, but I never do. I never feel fucked, at base. I feel inviolate somewhere, milky white and inviolate. I try to get out of myself and watch myself, naked, fucking, but it’s not me, it’s my body that does it and my body has become separate from me, and I am still a virgin and I hate it. I hate it, and it won’t go away.” She stopped for a moment and breathed. “I want you to be blank. I want you to fill yourself, or chose not to, but to at some point be satisfied.” Marin took her hands up out of Allie’s hair and stood, her dress falling, finally from around her hips. She stepped out of it and, bundling the netting in her hand, walked deliberately down to her room. Allie closed the door on the empty hallway and got back into bed.

Cold in New Orleans emptied the air. The buildings stood sharply separated from a sky now diluted, as if the air had moved one state of matter farther from wood and stone. Cold was perhaps the same in other cities, but Allie imagined that it could not feel the same in a place without the walloping contrast. New Orleans’ atmosphere remained humid through all of its seasons, bathed in the swamp’s green halitosis, until that point when the mayor—always a man the color of café au lait, the city’s mélange and its compromise—came on the television to tell everyone to tuck their plants into their beds and bring their animals inside. There would be a cold snap, there was the potential for frost. And the city, defiant, would slip off its dress made of water, leaving it white over the shocked grass, to gallivant, naked, in the cold. The sense of being cast suddenly into a

vacuum made Allie want to fill it. She felt light within her skin—depressurized.

She could not sleep, while Marin stayed in bed for two days straight under her comforter, watching Japanese films. Allie got into bed and then she got out again. She left the house into the sleeping evening, the dogwoods budded, the labs next door quiet on their veranda. The Peugeot’s engine turned over as if whispering, and she backed into the empty street and drove the dozen blocks to Oak Street. There were few cars—unusual—but then again she’d only ever been here before for Rebirth, and who knew what the cheese man and his band could do. She parked around the corner in the gravel and ran to the door. No music yet, but the man took her three dollars and stamped a lion in her palm. She bought a bourbon and sat with her back to the bar and sipped it, flanked by two skinny men she wanted to call denizens, both of whom looked at her like to talk and then looked away. “Has the show started yet?” she said to no one, and a man passing through to the toilets said *no* and she looked straight in front of her at the beaded wall and the Christmas lights they had hanging from the pressed tin ceiling and waited.

She felt the cheese man come up to the far end of the bar and lean over to procure beers for his band and himself. Allie buried her nose in her cup and pretended to be waiting for someone. *Where is Scottie*, she thought to herself in order to heighten the appearance. *He should have been here twenty minutes ago*. Best not to look stood up, only waiting. Onstage, the band was recuperating the wires from the floor and plugging in guitars, miking the green drums. Jerome walked towards them, his hands splayed among six Mardi Gras cups of Abita.

“Hey, Academy,” he said, walking through.

She thought *hey* and said nothing. She walked back to the patio. The back bar and the pool tables were sheeted, and a tarpaulin ran down from the roof into the far flowerbeds. It heaved in and out, breathing, with the intermittent wind. Two people sat along

the bar—a girl with her cowboy boots up on the gutter and a boy, talking about salmon fishing in Alaska. She sat on a corner of the pool table, over a pocket, and listened. They made no indication of minding. They seemed to know each other and yet not to; the girl challenged him and mentioned his mother twice, while he told her stories—broken bones and a year-long trip to Nepal—she looking at him as if it were all new.

Everyone in the city, at least the parts she knew, was related to each other. Marin liked the story of how she had one day tried to pick up a guy during the Endymion parade who had turned out to be her second cousin, and there were black, white and Creole Leperes in every corner, all of whom traced their lineage back to a single plantation owner. But beyond genealogies of blood were the unending networks that ramified from clubs and schools and law firms, the permanent guest lists of annual parties, the memories of houses. Coming home early from skiing once, alone, Allie had taken a cab from the airport, and the driver had asked her if she was one of the Mealings, the family who had sold her parents their house. “My grandmother worked for Mrs. Mealing until she was ninety-seven years old. Or she lived there I guess and peeled potatoes for Christmas when she got late in life. They was always real good to her,” he’d said. “Y’all still have a party on Mardi Gras day?” Allie said they did—it was impossible to stop it, as people came whether or not anyone was even home—and she invited him.

The girl at the bar, who sat on her stool as if she’d been out of town for a while, kept their conversation from sinking too deep, turning an anecdote he began with sleeping arrangements in narrow tents into a discussion of yurts before he’d gotten to his punch line. When her hand fell in a gesture against his thigh, she pulled it back quickly to her own knee. From the front of the bar, the drums began, a short riff applauding the rest of the band onto the stage. Allie pushed herself off the pool table and followed the couple in.

The girl lagged a little, and in the dark doorway Allie watched her drop her eyes to the boy’s back pockets and then straighten herself with a disconsolate skip.

The room was sparsely populated, almost uncomfortably so, and she hung back along the right wall, in the shadows by the trash barrel. Jerome stood on the left side of the stage, dangling a trumpet from his fingers, his head down, rocking as the band started. Funk which was like everything and nothing she’d ever heard before. Like the parade bands fucking off while they waited for the big floats to make the turn from Napoleon onto St. Charles, inventing music against the recorded pop blasting from speakers behind them for the West Bank girls to dance to and the Longhair falling in sheets from somebody’s balcony. Like a gospel organist on LSD. The guitarist occasionally took his hands off the strings and said something indecipherable into the microphone. The denizens had gotten off their bar stools and bopped along in the front of the three-deep knot of people by the stage. Jerome stood waiting. Allie moved slowly forward, thinking if she only got close enough she might catch something. People pressed warm around her. The bassist bounced on the low strings, and she let herself be pushed, something starting in her thighs. She began the controlled flail, the only way she knew to dance—to get inside the drums and try to keep from falling off the curb into the oncoming floats. Jerome brought the trumpet to his lips and let out a long howl which pushed her back into the crowd’s raised hands. She felt herself dancing, her hands syncopated, her feet keeping something steady up, her belly singing. She looked to him and found him, behind the brass, watching her. Neither of them blinked. He was playing his trumpet into her mouth and she drank the sound. It colored her muscles and her bones. He stood stock still, suspended from the music, and she had become the music. She went on and on. The denizens applauded her through the long bass riffs. Every time Jerome blew, something flared between

her pelvic bones. There were hours of it, or minutes. Who knew when the music made the time?

When it was over, it wasn't over; her ears rang as she walked back to the ladies' room. The girl in the cowboy boots came out of the stall amid flushing, staring blankly into someplace else as Allie passed her. Allie wondered how she could be tired. There was blood in the toilet, and Allie flushed it again. She squatted over the seat and tried to pee, but her body wouldn't be calm. Relaxation took the wrong form. She shuddered and braced herself on the toilet paper dispenser. She forced herself to think about moths and puddles on the summer sidewalk after rain. In the mirror, as she washed her hands, she ran with sweat. She tamped the beads that hung down her temples and pulled her hair back tight. Her teeth were white and wet when she smiled.

Jerome was holding his trumpet case against his chest, talking to the bouncer and one of the denizens at the front door. He didn't look up as she walked past into the diluted dark—it must have been getting close to dawn—the cold of which made her wet skin shine hard with an exhilarated chill. She walked, happily, towards her car, and did not look back when she heard the club's door open and close behind her.

"Hey, Academy," Jerome called.

She stopped in the middle of the street and turned around. "Allie," she said.

"Hey, Allie," he said. "What'd you think?" He smiled as he would smile in her dream of Burrata, knowing the answer she couldn't give him, her mouth full of cream. She smiled a huge white smile.

"Do you need a ride somewhere?"

"That's alright, my boys've got me," he said.

"Do you want a ride somewhere?" she said.

His house was baffled with beads. Clipped reeds on wire or hemp-strung red glass filled every doorway, and Allie walked through

them all slowly, thinking of whales' mouths, little fish caught in the baleen plates. She thought of what a strange middle ground it was, to fill your doorways thus, not to block them off with doors or leave them open, but to cause instead some hesitation in passing through, so that you realized you'd crossed a limn. She led with her hands, her fingers pressed together to make long doves, penetrating. The beads caressed her as she went, smooth and warm like cool flesh. Jerome had gone quickly to the kitchen at the back of the house, and a light was on in some unseen corner, the red beads shot luminous through their hollow centers. He was singing the first piece of the night to himself, and she entered, the veil of the threshold dropping slowly from her shoulders. He was shucking a second orange for a second bowl, oil popping at his fingers.

It was a phrase she'd prepared. Two words, one foot and then the other, just like stepping off the high board from the suffocating day. Running her hands along the insides of her thighs, she took one step and, unbalanced now, the other.

"Touch me," she said.

*And Justice for All*

It was the spring of 1953, and I was in love. Larry was a Naval Aviation Cadet who had come over to New Orleans from flight training in Pensacola to sing in a cadet choir performance. He had talked the director into letting him drive his own car so he could stay a few hours after the concert and take me to dinner. Like most young people, we rarely ate in fine restaurants. His salary was \$98 a month—the Navy kept them poor so they had nothing to do but learn to fly. I was a scholarship student at Newcomb, and my meals were paid for. The college didn't seem to care if Larry ate in the dining room occasionally with the other girls and me—on weekends there was usually an empty place at the table.

This evening, however, Larry was taking me out. He had a used Ford convertible—bright red. It was just twilight when he called for me at the dorm. We drove down St. Charles Avenue, across Canal Street, and somehow found a place to park in the Quarter. The Court of Two Sisters in those days was a gently-lit elegant restaurant in the middle of the block between Bourbon Street and Royal, almost cut off from the rest of the city with a brick-paved entryway on each side. The ladies room was on the Bourbon Street side and accessible to anyone who wanted to walk in.

I had only been there once before, with my mother. She had ordered soft-shelled crab, and I did the same that night. Although I was only eighteen, I felt very mature, knowing where to eat and what I preferred, and being escorted by a gentleman in his Navy uniform with a white officers' cap. We had spent a lovely courtship: first date on Halloween, a series of short and then longer letters, dates here and there when I could take a bus to Pensacola or he could drive to New Orleans. We canoed on the lake in Audubon

Park, and since he was a Californian, I introduced him to grits at the Toddle House. Later I learned he hated grits, but we were getting to know each other and being polite.

That evening after we had enjoyed the crab and the ambiance and each other's company, I excused myself to wash my hands. I floated across the dining area to the beautifully-appointed ladies room, where I tossed my little black evening purse on the counter in front of a big gold mirror.

In the stall, I happened to lower my eyes, and then looked more closely at shoes and trousers which could only belong to a man—a man who was in the stall next to me. I jerked upright, prepared to run, when the pale pink door opened. In front of me stood a small, youngish man with thin blond hair and watery, bloodshot eyes. He was dressed in nondescript baggy trousers and shirt—gray or maybe just dirty. His right hand was in his pants pocket, and from the shape of it, I could tell he was pointing a gun. There was no one else in the room.

"Where's your money?" he muttered.

"I don't have any," I said.

We both stood there for a second. Then suddenly from deep inside me, from the base of my Anglican roots I guess, I blurted out, "In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, get out of here. I have nothing for you, and God will punish you if you hurt me." He looked into space, probably not prepared for evangelism on Bourbon Street. I was just as surprised, but at least I hadn't collapsed. It must have been my years of Sunday school and little theatre.

"Go on, get out of here!" I said. To my surprise, he went. And he left my purse.

I took a deep breath and washed my hands. I collected my purse and went back to the table, weaving cautiously across a space that now seemed a mile wide. I felt as if I might faint or vomit. It was good to find Larry at the table. He smiled, I tried to smile back. "We have to get out of here. Something's happened," I whispered. I think he wanted dessert, but he agreed to finish his coffee and cigarette, pay the bill, and get me out of there.

Once we were back in the car, I told Larry about the man and the gun and the attempted hold-up. He rose to the moment and said he would take care of me. As soon as we got across Canal Street, we drove to the park and sat under an old moss-covered tree in the moonlight while I calmed down. Then I began to think that we had to do something. My father was an attorney, and I had a notion that justice must be done. I had been attacked, even if the man hadn't touched me. Finally, we decided to go to the priest at Canterbury House, an Episcopal youth hostel across from my dorm.

The priest suggested that he call the police and tell them to be on the lookout for the man. He might hurt someone. When we called the police, we learned that they had just arrested a man fitting the description of my assailant. I don't know if the man was trying to steal again or just roaming like a cur dog in the shadows, but the police had him and insisted that we come to the station.

I had never been in a police station. It was dark and smelled like cigars and sweat. The big men in blue uniforms with gold stars were expecting us and told me to sign a paper. I didn't want my name on police records, but it was too late. I have since read that no matter what the circumstances, a woman tends to feel she did something to bring on a man's approaches. I know that feeling.

After the paperwork, they brought him out for me to identify. It was the guy. I recognized his watery eyes and the thin hair, the baggy trousers and shirt, but it turned out he only had a comb in his pocket. He was just a grubby little Wizard of Oz, all sham. I shivered a little, Larry put his arm around me, and we left. Afterward, Larry told me the guy looked like he'd been in a fight: he had bruises around his neck and face. One of the officers told us the guy would be in jail until his trial came up. *Oh my God*, I thought, *I can't go to police court!*

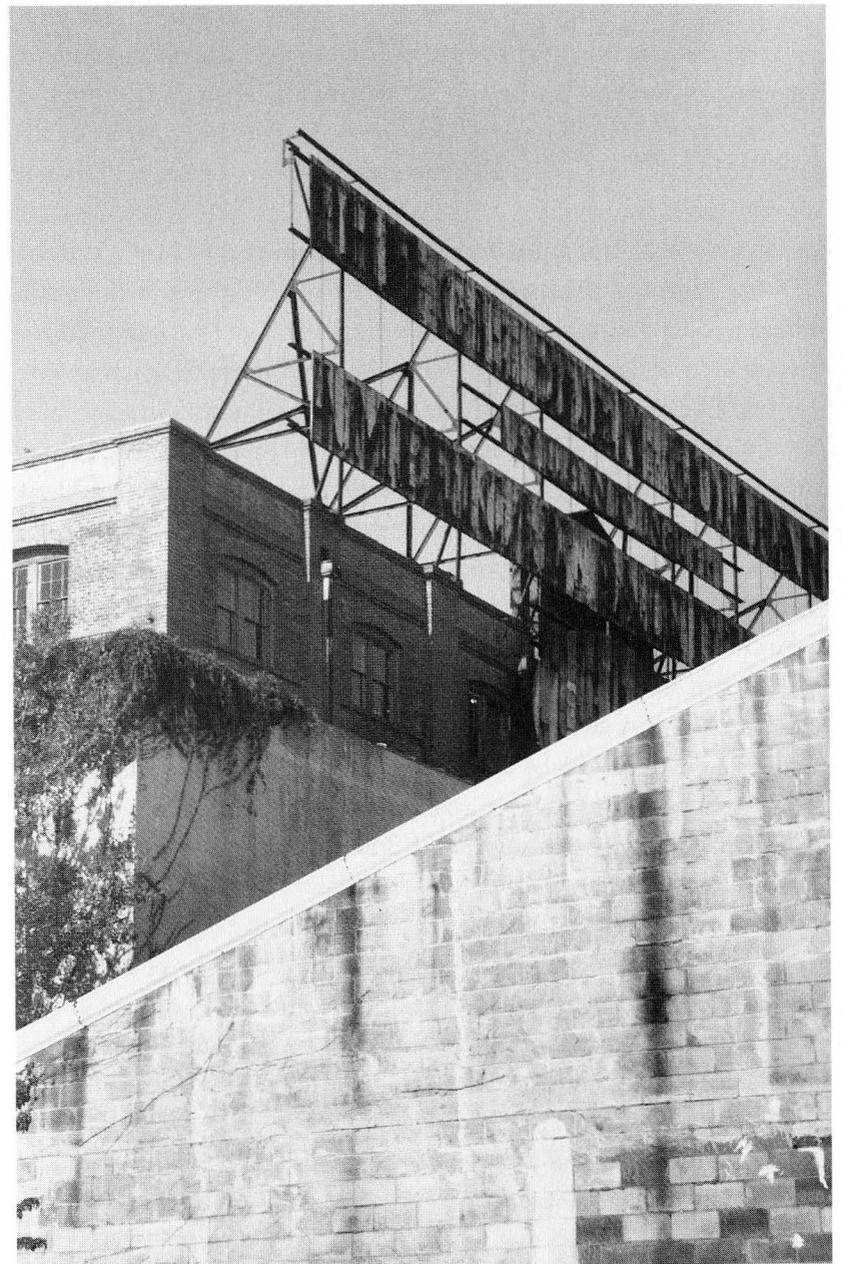
Larry had to get back to the base at Pensacola by dawn, so he was on the road as soon as he took me back to J. L. House. I don't think

I slept much that night. Two days later, a police officer showed up at the dorm, asking for me. I was in class, so he left a phone number. I was embarrassed so I didn't call back. They didn't pursue it. I'm not sure why. A friend later told me he had seen the incident reported in the *Times Picayune*, but fortunately my name was not mentioned: "Newcomb girl accosted in local restaurant."

I called my father in Tennessee, who called his friend, an attorney in New Orleans, who got to the bottom of it: the man in baggy trousers was from an old Christian family in Mississippi and had been in and out of mental hospitals for years. My "God-the-Father" plea had scared him to death—he'd probably been brought up on Hellfire and brimstone. The trial was in a few weeks. It was too late to drop charges.

Time passed. I wrote Larry. He wanted to come to New Orleans, but he was busy learning to land on an aircraft carrier. The case was postponed and then postponed again. A couple of months later when the day for court finally arrived, my father came to New Orleans. I met him at the court house where we discovered at the last moment the case had been dismissed. Old baggy pants had served as much time as he needed for his offense. I found it hard to be prepared for testifying in court and then have it whipped out from under me. I couldn't imagine what the guy felt.

My father was used to the vagaries of courts and criminals. He told me not to worry, and we went to Galatoire's for oysters on the half shell before he took the train home. I grew up a little that day. The man with the comb in the baggy pants had a tough time of it. Poor devil, but he had been wrong. As for me, given a chance to do it again, I think I'd return to the table, smile back at Larry. I hadn't been hurt, and we still had a few more hours. We could have a cup of French Market coffee and a cigarette—and maybe a tiny glass of Courvoisier. That would have done justice to our evening out.



*Resurrection*

Resurrection is best understood when accompanied by a red hot clarinet. I learned this in New Orleans, the only place in the world where people dance a dirge to the edge of the grave, then turn and strut their stuff back into life. When I moved there to teach in 1977, nothing had prepared this Mississippi girl for the public schools of New Orleans. The facilities were abysmal, there were no books, and a good percentage of my first-grade class had serious problems that impeded their abilities to concentrate and learn—infected ear drums, uncorrected vision, sickle cell anemia and decayed teeth so painful the children cried when they tried to eat.

And that was only what I saw. I heard tales daily that provided glimpses of the children's lives at home, a six-year-old waking the other children in the morning, dressing the younger ones, feeding them whatever might be available, if anything, and walking them to a neighbor's house before school because the mother was working or maybe just had not come home the night before. But these children endured. I was astonished at their strength and resilience and worldly wisdom. They won my respect, and I determined that I would give every last one of them the gift of literacy—or die trying. I died a lot during those years.

One of my schools was on the edge of the French Quarter, serving children from the Iberville Housing Project which looked so quaint with its rosy brick and wrought-iron grillwork, but which harbored guns and drugs and death. A few blocks from the school were some of the oldest cemeteries in New Orleans, and I often heard accounts of tourists being held up at gunpoint or knifepoint as they wandered through the cemeteries in spite of the posted warnings. My young pupils watched these events from the upper-story

balconies of their housing projects. Far too often, they themselves lost money, shoes, or a sack of groceries to the same perpetrators. When I was accosted coming out of the school late one evening and pulled down the concrete stairs until my purse strap broke, the police told me there was no chance of finding those who assaulted me. But the next morning, my indignant first graders rushed in with the names of the two men who had attacked me. I smiled in spite of my raw elbows and bruised knees; I knew for the first time that I mattered in their world. They were the heart of mine.

One autumn morning during my first year teaching, my class was engaged in reading groups, laboring to make sense of the strange markings on the page when we heard the sounds of a distant drum. All of my first-graders made for the fire escape, scrambled down the stairs, and ran to join the line of people, the second line, parading back from the cemetery where a jazz musician had just been laid to rest. The tune was "Didn't He Ramble?" and the brass band musicians leading the way were the best.

These children were in my care. I was a by-the-book teacher and knew full well my responsibility, but my shouts to come back inside couldn't be heard over the tuba. I hurried to the principal's office to report, in disgrace, that I had lost my class to a funeral procession.

But I never made it to the office. I looked up to see my principal, a dignified, middle-aged woman, joining in the second line, twirling her umbrella and dancing that dance unique to New Orleans—a step or two forward, a couple more back, then a few in place—her ample hips swaying with the saxophone and an expression on her face I had never seen in a faculty meeting.

I realized that all the other teachers and students were now in the second line and only I, "Miss Mississippi," was still standing on the campus with my mouth gaping open. So I ran. I ran as fast as I could to catch up with my children, who had known better than their teacher how people show respect to an artist. I joined the second line, dancing with my students to the soulful and joyous sounds of the brass band, and I learned something about resurrection.

## *Fools Rush In*

New Orleans, 1983.

Pete "Maz" Mazewski, the sax player, swept his eyes around the *Cozy Cove*. The smooth wood, mirrors, cool darkness. Genteel chatter by candlelight. He had been mugged just a few hours earlier, held up by a kid with a gun somewhere off Basin Street. Across the room he saw Davis Legget, who waved him over. Maz had first seen Leggit on the train down from Chicago. Leggit wore the same pale creamy suit and lavender tie. His short-brimmed panama sat on the bar in front of him. He'd trimmed his neat Faulkner moustache so he looked even more foppish. Maz felt shamefully plain in his jeans and polo and sneakers. He pulled up a stool next to Leggit.

"Maaazzz," Leggit breathed, "I'm so pleased to have the pleasure. Drinkin'?"

"Uh, yes," Maz said.

"I know you *are*, my question concerns what is your preference."

Maz couldn't remember what he'd been drinking, couldn't remember what he liked. "I don't know. What's good?"

Leggit chuckled and slapped Maz on the back. "There's a lot that's good. You see, that's why folks have so much trouble deciding in life which good thing it is, exactly, that they want."

"What are you having?"

Leggit didn't answer, he just raised his eyebrows and nodded at the bartender, who'd been eyeing them for a while now. The bartender went to work, in crisp, sure movements, and brought over two identical cocktails. Minty sweet rum drinks, tasty.

"You like?" Leggit asked, as if assured of the answer but still happy to ask, every time.

Maz said, "Sure."

Leggit was a talker. Practiced. Knew a lot about jazz. Knew a fair bit about Maz, too. But when he listened, he seemed to really listen. His eyes tapping always right on the door, intricate head movements to fine-tune his ears. He reminded Maz of that close-up of LBJ giving some senator the "Johnson treatment." Like he wanted to make a deal. *Hey, hey, LBJ*, the words Maz had built into an ostinato refrain onstage, to twelve-bar blues, when he still played sax, when he still could, at Grant Park, Chicago, August 28, 1968, in the sun, sleepless. In a sudden but deep flash, like an undertow, the face in front of him was Johnson's, not Leggit's, and Maz felt faint, exhausted. But it went away as Leggit's banter lapped on. The voice was pleasant, like gurgling water. Pleasant to the ear even when he took it upon himself to point out Maz's shortcomings.

Leggit stood and carefully pushed his barstool aside, then leaned close to Maz's ear and said "I know the kine-a music you wanna hear."

"What?"

"My suspicion is you never heard it before, but there always will come a time in a man's life where some inexorable something is destined. Even the things that seem like little things. Like just a little ol' music."

"What?" Again, Maz was drawn in by the man's style, delivery, oily smooth enunciation, the rounded edges of his words—even though he could barely understand the substance of what he said.

"If what you wanna hear is jazz, though, what I got in mind, this is the real dealy-deal. Distilled. You got to go to the source."

"It depends on what you call jazz."

"Indeed. Indeed. It certainly does depend on that. But see, me, what I call jazz—and I think you'll come around—I'm talking about from the way down under gutbucket." His eyes narrowed and he lowered his voice. "Some funky-ass dick shit. Now are you game?"

Yeah, Maz was game.

A car waited outside—not a cab—with a black driver who seemed not only to know Leggit, but to have been waiting for him. It was a Leggit kind of car, a late seventies Lincoln, dark on the outside, cracking white leather within. They got in the back seat and when Maz asked Leggit about the man up front, Leggit just said, “Oh, he does some work for me, y’know,” and took out his cigarette case and offered Maz one. They lit up—Pall Malls.

“Good brand,” Maz said.

“It’s not the quality of the smoke, though, superior as it may be. It’s the memories.”

“*Wherever Particular People Congregate.*”

“*In Hoc Signo Vinces.*”

“You’re well acquainted with the cigarette pack literature.”

“Let’s say I smoke them tonight in honor of you, a man who has played an indisputable role.”

Maz waited for him to expand but he never did. So Maz asked the question he’d been turning over in his head. “Did you mean to run into me tonight?”

“Of course I did.” Leggit paused, in thought. “I wanted to honor you. But what I want to know is, can you remember the taste? I mean from then, y’know, back in the big days on Division Street. What it was like lighting up then, on the stage, in the light? The nicotine buzz—” He exhaled, slowly, and admired the blue smoke curling up from his mouth. “Tobacco’s such a fine drug. Up on stage, looking out at the fans and uttering some shtick of some kind to get ’em relaxed and primed? Do you have a memory like that? Can you recall the faces of the girls—excuse me, I mean that metaphorically—”

“I’ve slept with plenty of women.”

“Y’know, whoever it would be, at the front-row tables, lookin’ up atcha, y’know back when it was all just opening up, as opposed to closing in?”

“I don’t remember much, actually,” Maz admitted. He remembered the effects, results, implications of things he did, but the actual experiences, sadly, no, not really.

Maz heard an electronic whir, and saw Leggit lowering the window and leaning his head out. A retching sound. Leggit was vomiting. The car didn’t slow down and the driver didn’t say anything. Then the window went back up and Leggit puffed on his cigarette—it had never left his hand—and produced a pewter flask. He politely waved it at Maz before hitting it. Maz took a hit and handed it back to him. Bourbon, of course. Or rum. Surely he wouldn’t have mixed the two? Then the smell of vomit and booze and cigarette smoke drove Maz to roll down his window—the outside air was balmy, beautiful, why were the windows up in the first place? He saw they’d just crossed Barracks, Barracks and Rampart. This neighborhood again. They pulled to the curb about a block from where he had been mugged.

“What is this neighborhood?” Maz asked, stepping out of the car. Leggit laughed low and coughed a little. “Got Uptown, y’got Downtown. And then there’s the Back o’town,” he said.

The driver stayed in the car. The white men headed toward a loud cluster of black partiers spilling out of an open door on the corner. Marijuana smoke wafted toward them, an invitation on the soft air, reminding Maz that he wanted to get high again. But Leggit seemed unaffected by it. He snorted something out of a round little antique-looking snuffbox, but didn’t offer Maz any.

Almost everybody on the corner put a hand on Leggit in some way—squeezed his shoulder, brushed his arm, slapped his hand. But nobody touched Maz. They just eyed him suspiciously.

“My friends and countrymen,” Leggit said, “I’d like y’all to meet uhhh...a fellow enthusiast.” With this they ceased all conversation among themselves. In silence they stared at Maz, almost soberly. But it only lasted a second. Then came an ambiguous chuckle, one nodded and one looked away, another made a sucking sound, one

said, "Awright then," and Leggit laughed in earnest, loud and hard, eyes undone and rolling back toward his brain, face pointed up at a muscular green and brown arm of the twisting live oak bowing over all of them.

Maz didn't know what to feel about the oak *in the southern breeze...the poplar trees*, but he felt confusion because of the people, because he wanted to assimilate all their faces, different faces and shapes and clothes and eyes, but he couldn't: they were simply them.

But he forgot about all this because of what came from inside the narrow little building. A band had started up. The sounds flew out the open door and shouted a prohibition on all doubt, confusion. The blare soaked him to the bones from even way over where he was standing, outside and through a sea of bodies. What about right up against it? In it? What could that be like? He wandered inside and Leggit grinned at him. Followed him in grinning. Put his arm over his shoulder and said, "Well, let's us belly on up to the bar."

The bartender, a large very black woman with a diamond in her nose and marcelled golden hair, said, "Mr. Leggit." And he said, "Why dontcha call me Davis?" and she said "Whatever you say, Mr. Davis." She fixed up two bourbon and sodas without being told—Maz didn't much care what the drinks were—and the music made it seem ridiculous that anything like conversation was going on at all. It was a haphazard brass ensemble, obviously just thrown together out of what happened to be lying around. Like a jam session, but they were clearly used to playing together. Their part harmony was tight, practiced. Four trumpet players? No, a couple were cornets. One alto. A bari-, no a tenor. Two slide trombones, plus maybe another one sitting it out. But most fundamentally: *two* sousaphones, cussing out a tightly dove-tailed bass line. It hit Maz's groin in an unfamiliar way. They were mostly young cats, except a couple, who looked not only much older but also more ragged. You couldn't say they had range. They all just blared as loud as they

could—which made it miraculous when they sweated and strained enough to bump the din up a few notches whenever the head came around. The percussion consisted of one snare player and one bass drum and cymbal, and both stood and shuffled around while they played, like all the players. They all worked their feet like the crowd in front of them.

Maz wondered what was wrong with the picture and then it hit him: even though he and Leggit were the only white people in the place, no one seemed to worry about them, or notice them even, at all. No one stared. If someone happened to bump into them, they either said *excuse* or didn't and kept right on. Marched right on. They all kept right on marching, either in tight little circles or in broad swaths that reached every wall of the place, cutting in and out of the boiling tangle of bodies at different points like electrons must. Or water molecules.

But somebody out there *was* looking at Maz. Was staring. He felt it, but couldn't locate the eyes. Below the radar somewhere, like a cat in the reeds. Not Leggit. Leggit was talking with the bartender and leaning over the bar and pointing at this bottle or that one and shaking his head or nodding. Maz heard him say, "You don't wanna get no European beers in here. This ain't Europe."

The bartender said, "But they good. German beer is good."

"Forget it," Leggit said. "This ain't the *Cozy Cove*."

The eyes gunning Maz belonged to a band member. A cornet. Young, a boy. A boy with skin the color of a soft worn wet brick sidewalk, soft as the backside of a magnolia leaf. Trombone lips with edges delicate enough to swing a cornet. Yet a soft, edgeless tongue. This cat was a cheetah. He'd seen this cat before. Blowing for the tourists in front of the Cabildo. Or somewhere else. But he'd seen him before somewhere, he was sure.

Maz stared back at him, but he didn't look away like he was supposed to. It was a mellow look, cool, but not exactly serene. And with the music around him, the kid seemed lifted up or larger or

thrown in some kind of light that went way beyond his slight physical frame. And made him come off much older and much wiser than he really could be at his age. The music backed him like an army would, like fists raised, clutching guns. And the kid nodded and set his chin and mouthed a *Dat's right* and lifted his horn to his face and stepped up to take a solo.

And there arrived the fattest, most pissed-off bitching whine and growl Maz had ever heard. And he played out of the side of his mouth like he'd never had a proper lesson in his life. The root of the sound seemed to be the brassy shouting of a King Oliver or a Satch—the demon of Buddy Bolden, who they say you could hear a mile away. But cut with microtonal edges—the notes slid around like men wrestling in mud on a levee. Like Miles, but earthier. Muddy. Other ingredients were, yes, a mystery, but not a quiet mystery. A mystery like a heart attack is a mystery: you don't stand around and ponder it, challenge it with questions, you just die.

But what was here was too hot to be death. Maz hadn't been sweating before—certainly not at the *Cozy Cove*—but now he felt the beads pushing through the layer of invisible grime that finely coats the skin on trains and in New Orleans. Like every drop of sweat wanted to get out there and boogie, too, like the people, and be joined with their brethren in a big camp meeting of the sweat of fifty synchronized bodies. The floor of the place grew slicker and dust became grime. The kid's cornet was right on the thermostat, frowning and threatening and ignoring all supplicants, sending the mercury up, up. The band started chanting *Talk Dat Shit Now* and *Say What?!* and pointing at the dancers, pushing them to march harder. The boy blowing into his horn through the side of his mouth found some undiscovered and previously unused muscle in his face or his belly and started swinging and leaned into it, bumped the volume up one more decibel, and treated the air in front of his cornet to a righteous, vicious pummeling. The other cats first yelled and then

came in on their horns and the kid took the solo out through the upstairs exit, some previously unknown-to-man pitch up in the sky somewhere halfway to the sun. The temperature on the dance floor went from Fahrenheit to Kelvin. People yelled, shrieked, and started jumping as high as they could and spinning around. And crouching low down to the ground and marching around that way. And Maz discovered that he was up and dancing too, *feets don't fail me now*.

But his groove got busted when the kid lowered his horn in a snap and spit on the floor and shot a look right at him like a bullet. Then Maz recognized him. Not from the Cabildo. From the street. Recognized that if this kid had had a bullet earlier that same day, Maz would have spent his evening differently, lying on the sidewalk waiting to be cleaned up by the sanitation department.

Leggit shouted over the music, "I guess the Saints won tonight."  
"What?"

"They provide that jam whenever we win. Game at the Dome tonight. Bears, I believe." He laughed soundlessly, like a dog panting from the heat, and his eyes did their thing. Yes, Leggit was a dog all right, ridiculous in suit and hat, drink at his side. All he needed was floppy ears, a deck of cards, and some well-dressed dog companions.

The band had decided to mercy the feet and work the hips instead: played a blues ballad—"Back O'Town Blues"—it was the only down-tempo number they did the whole night. And even it seemed antsy, jerky, not smooth, not rich like a ballad should be. They rushed it, always jumped the beat. They couldn't let it find peace, had to keep kicking it whenever it tried to sigh.

Right before they broke, the kid with the cornet stepped up and did a vocal of "How Come My Dog Don't Bark When You Come Around?" A vicious revenge murder ballad. New Orleans had produced a wealth of that stuff. Full of cutting, shooting, a celebration of righteous, joyous hatred.

And that boy—the cheetah or the snake, the cornettist—glared right at Maz through much of it. Maz stood flinty in his glare. The music made it easier. The boy's hostility was couched in the horn and Maz could pretend it wasn't what it was. He stared right back, and listened.

Leggit noticed. He made a sucking sound with his tongue and leaned and mumbled in Maz' ear. Maz heard sharp, unbelievable words. *Wanna whip him?*

"What?" he said. "What did you say?"

"Wanna whippet? They got 'em here."

"What's a whippet?"

"Nitrous oxide. It's legal in Louisiana."

Leggit moved down the bar and halfway behind it and spoke with the bartender. He called her Berta. Could that be her name, too? Yes, she wore a big gold pendant that spelled it out. And she called him Davis, with no "Mister." They clucked and chuckled and glanced back not too subtly at Maz. Then Leggit waved him over and Berta opened a small door behind the bar and in the two men went.

A ratty low sofa in a small room, a little lamp with red tassels, and two women sitting on the couch. Yep, hookers, definitely. One of them seemed white at first, but then Maz decided she was just light skinned. He looked them over out of some knee-jerk instinct and Leggit watched him do it with a little probing smirk on his face.

Maz had dated women, mainly in his youth. He was thoroughly capable of having sex with them, but they just didn't interest him emotionally or intellectually. Too often they seemed to be seeking out dependence. A two-sided dependence, sure, but still, the women in Maz's life seemed too quick to scuttle his and their own autonomy in the name of *love, relationship, commitment*, whatever. Too clingy, too close. Personalizing everything, unprofessional. Sticky.

Maz leered at the hookers because he felt almost duty bound to do it. That was their purpose, their function, their art. After a few

awkward seconds, Leggit said, "Ev'nin' girls, we just want to sit with y'all for a minute." They nodded and smirked just as cutely as Leggit did, but in a black way, and one of them moved over to make room on the couch. Leggit offered the spot to Maz and Maz sat down.

The whippet looked appetizing. Because Maz's skin was hot to the touch, he had run out of sweat, and the way the balloon stretched and swallowed the freezing gas and how the cold steam wafted up from it—he felt like the star of a Coca-Cola commercial.

He had seen this contraption before, on the Bourbon Street sidewalk. They were charging a dollar a hit, within feet of obliging policemen, in front of a daiquiri place. He had seen a middle-aged Midwestern housewife take one and collapse in the Bourbon Street gutter. He had been disgusted then, but now he was ready, ripe for a collapse of his own. It had been too long since he had fallen in a gutter.

He sucked up the contents of the balloon and died. In a cold off-blue throb. Like a mist of windblown snow off frozen Lake Michigan. But the best thing about the trip was how short it was. He came throbbing back and felt the heat again, just not as stifling as it had been before.

"What a thing to do," Maz muttered, as soon as he was able.

"Yass," Leggit grinned, his eyes closed. "Big with the kids these days. So who said we too old to learn new tricks from the young'uns, eh, Dog!" Now his laugh came out low, deep, and steady, like something with no beginning or end, like groundwater.

On Leggit's suggestion, they moseyed back out to the bar, where Leggit conducted some businessy-looking chatter with the band members—but not with the cheetah, or mugging punk, or whatever he was. The one who had caught Maz's eye and squeezed. That one sat off alone, serenely cool amid the gaggle of girls surrounding him.

Maz wandered outside and drank up the eminently drinkable air. He attached himself to a group of stoners, saying, "Could I get a hit off that?" They let him in. He said it tasted good and one of them said, "Yeah you right," but didn't really look at him. None of them really did. Until he started to turn away and one of them said, "Watch dat back."

Maz faced him and said, "What?" and the man replied, point-blank, in his eyes, "You on de front now. You best go find yo' friend and grab onto his pantses." Restrained but real laughter arose from the other men. Maz just said, "Thanks for the hit," and went back inside.

He found Leggit but didn't grab his pants leg. He just said, "What's up?" Leggit placed his hand on Maz's shoulder in a solemn gesture, right up by the neck, and said, "Boy, we need to get you home."

"Chicago?"

"Well, maybe you had better sleep something off a little bit and think about gettin' you back to Chicago some other day." Leggit laughed, but without much energy, and Maz laughed, too. He figured what the hell.

They walked back to the car and Maz said, "So that's the new marching band sounds, huh?"

Leggit said, "But, of course, the new marching band sounds are not really new, not really, it's the same old thing in different clothes."

Maz asked him about the cornet.

Leggit told him to stay away from that one, said he had a problem with white people.

"I dig it," Maz said.

"Dig what?"

"Well, I do dig that music, too, y'know. I'm not really sure if I'll go back to Chicago at all. Seems like a nice enough place to retire."

"Yes," Leggit agreed, "that's why those that never leave begin their lives with retirement. You should stay at least indefinitely, we've been expecting you."

"Expecting me?"

"Well, certainly."

"Why didn't I hear about it?"

"There's ways to get a message across and also there's ways a message doesn't get received."

"What?"

"Let's us just say there are many gods, my most reverend Maz, and therefore many who have not consented to be dead as much as the big Christian daddy has."

Maz just shook his head and said, "I'm too old for that talk."

"I thought you wanted to be young again."

"Who told you that?"

"Maybe I smelt it."

After a short and silent drive, they let him off at the corner of Barracks and Dauphine—a block from his guesthouse. A couple of dark suspicious shapes crawled over the iron gate of Cabrini Park and began shadowing him. But he made it to his guesthouse before they caught up.

*New World Theater Hotel*

I picked my head up from the toilet bowl. They warn you about peyote. Wiping my mouth, I looked up into the mirror and saw the face of a cop.

“Are you really there?”

“Yes, miss, and I’d like to see your identification.”

In the eternity it took to empty my four pants pockets in a quest to produce the one document that claimed that I was eighteen years of age, a certificate attesting that I had been baptised Josephine Marinello—whoever that was—the cops had found whatever or whoever it was they wanted and thundered down the steps, and suddenly I was alone again with the mirror.

I climbed the stairs. All along the corridors the doors were open and residents reassured one another it was over. The girl in the red dress from room 3A brushed past me and went back to applying her makeup for the evening. I looked in at the sparkling wall of g-strings and pasties that were artfully concocted by the girl in 4B, who did a respectable business with the other girls working on Bourbon Street. Somebody has to glue on those sequins.

In the doorway to the room I shared with three other people stood Boychick, a tiny, feisty creature with fuzzy hair, about to leave for work. She peeled potatoes all night long. It paid the rent. It paid the rent for all four of us.

I stared out the window at the blinking lights of Decatur Street. The bar across the way sold red beans and rice, but not as good or as cheap as another bar a few blocks away. I assessed my chances, went over in my mind every step that I had climbed, considering it in re-

verse. After a while, I remembered why I had begun. To my credit, I figured it out: the bars might as well have been on Mars. Besides, the landlord was known to hang there, and I wouldn’t want to give him the wrong impression.

I lay face down on the bed. My head began to echo with a beat that was not, as I had thought, the timekeeper in my blood. The building had a heart, and it was down in the rehearsal rooms. *Rehearsals for what*, I wondered. *Isn’t this what you’ve been waiting for? Isn’t this the real thing? Really?*

A steady pounding reverberated through the walls, the floor, the bed. I buried my head under the pillow, which served then as a muffled amplifier.

Thump thump thump thump. Jesus.

I stuck my head back out into the on-off light-dark room and tried to listen for the words.

*Wait for Me, Susanna*

I don't know what I was doing in New Orleans without my boyfriend, who was back in Chicago. I'd said I was going because my friend had had a baby, and maybe that was true, or maybe I needed to embrace real heat, having lost the feel for it somehow. I have this thing about warm climates, and Chicago wasn't living up to it even in July. In the South, outside and inside can mingle like the dogs that run around in the Marigny bars wanting to fuck each other, and the music from the river calliope tinkles into the kitchen, the song from a high school trumpet player shimmers through his closed door like a form of jazz meant to be inhaled. Even with air conditioning, the humidity gets to you indoors. Even with air conditioning, people sit on their porches as if saying hello through their sweat is an act of communion out there in the heat.

Anyway, all I wanted to do was walk around. I didn't know what I was doing because I kept forgetting I didn't live in New Orleans anymore with the men drinking their beers in front of the little grocery stores, saying *How ya doing* with sex in their eyes always, the young women, curvy and without makeup in flowered dresses, blooming themselves, the heat that slowed the body, teaching the body not to fight so much, to give in to the needs of the flesh and take it slow, and the guitar players on the sidewalks outside the coffee shops not wanting to go to work. I didn't want them to work ever. I was so in love with all of this, all the way from Uptown to the Bywater walking with my hair finally curling right in the humidity as I passed the park on Elysian Fields and Royal.

One of the payphones was ringing, next to a bench with an empty bag of Fritos and some crushed Bud Lite tall boys on it. I'd been

hearing it the way I hear alarm clocks, as white noise I block out so as to dream. I answered the phone.

"Hey," a deep voice answered. He sounded white, Southern, and about my age, which was twenty-seven. "Is this Susanna?" he wanted to know.

"No," I told him, somehow disappointed. I was already scanning the park for her, imagining her tattooed with roses and maybe waiting for him, wearing a red tank top and some exotic skirt like the ones I'd worn a long time ago. I could smell jasmine.

"Is there a girl named Susanna around?"

I couldn't see anyone but a few men from the old folks home languishing in their wheelchairs despite the sun. On Frenchmen Street, a dishwasher sprayed the sidewalk with a hose, spinning the heat into momentary rainbows.

"Well, can you look under the phone?"

"At the ground?" I asked, confused. I pictured someone taking me hostage as I bent down, out here with the world sticking to me and the bus squealing away, thickening the air with exhaust.

"I taped something under the phone. For Susanna." His accent held me a beat too long.

"Hold on." I felt around.

"There's no picture taped there?" He sounded excited, like a gambler perhaps, but a small time one who'd never lost big.

"Nope."

"Shit," he complained. "She was supposed to wait for me."

"Who is this?" I demanded, sick of all his mystery.

"Jacques," he said, and maybe I detected a hint of Cajun sexiness then, there under the finally blue enough sky. "I'm in Harahan. You by the park, yeah?"

"You called this number. Why you callin' the pay phone?" I asked, slipping into a slang to match his. It happened so naturally I wouldn't have noticed except I hadn't done it in a while. I vowed to make my voice throatier, more like Susanna's, whoever she was.

"Let me ask you somethin'," he began. "I don't know yer..."

"Maria," I interrupted with the pseudonym I'd chosen randomly long ago for this kind of occasion. I let desire drip into my voice.

"Maria," he began, "what do you consider the average size of a man's penis? A real man, mind ya." I felt my face warm. I really had no idea, as guys all want to believe theirs are huge, so I may have tricked myself into thinking they all were. Here I was outside, talking to some guy, thinking of Susanna, who was somewhere licking salt from a glass, getting torn down, legs crossed on a barstool, maybe getting all hot over Jacques' picture but probably just tapping a foot to a jazz tune and licking that salt, her breasts firm and braless. Sweat collected at my neck, and I had to twist my hair around with one hand. Someone had left an empty pack of Zig Zag papers at the phone, maybe rolling a joint as they spoke. Perhaps it had been Susanna. I should have claimed to be her, but it was too late for that.

"Does Susanna smoke weed?" I asked, imagining a drug deal I'd walked into, what that would bring to a day that had already gone sticky and was now sealing itself to me, this city a wet suit painted moss green. Seediness—the potential for it. I liked knowing it was possible, that the world wasn't completely cleansed of all the secret things that were supposed to happen under darkness but could apparently take place here on the phone. If only she were here; something in his desperate voice hinted at that. I could tell somehow that Jacques was seedy with lank hair and maybe some unfinished tribal tattoos, the kind of guy who was sexy on a hot day, a day when there was nothing to do but walk around and those with nothing to do appeared fascinating as their jeans slipped down too low on their hips. There was no rule against sexiness on a day like this, in a place like this.

"Susanna is a young lady I know. Friend of my neighbor. She wanted to see what a big dick looked like. She wanted to know if her guy was big. I told her I'd tape a picture there under the phone. Call her at two. What time it is?"

"It's almost 2:30," I lied. I had no idea what time it was. The day was getting too hot for any of this. I needed to walk, to get some water in me. "She ain't here." The slang again. There it was. A woman passed by, this time in a yellow sundress, her arm a fresco of morning glories, their scent rising. Was she Susanna? I wanted to slip into her dress and her skin. Then she was gone.

"She said she'd wait til I hollered at her," the man was saying.

I scanned the houses around, picturing myself as Susanna, as all the Susannas, sultry and alive, shimmering in sweat, their pale legs parting, licking the sweat from Jacques' neck. I wanted to seduce her, to morph into her as she waited in the park, honeysuckle in the air. *God, I love how it smells here.* This guy was probably across the street, not in Harahan, in a car jerking off. I shouldn't be doing this. I had to keep talking to him.

"So how big do you think is average, babe?" he was asking. His voice grew heavier, his breathing deep and ragged. I needed to smoke. I couldn't find my lighter in my purse. Some dogs were racing through the park where men slept, content in the size of themselves, their girth. Susanna was nowhere around.

"Eleven inches," I lied, absurdly.

"Well, I got thirteen," he said, breathing more heavily. I couldn't find her. I could walk across the park. I could buy a bright red dress and take my panties off. I could slip into this rhythm as if it were my own skin. "You like..." he began before I hung up.

People can think what they want. He could've been in a waiting van, Susanna's body stowed in a cooler, tall boy can of beer warming beneath his knees. This day, the sidewalk cracking into interlocked grins, as an old woman on a Vespa in an enormous brimmed hat passed. I could be Susanna, sexy and wanting to see, smelling hot as the air here. She's never been to the other places waiting for subways and blending into the concrete, answering payphones in Chicago and other cities, where always on the other end, are telemarketers.

*Mambo*

Shelton is terrified of me.

There are fried oysters in his ears—I can see them leaking out, chirping, clicking, whirring. He doesn't notice, of course.

(The last time we spoke was at the bar in some gaudy restaurant where inebriated old women sung at us how classy we were—we pretended to be lovers, under that polished liquor-light; upstairs my cousins flickered martinis down their throats, ordered Steak Diane and Bordeaux, and stuffed twenties into the cleavage of our waiters. Well, everything was different then.)

I am wallowing in a society swimming pool. I'm drowning in this Bourbon-soaked chlorinated disco: "You're in love with a girl, you're always in love with a girl," I curtsy to Shelton, through my crawfish bisque. I know everything, you see.

An intoxicated father falls into the Bourbon-pool, and no one laughs. We all stare at him in banal acclimatization. Mundane perversity. If I turn my head at a certain angle, I can see through him, through his gray suit and clear eyes, through the hard metal of his wrist watch. I laugh too loudly at nothing at all, and people glance at me, bored. I finish my gin and tonic on the tide of noon.

"She's not like other girls, Eleanor. I can't think of anything but her." (Shelton's hands are dirty, like opium and paint remover. His lips are nervous when they open to speak to me.)

These boys are always falling in love. They bow down on tuxedoed knees and dip their moneyed heads into the Southern heat—

and just when they start to bore me, they take my face in manicured palms and tell me they're in love.

"I love you Ellie I love you."

They pull me into some fantastic waste, prove their love on some plush sofa, and leave me there to wonder at the excess-sobriety-deception.

I light one feminine cigarette under the languish of saxophones and cellos. There are debutantes in the gutters here. The dirty blonde and rusting beauties decay in hot puddles. But we're all sipping mint juleps and our feet are leveraged into stilettos and we know how to limbo our words into a drawl with lusty undertones, until the boys lunge at palmettos in the dark lantern light.

"Don't look at me like that, Elli, she's different from the other girls. She sees things differently. I don't know," Shelton relapses.

It's what we all want to hear. Tell me more tell me more. Tell me how my sharp wit and catty smile give you the chills. How my words whip you into some sort of jellied frenzy. How my assured movements remind you of ice. Tell me misleading things. Ohhh, touch me where it rattles me.

I am a belle, you know.

My mother screeches at something. She flashes insane golden eyes and her hair twirls like a broken figure skater. I beckon my loveliest smile (the smile she taught me once) and blow a curl of bluish smoke at her. Liquid decants down her throat in retaliation...I follow suit. We are so much alike, my mother and I. We're madly in love.

"What are you doing, Eleanor? Just sitting there? What the hell are you doing just sitting there and here I am entertaining thirty people and what the hell is that on your neck?" She regards me kindly.

I touch the large opal above my breasts, wistfully. Can debutantes be wistful? Oh, I heard once that it's possible.

"Mother, dearest, as soon as I am through with this cigarette I'll entertain your guests with charming wit and glamour, oh mother that I love."

And away she goes, like a York Terrier. My mother is a York Terrier.

Jazz music emanates—Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.

Shelton glances up at me. (He's six feet tall and always seems as if he is looking up at me.) Magnolias frame his lips. He wants to tell me all about love, and the girls he will marry, and the life he will lead. Shelton's the darkly serious one. The only one I can stand.

"Sit with me for a little while, Elli." His face is melting, I hear.

Mackenzie's cold hand around the wrist, a familiar hand. I don't look.

"And what's your name, young lady? Fancy seeing you here on this dashing summer afternoon. And how gorgeous you do look today, Lady LaFolette." A whisper in my ear. (Goddammit, I think I may have blushed.)

I am reposing next to the folded, framed gold-and-green flag we display—in polite bashfulness—every Carnival season to signify that my mother was Queen of Mardi Gras. I am twenty years old and my fate has fallen. My younger sister thinks I am a goddess; her eyes water desperately at my presentations and masquerades. An eager, stupid little girl.

"Hey, honey, can I get you a drink? Have you had a drink? Let me get you a drink." Mackenzie's hand is still on mine, embarrassing and obvious, though he is too drunk to care. Mackenzie who lashes those chills below my neck.

His hair is disheveled, of course, a three-piece suit tossed crumply onto his thin frame, his pale skin laced in permanent grandeur, his smart eyes tired from *The Easy Life*.

He smiles to someone inside my forehead and tries to be affectionate. "Let me get you a drink. Have you had enough to drink, Booful?"

A sixty-year-old woman lets out a shriek as Mackenzie's father pretends to throw her into the pool. The debutantes and college boys are rowdy drunk in their pink summer gowns and white linens, pecking one another lustily, joking in rich, youthful sarcasm. Mackenzie returns with a scotch and soda for me. I hate scotch.

He pulls me into his white jacket, secretly.

Stutters something incoherently.

We feel inartistic and apologetic.

Mackenzie is shattering: ripe oranges squeeze through his pasty cheeks, roll into my chest.

"I want you," he posits. Then he slaloms away into the whiskey-soaked audience, a great actor in this fabricated hierarchy, a muffled voice under all the béarnaise.

"This is so clichéd," I toss at Shelton. Shelton the deep mysterious one.

He twirls a gigantic banana leaf. "Mackenzie's all you need, right Elli?"

I close my mouth and breath through my nostrils—a fast, hard sigh-string.

"We're alike, that boy and I."

"You, Eleanor, you're not like anyone." Shelton filters his words through discordant lips, and swiftly elopes with his highball.

Something too familiar, here.

This is liquid motion and the air is unethical. Banana leaves clog my arteries; strangers hand me atomic bombs. Mackenzie reappears to joke apologetically to my mother (Oh, Lordess Lafolette!) and bow inartistically, and she loves him for it. He is covered in rhinestones and margarita. The archaics can't get enough of him.

“Mother, I am entertaining, see. I am charming this specimen here.”

He promptly falls into the swimming pool.

(She laughs girlishly.)

My mother falls in love with all of my suitors. We are alike, my mother and I.

(I slap her ass.)

“The pool is brimming with Bloody Mary,” say the guests.

Someone is pirouetting in the bamboo grove and I ask him would he please stop. I can’t see anything behind the stone wall, where the others are mingling in the New Orleans sunwater; I am stuck here on Karter’s glittering lap. Karter the playboy.

“Eleanor, tell me again how handsome I am? Remind me, please?” Karter squeezes my hips thoughtlessly and I shimmy away.

I have turquoise eyes, by the way. These Boys Are Tattering Me.

Karter has this grin that makes me writhe in simultaneous disgust and desire—the cruel dismay of lust. One of the boys who defeated me—the dark playboy with an obscene smile.

He refused me, once.

(And again and again in this carouseled summer.)

He loves to see me so pathetic, so outwitted.

Of course, my sharpness sets me apart here, in this liquored re-past—I’m the enigma. I can think something sordid, behind those long lashes.

I tear these folks to pieces.

Shelton watches me candidly. I adore him; I also abhor his scrutiny, his dramatic psychoanalyses, his perplexity in the face of simplicity. If only he could unhunch those shoulders and unmuffle that voice and—maybe—explain to me what it is that keeps us in the shadows.

Why, Shelton, why is everyone here always drunk and insane? Is it like this up North, where you go to school? What is the North like, Shelton?

“You ought to come with my family to Lafayette sometime, Elli. They know how to drink up in that plantation. You’d have a nice time.” A penetrating green blankness.

“Tell me all about the plantation, Shelton.”

He regards me wryly. I douse my cigarette on the granite. He is smoldering, and I am smoldering, and the heat condenses us into something hypocritical. He makes a motion to touch my arm, a formulated arch—and recoils in nostalgic doubt. He looks away quickly. I hide my own face too, inside the late summer breeze (where discomfiture is unexposed).

“Eleanor,” he says. What he really means is, “Go find Mackie and screw him in the cabana.”

I shake my head *no*. Today I want eclecticism. I want a Northerner, an upright patriot, something hard and solid to drown this degeneracy.

Most girls despise me. I have several friends, of course, but they are sour beauties, dispersed and ignominious. The wrecks of society, the intoxicated queens, the ones who illuminate me best. I dazzle them with eloquence.

Katie and Genevieve and Blair and Rand. We corrupted each other, once. (There was a time, you see, when old gents or white lace could make me smile.)

But other girls hate us, and they hate me most. I can see them now by the lower garden bar, their clandestine ellipse. They whisper about the malaise of youth. I am the cynic of this morbid caste. But the boys love me, and the boys save me, and so I tranquilize them in the vacancies of my Harmony Street home.

I want Motter, today. John Motter, the New Yorker, transposed to the South, the dirty heap of oaks and fallen soufflé—Motter the fun, good guy. A stereotype: bottled water, french fries, undershirt, athleticism, sunburn, dental floss. I'll seduce industrialized capitalism and American regalia. (I'll win this crooked contest here and now.)

My father laughs voluptuously in the cigar room, trumpet-trombone-clarinet. I can imagine his large stomach wobbling through his weak and plastered breaths, one hand wiping sweat from his reddened neck and the other hand pouring gin. My father is nothing at all, really—just a man born into money who made a little more of it in his various pursuits of success. A lawyer now—a three-martini oyster-bar lawyer who tapers home to maids and lovely daughters and a puppy-dog wife.

Mother and Father spend little time in the same room at these events—she hums to society women and dashing young men, while he burrows his way from bar to bar and consumes trays of hors d'oeuvres. I secretly praise the exotic love affairs they must have on the sidelines.

I corner John Motter in the kitchen. He is watching the cook create baked Alaska. Innocently. We speak in abbreviated phrases—he is sober.

"Hello Johnny-boy, good old John, off serenading my chef, I see." I smile buoyantly, one red elapse.

"Hey there, Eleanor! A pleasure seeing you." He moves away. Not really, but his hands are relaxed on the chilled counter, and his cheek is angled towards the wall. There is no invitation in his pupils.

"Can I interest you in a glass of champagne?"

No response. Beaded light trims the sink with spoils of victory (not mine, I am realizing), silk beneath the unremitting hands of our chef. A guest laughs coolly from a patioed terrace.

"What? Oh, no, dear. I'm fine. You can go fill those other boys with champagne—I've got to leave soon." His eyes move to the deadlocked door.

"So soon? Well I'm glad we had our moment here. Au revoir, mon ami." I recoil, defeated by upright Northern morality; Yankees lack heart in this game.

The house shrinks beneath me.

Shelton stares through a middle-aged woman as she attempts dry humor. Her jokes come out too syrupy, too soggy. Shelton holds his face against grimace.

I rescue my darkened knight.

"Come, now, Mrs. Denevre, you mustn't hog my beau all day long!" I take his arm in mine chivalrously (a soaked, lecherous glamour pervades all Garden Parties) and glide him to the porch.

"Shelton, do you remember what you said to me one night, about a year ago? We were drinking Chateau Latour in the lobby of the Royal Orleans. You wore a gray tie."

He glances at me contemptuously. (Immediate regret.) His look thaws—but too late. The drink in my hand clatters.

"Eleanor, if I recall correctly, I told you I loved you. And your laughter was as empty as your bottle." He stands to his full height, and I am nakedly small.

I move my arms around his waist, a plastic frivolity my mother bestowed me.

Shelton is unimpressed. He finishes his drink and sidles away. I watch him go, something fresh and cold flapping in my stomach.

Someplace unreachable.

A hand cups the flesh on my thigh (a thin, adorned masculine hand). Mackenzie kisses my neck, right there in the palmettos, the locusts croaking loudly to siphon the evening. He slides my dress up to my

waist and pushes me behind the curve of the doorframe. Through one tight slit I can see the debauchery undulating, in the gestures and sips and taunts and gulps of the decrepit New Orleans society, overly dressed in this Mardi Gras Mambo:

Karter the playboy is making his rounds with Blair/Emily/Genieve/Courtney, the lovely younger belles. His tie is dirty blond. One girl laughs in stanzas.

A child has cut his knee; blue blood leaks through light colored pants, down into the soles of shoes.

My mother has disappeared. Probably in the cabana with some faded beauty's husband.

A hand moves. A bottle of beer sways...tumbles.

Sequined lady in a patio chair stares at her lap. Empty gloves murmur to one another, silently. This woman has fallen in and out of love, I think.

The sun collapses.

Party members sift out towards their waiting Mercedes and Jaguars and silvered sedans, there in the thick-liquored southern exhaust.

My little sister shrieks.

Mackenzie pulls himself away—his thin frame looks pathetic under the slinking indigo sky, his face sickly and drunk and despoiled. He kisses my hand rhetorically. I watch him stumble off into a brand

new Beemer, gripping its shiny wheel with the turmoil of overindulgence. My face is reddened and—wet? I sink.

Behind me the maids commence their revolution.



*Luna*

Her name was Luna. Except it wasn't. But that came later.

Before she was Luna, I just knew her as the danciest white girl except she wasn't that white neither—maybe demon, lizard, or light. That's how I knew her before she got all fucked up over Blue, became all angles and sadness, cut off all her hair. I used to see her up at Vaughn's on Thursday nights. I thought she was just there for me because I'd start playing and she'd appear like some apparition with her curls snaking all over the place, black as death. But as the night would get later, and I'd get drunker, I'd get confused watching her, and I'd start thinking I wasn't in control at all, but that she was making me play the music to the movement of her hips, the sound of an open wound tangled with wind chimes.

I finally learned her name was Luna this one night when I was playing a gig for some art show Uptown with mostly white folks in tails and sequins. Blue wasn't around then because my younger brother, Woo, had just died—gotten shot down on the corner in the Sixth Ward. Woo was Blue's best friend and also our snare drummer, and when he died, Blue couldn't play. So, he just dropped out for awhile, quit playing his bass drum. It was the exact opposite for me. I played with any brass band I could because I felt something like a sickness when I wasn't blowing my horn.

I had just seen her at a second line earlier that day. At the second lines, she was different than she was at Vaughn's. At second lines, she put her hair up in braids and only wore baggy shirts. She drank Budweisers and smoked joints with my uncle who tried to grab her ass. She danced of course, but it was different at parades, quieter somehow, like she was holding back a secret.

At the art show, I almost didn't recognize her. She came walking in with her hair all done up, a red velvet dress clinging to her body, and these black stilettos that killed me. I'd only ever seen her in shoes she could dance in. She had on all this makeup, giving her face a sort of savage look, but nobody seemed to notice. At our break, she held up her hand in a wave to me and cupped inside was a joint. Her smile was soft, but there was something desperate around her eyes. She walked outside and I followed.

Outside, the night was full of cold stars. They smelled like jasmine. I watched her walk across the street and then sit between two cars. When I came up next to her, she didn't say nothing. She went to light the joint, but then stopped and put her hand on my arm.

"I'm sorry about your brother," she said.

I vaguely remembered her being at his funeral, dancing on the side as we played behind Woo's coffin, but most of that day was a haze of blunts, beer, and pain. "Thanks," I said and thought about how Woo would have liked her. He always liked the girls who smoked weed. Said the sex was better. "Did you know him?"

"A little," she said. "He gave me a ride once."

"When was that?"

"A little before he died. He was playing at a party I was at. He was playing with the Rebirth. My ex-boyfriend got all angry over something I did and left me there. I was waiting for the streetcar and Woo recognized me from always being at the second lines and took me home."

"Woo never told me about that."

"It wasn't a big deal." She sparked up the joint. "I'm Luna," she said.

"Jomo."

We smoked in silence for awhile, passing the joint back and forth.

"How long ya'll going to play?" she asked.

"We still got another set."

She looked over to the gallery. "They told me there was going to be dancing or I wouldn't have come." She picked up her glass from the sidewalk and drank the rest of the wine. "At least the drinks are free."

I finished off the joint. "I gotta go inside."

"Go ahead. I'm not ready to go back in there. I have to take a walk or something. I can't stand being high and still. It makes my nerves bad."

So I went to finish the set and didn't see her the rest of the night.

I don't really know how Luna met Blue. She just started coming to this gig we had up in George and Johnny's on Tuesday nights. George was a drug dealer who owned the bar. As far as I knew, there wasn't no Johnny. It was back by the Lafitte Projects, by the freeway, and was a small barroom of mirrors and fake marble. The only reason he even hired us was so that he could have a front to do his deals. He didn't pay for shit, but we wasn't playing for shit neither. Even with Blue back on the bass drum, and a new snare drummer, Erik, we couldn't seem to get it together. All I could hear was the silence Woo's rhythms used to fill. We spent most of the night drinking Beautifuls and smoking blunts.

So this one Tuesday, Luna come walking in like she hung out there on a daily basis. She went up to the bar, ordered her a Miller High Life, and then sat down by the jukebox, smoking her Kools. Every motherfucker in the bar was watching her because it wasn't the sort of place you see lots of white folks in. That, and because she wore these tight-ass black jeans that made her all curves and cream. I honestly thought she didn't know where the hell she was.

"What you doing here, Luna?" I asked.

"I came to hear ya'll play."

"Yeah, but how'd you know? This show ain't listed in the paper."

She laughed. "You right about that." She looked over to the band. "Blue told me," she said. "Blue told me to come."

Blue walked over to us. "I know you ain't stepping on my toes, bro," he said to me with a smile.

"Maybe," I said.

"You want to smoke?" he asked her, and the two of them went outside.

During the gig, it was the first time I'd seen Blue like his old self, laughing and making jokes, since Woo died. But I couldn't believe he hooked Luna. Most girls, especially the white girls, like the horn players. I don't know why. Or they used to like Woo because he had this great smile and a nice little body rhythm when he played. But never Blue. Blue always just stands in the back, playing his drum. He don't even look at the girls who come up to the front in their little tops and skirts, their eyes full of sex. And I ain't gonna lie, Blue ain't the prettiest motherfucker out there. But damn, when we started playing, Luna would stare at him and get this goofy-ass smile. I'd look over at Blue and he'd be staring at her the same way.

She started showing up there every Tuesday night. Nobody in the band ever talked about it, but I think we was all surprised to see Blue get all tender over her, calling her little mama and sweetie and trying to touch her without being all obvious about it. If he had any drink in him at all, he'd start saying how he was going to move in with her and she'd always say, "Okay baby, let's go get your stuff right now." Blue would just shake his head and say, "You ain't nothing nice, you."

Luna never tried to hide how much she liked him or maybe she just couldn't. All I know is as soon as Blue was around, Luna couldn't see nobody else.

It was two months later, around March, when I figured out Luna didn't know Blue was married. We was playing down at the French Market at the Tomato Festival. Luna was wearing this red polka dotted dress that made you want to unwrap her like a piece of candy. When she saw us, she smiled and sorta skipped over.

"I didn't know ya'll were playing today," she said.

"We got called up at the last minute. The other band had a wedding or something," I said and then looked away because Blue's wife, Tina, was watching us.

"Hey Erik," she said. "What's up, Shorty?"

Both of them say hey and then looked down at their instruments. Luna looked back at me and I could tell she was confused. Usually, we'd all be joking around with her. Shorty would ask if she got any of that fire weed and Erik would put his arm around her shoulders and flirt with her until Blue got annoyed enough to come over and say something.

"Where's Blue at?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I think the bathroom."

Luna looked at me for a second longer and then walked over to the bench where Tina was sitting. Luna sat right next to her. Tina looked over at Luna and Luna just gave her a big smile and that's when I started thinking that maybe Luna didn't know nothing. Blue's wife smiled, but all small-like and then turned back around because Blue was coming from the bathroom, holding his two girls' hands.

"Come here," Tina yelled. "Your daddy got to play now."

The two girls ran over to Tina, and that's when I knew Luna didn't know nothing about any of it the way her smile got even bigger and then froze up that way into a mask. I turned to Blue, but all he said was, "We better start playing now."

Luna wouldn't look at any of us. She didn't move, but watched Blue's youngest girl get up and dance. After two songs, Luna walked away, and Blue hit his drum louder and louder.

She didn't come to George and Johnny's that Tuesday, and Blue didn't say nothing about it, but he couldn't stop looking at the door.

She came to Vaughn's on Thursday, where I was playing with a different band. She was alone in front of the jukebox. She put a

Latin song full of wailing trumpets and began to dance with slow, sad hips. Her eyes were closed. When the song ended, she walked outside.

I found her sitting on the curb around the corner, smoking a cigarette. The moon was full. When I said her name, she didn't look up.

"I wasn't trying to start trouble at the festival," she said. "I didn't know. About anything."

"Nah, I realized you ain't know."

"You thought I knew this whole time?"

"Well, yeah."

Of course, after the festival, when I started thinking about it, I figured out that she had no way of knowing if Blue kept it from her. None of us talked about Tina, because that ain't something we do—talk about each other's old ladies. We especially don't do it in front of girlfriends.

She looked up at me then, and I saw what a mess she was. Her eyes was bright with pain, and her mouth all tight and sad. She looked worn out. After the festival, I figured out something else. Blue fell in love with her because she didn't know nothing about being a girl on the side, which was also why she fell in love with him. Most girls on the side know that it ain't about love. It's about having fun. They got their boyfriends and husbands at home, so they go in knowing it ain't about future or babies. And even if you think you love each other, you don't do nothing about it because it gets you nowhere fast. But why would Luna have known any of this? She wasn't from New Orleans.

"Is he happy with her?" Luna asked.

"I don't know," I said. And that was the truth. I didn't know nothing about Blue and Tina's marriage, even though they'd been together since high school. I knew that Tina hardly came to any gigs. And I knew Blue didn't spend a lot of time at home and that he had a different sort of smile when Luna was around.

Luna put out her cigarette. "I can't stay tonight. I'm already too fucked up." She touched my neck as she walked by. "I'll see you later, Jomo."

I watched her until she disappeared around the corner.

I don't know what Blue said to her to get her back, but the next Tuesday, he had me drop him off at her house. After that, she started showing up at George and Johnny's again, sitting at the same seat by the jukebox, smoking and drinking. By this time, people was used to her being around.

She finally did dance one night when Pepper showed up. Pepper was Erik's cousin and knew Luna from the second lines. I had been knowing Pepper since we was small, because we grew up on the same street. We used to steal her momma's beers and drink them in the backyard.

Pepper wasn't nothing nice on the dance floor, shaking her ass every which way and at first Luna wouldn't dance with her. But then Pepper walked over and pulled her up. "Come on girl," she yelled. "I know you want to shake it. You ain't fooling me." So then Luna got on the dance floor, and the two of them start dancing all nasty. I'd never seen Luna move like that, all hot sex and moans.

Pepper knew how to hustle, so she had all the motherfuckers buying the two of them drinks all night long. By our break, they was all the way fucked up, not giving a shit about nobody. Blue was watching her, we all was, when his sister showed up out of nowhere.

"Who that white girl is?" she asked, her mouth full of poison. Blue didn't even hear the question because some guy was grinding up against Luna from behind.

"Blue," she said, shoving him in the arm, "who that white girl is?"

Blue looked at his sister who was glaring at Luna. "Some girl that Erik cousin know," he said.

"Shit," his sister said. "If I walk into some white bar, they'd tar and feather my ass, but a white girl go anywhere and make a fool of herself and it be okay."

That night, I had to take Luna home because she wasn't in no condition to drive. At first, she wanted to walk home to sober up, but I told her walking to her house from George and Johnny's wasn't like walking home from Vaughn's where she was only six blocks away and in her hood. Blue put his hand on her face. "Baby," he said, "don't act crazy. Let Jomo give you a ride." So she agreed and we dropped her off at her house.

When I got to his house, he just sat in my car, looking at the front door. He didn't say nothing. Finally, he got out and got his drum from the trunk. He came back to the window. "Jomo," he said, "I can't leave my family. I can't leave my kids with no daddy." He looked back to his house. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah, I do."

Blue looked back at me for a second longer. His eyes had the same sort of sadness as when Woo died. "Later cat," he said and went into his house.

Blue didn't say nothing else to me about her or what he was going to do, but I knew that on Tuesday, I'd see what was up. But then, on that next Monday, George and Johnny's got busted and George got thrown in jail, so we didn't even play. When I asked Blue if he called Luna to tell her about it, he said no.

We didn't care about losing that gig because we had found our groove again, and people was calling us left and right. It was May by that time, and we got ourselves something playing at a hotel in Florida for the summer. I thought I'd see Luna at Vaughn's before I left, but she never came. And in Florida, Blue never said nothing about her and I never asked.

I didn't talk to her again until June. I was driving down Decatur and saw her outside, smoking a cigarette and looking up to the sky. She had cut off all her hair and was so skinny that she lost all her booty. I pulled over and got out of the car.

"Luna, what's happening?" I said and held out my hand. She grabbed it.

"Jomo, what's up?"

"You need a ride somewhere?"

"Uh-uh."

"I'm about to go to our CD release party uptown. You should come."

She laughed. "I can't make it tonight."

"Here," I said and grabbed one from the back seat. "You shouldn't have to buy it. You was our number one fan."

She looked at the cover where there was a picture of the band and flinched. "Ya'll look good," she said. "But I always thought you guys were cute, even before I knew you."

"George and Johnny's is opening again. George was found innocent. He hired us for the party next week. You should come."

She sorta laughed. "I probably won't be making that one." She took a drag off her cigarette and her hands were shaking. "You know, I hated that place. I hated being the only white girl there."

"I know," I said.

"Oh yeah? How'd you know that?"

"Because you ain't never dance when you was there. Except for that once with Pepper."

Luna looked at me. I could tell she was surprised.

Then some white boy from the bar came out. When he saw me, he frowned.

"Y'all done?" she asked him.

"Break," he said.

She looked at me. "This is Jomo. He plays with the Revolution. This is my boyfriend, Jackson. He plays guitar."

We shook hands. He was eyeing me, trying to figure out who I was to her. I wondered if he knew about Blue.

He turned to Luna. "You coming inside?" he asked.

"Yeah. In a second."

He looked at me one more time. "Nice meeting you, bro," he said. "We should jam some time."

"For sure," I said.

He leaned down and gave Luna a kiss before going inside.

"I gotta go, Jomo," she said. "It was real nice seeing you again." She gave me a hug. I smelled jasmine and gin. "Thanks for the CD." Then she smiled how she used to smile at me when she didn't know me, all shy.

"Luna, you really should try to come on Tuesday. I know the rest of the band would like to see you."

"Maybe," she said. "You never know." Then she turned and walked back inside. She did not look back.

I really did expect her to come that Tuesday. The place didn't seem the same without her sitting by the jukebox, grinning and smoking. At our break, Pepper walked in. Luna wasn't with her.

"Hey Pepper," I said. "Is Luna coming?"

"I doubt it," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Baby, she ain't tell you? Luna got married. On Sunday. Had her a second line and everything. They moved out to Lafayette somewhere. Get the paper for today; it's in there."

I found a paper at the end of the bar and right on the first page of the Living section was Luna. It must have been taken awhile ago because her hair was still long and she was standing in front of the gallery where I had first met her. There was an story about how she moved here without a dime and painted on whatever she could find with whatever she could find—house paint on plywood, on broken mirrors. Finally, a gallery had taken notice of her and gave her a

space. She was moving with her new husband to Lafayette where she was commissioned to paint a mural.

It made me a little sick how I didn't even know Luna was an artist. I thought of Woo then, if he too had a part of him I never knew. A part of him that picked up white girls lost on the side of the road, brought them home and maybe fell in love with them a little bit.

In the picture, she had a smirking sort of smile, like she knew it was all a joke. It said her name was Olga or Ophelia. Some name I don't want to remember.

DAVID RODRIGUEZ

### *On Hesper Avenue*

Four men and fourteen crumpled Miller Lite cans surrounded by a mess of dismembered crawfish. From inside the house come voices of the women. They have taken our trays, but there are ten pounds yet to eat on the newspaper-covered table, with new potatoes and cob corn. Again, my father's mouth opens to suck the skull of a red bug. He has salt on his potatoes but he doesn't eat them—he and my grandfather hunch over their piles, enjoying the lift the box fan gives to their sparse haircuts. My uncle and I split a garlic clove, stained red by the boil and still sizzling with cayenne pepper and Tony Chachere's and throw our used paper towels on the empty seat between us. We all wear wear bibs that say, *Our crawfish are so fresh we have to slap 'em*. Randy, my younger brother, has recently gone vegetarian and refuses to come outside. He glances through the screen door holding a can of Barq's, and I can see he's still in his suit from our sister's wake. He's always been a little dramatic. "While you're in there, can you grab me another beer?" I yell, and my father and uncle ask for one too. But Randy doesn't say anything. And we go on making jokes, laughing too loudly. "Don't worry about him," my uncle says the next time Randy looks out at us. "He's still young. There's still time for him." And that makes me thankful to be sitting next to my father, straining to hear his voice over the box fan and the creak of the rusty door hinges, wondering if this pot will ever empty, if I'll ever tip it over and not find hundreds more crawfish, still steaming at the bottom, shining with such radiance in the midst of our suffering.

*Do You Know What It Means*

My family lived fifty miles upriver from New Orleans in Donaldsonville. In the early sixties—depending on how long we had to wait for the ferry across the Mississippi—a trip to the city took at least two hours, most of it on a seemingly endless stretch of the Airline Highway. Five weeks ago the drive took less than an hour—the ferryboat long gone and replaced by the Sunshine Bridge, a pork barrel non sequitur arching over the river between two sugar cane fields. Instead of the Airline Highway, there was multi-lane 1-10 twisting a short cut through the Spillway. Nowadays the drive is nothing, and the provincials of our hometown have taken on a certain air of the urbane—unimaginable before the bridge was built—through their proximity to Louisiana’s largest city. But, when my three sisters and I were children, a trip to New Orleans was a rare and splendid thing. Our father spoke in reverent tones of the city shaped like a phase of the moon, telling wonderful stories about that enchanted and mysterious place. We traveled there maybe once or twice a year, and spent weeks planning our trip. Going to the Crescent City was like opening a slightly musty, fantastically ornate and sacred book. In later years I traveled the world over and saw many great cities, but have never experienced anything close to that childhood thrill of sweet mystery about to unfold. Which was what arriving in New Orleans was for that backseat row of little girls, all dressed up in our city best. Walker Percy, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Walker’s Uncle Alexander were among the writers I read obsessively, soaking in the poetry and atmosphere they layered over the city. In the writings of those white men lay the affirmation of my father’s tales, and the evolution of my own sense of the eroticism embedded in that gorgeous old city of magnificent houses, low hanging

trees, and lusty flowers. The scent of gardenias never fails to transport me to the almost overwhelming swirl of childhood sensations that filtered through our open windows as the family car turned off the River Road, and drove down St. Charles Avenue.

In my early teen years I had a college boyfriend who shared my love of southern writers. One summer we planned a respectful and impractical horseback pilgrimage—aborted by Faulkner’s sudden death—to visit the great master in Oxford, Mississippi. We read *The Moviegoer* together and made a ritual of going to matinees just as Binx Bolling had done in Percy’s novel. Buddy would burn up an entire week’s paycheck taking me to New Orleans for nightlong dates; he wore white linen suits, I wore stiff petticoats and high heels. We ate dinner at Antoine’s, danced at the Blue Room; dropped a dollar in the hat by the front door of Preservation Hall and sat on the back benches listening to Sweet Emma, George Lewis and Kid Howard. We wandered through the open-air market marveling at the exotic vegetables—gourds the size of newborn babies, translucent lace-edged lettuces, jewel-sized eggplants—lit by bare, moth-tormented, light bulbs. Our evenings usually ended at the Morning Call where we watched the mirrored parade of garish young women hanging on the arms of their pudgy sugar daddies, the occasional misplaced tourist, dockside workers and exuberant drunks. The Morning Call coffee house abandoned the French Quarter for the suburbs when the hippies arrived, but I can still picture the over-sized sterling silver sugar bowls secured by a single slender chain running the length of the marble counter—the illuminated mirrors, the tawdry glamour. Buddy drank cafe au lait and I had chocolate milk; we ate hot beignets and spilled powdered sugar over our city finery. After midnight, the ferry—our only way home—ran quite erratically, if at all. Buddy and I would fall asleep in his car parked on the riverside slant of the levee. Sunrise often arrived before the ferry did.

In 1965, a few months before I turned twenty, I moved to New Orleans—in the immediate wake of Hurricane Betsy—to teach at a school on Esplanade, on the edge of the Quarter. Every weekday morning my ride picked me up at my small uptown apartment in his Oldsmobile convertible and we sped downtown along mocha-scented Magazine Street. We crossed over Canal and took St. Peters Street past the Jax Brewery, Jackson Square, Café Du Monde, and Morning Call. Raucous music blared out from the all-night clubs; revelers staggered through century-old double doors from dark interiors onto the glare of the sunlit streets. Only in New Orleans, could drunks and school kids pass one another in such cheerful morning oblivion. Black men in high rubber boots hosed down the streets and the damp air shimmered rich with the scent of brewery, bourbon, roasted coffee and market flowers.

My life changed rapidly in that slow moving city. By my twenty-first birthday I was living in the second story of a high-ceilinged apartment—across the cemetery from Commander's Palace—with my husband, a Tulane professor, and our newborn son. In the spring of 1967, my husband accepted a job in the far off mountains of Virginia. New Orleans had remained as mysterious and exotic to me as a resident as it had in my childhood. During my final days there, I wandered the crooked sidewalks of the Garden District, pushing my infant son in his baby carriage, trying to capture and hold forever all the sights, smells, sounds—the sensual abundance—of the tree-draped streets of that eccentric, gracious, decaying city I so loved.

Then it is August of 2005, my first-born son—a musician who moved to New Orleans months after his high school graduation—has just had his first-born son. We arrive in the city to celebrate the new baby and also commemorate my father, who—though dead for almost thirty years—would have been one-hundred years old at the end of September. From California, Manhattan, London, and

Virginia my sisters, most of our children and our spouses gather at a friend's B&B, across from Washington Park and just down the street from Snug Harbor. The friend has turned her entire mansion over to us. We sleep in canopy beds, wash in marble baths and fill her brick-floored kitchen with conversation, Abita beer, wine and the overflow of Louisiana's plenty. In the patio, saline water sparkles from the mouths of stone lions, green parrots chatter in thick-leaved trees, our novels and magazines clutter the poolside where we sip drinks and tear into muffulettas gathered on impulsive runs to Central Grocery. When the August sun becomes unbearable, we slip into water cool as April rain.

One of the highlights of our reunion is lunch in the Garden Room at Commander's Palace. The martinis are twenty-five cents. We drink them, and bourbon milk punches and Ramos gin fizzes; we share everything, passing rich dishes back and forth: shrimp remoulade, chili-crusted oysters, turtle soup au sherry, duck tasso, beurre blanc, bread pudding soufflé, chocolate Sheba. Our voices rise as a thunderstorm rages against windows and Commander's massive oak tree. I watch my sophisticated, world-traveled nieces become as enchanted by the City as my countrified sisters and I had been a half-century ago. The night before we all leave for the commemoration in upriver, our New Orleans hostess picks up boiled crab and shrimp from Arabi, just across the industrial canal, for a farewell supper. We spread newspapers over a table by the pool and have a sleeves-rolled-up feast that echoes so many of our country childhood backyard seafood boils. Except that the steamy, sumptuous nighttime shuffle of New Orleans is just beyond the gate.

The day after the celebration in my father's honor, I move to a small St. Charles Avenue Hotel to be closer to my new grandson. Every morning, for four days, I meander along the one-mile walk to the Coliseum cottage my son and his artist wife have lovingly restored.

The walk is along sidewalks twisted and cracked by the roots of century-old oaks and I remember the days I spent pushing a baby carriage over these same Garden District pathways. I glory in the damp mantle of early day heat, the slats of sunlight pushed through tree shadows, the gothic-movie-set mansions that are real homes in real neighborhoods. At lunchtime, I leave the baby and my daughter-in-law—my son is off at his first full week of teaching school—and walk three blocks over to Zara's, a corner grocery on Prytania, to pick-up shrimp po boys. Every day there are workmen—all of them African American—lined up for their own po boys, and every day they offer to let me ahead of them in line. I smile, shake my head and wait my turn. Back at the house, Tama and I unwrap our spicy over-stuffed sandwiches, spilling fried shrimp over the white-waxed wrap paper we use as plates and place mats.

On August 19, my last day in New Orleans, the taxi picks me up at seven. It rained all night, but the early morning is sunny and glorious. I roll down the windows, and ask the driver to please turn off the air conditioner. He complies, while good-naturedly reminding me that we are in New Orleans in August. He winds through the sleepy back streets off from St. Charles Avenue, streets of long narrow houses and decorative porches. We pass beneath oak tree flickers of light and shadow; the damp streets already shimmer and steam in the heat. I have my head out the window, breathing in a zest of peppery food, flowers, scorched cement and listening to an undercurrent of sidewalk banter, street car rumblings and barroom jukeboxes. All these years and this City remains the same sweet mystery, the same heady potion it has always been to me. With a grandbaby to visit, I have planned ahead and already have a return plane ticket. I'll be back in October. The taxi feeds onto I-10. I roll up my window and sit back, smiling—content in the knowledge that enchanting New Orleans will always be here waiting for me.

ANNE GISLESON

### *The Chain Catches Hold*

Fall 2003. High on one wall of Markey's Bar, on the corner of Louisa and Royal, behind beer signs and framed pictures of ball players, is a mural of the old Banana Walk. Against a gold, nicotine-softened sky, fades a row of gray-green towers, from which longshoremen used to slide conveyors into the cargo holds of South American ships, unloading ton after ton of bananas. The Banana Walk itself, once lining the docks a block away, is gone, along with much of the river industry, which for almost two hundred years supplied the Bywater with its vitality and identity. Among the half-empty wharves, collapsing warehouses and railroads tracks, a more subdued commerce still circulates and at night, you're especially aware of the heavy, rolling creak and muted blare of freight and industry reaching through the narrow streets.

At Markey's, one of a handful of corner establishments that anchor the neighborhood with their elegantly carved oak bars and unpredictable jukeboxes, the dark, solid accumulation of texture and low-hanging light fixtures belie any airiness the tall ceilings may afford. Any given night the place collects laborers, artists, professionals, younger folks in search of cheap rent and decadent realism, and drunks, many of those categories overlapping. Here, the mystery and challenge of possibility fall naturally into place, maybe best represented by its two borders, the Mississippi River and St. Claude Avenue, one powerful and oblivious, the other loosely clutching its past. The neighborhood has emptied out of many long-time residents but there are enough holdouts to infuse the newcomers with a sense of murky authenticity through their barstool stories of ward politics, thriving corner businesses, legendary brawls and finally of

the crime wave fifteen, twenty years ago when fear sent folks scrambling for the outer parishes.

Left behind were beautiful family homes, mostly Creole cottages and shotguns built right up to the canted, crumbling sidewalks with a European and Carribean sense of shameless proximity to street action. Property and lives still lean into each other at crazy angles without order or clear demarcation, with the messy intimacy of extended family and close quarters, a casual net of drama created from everybody being in each other's business. Hidden, impulsive courtyards, or narrow side yards squeeze between houses, elegant, mercenary vegetation competing with concrete and brick for some slim and fertile accommodation. Further down towards Poland Avenue and the Industrial Canal, treeless blocks are lined with the blank repetition of shuttered shotguns and the sharp inclinations of stoops, houses built so close together you can feel the slap of your neighbors' heels on your own floorboards.

If you grew up on certain Uptown streets, where the green, manicured distances between big houses politely waved off intimacy and contact, moving to this neighborhood could be major personal discovery, like finally recognizing the true and vital part of yourself after all those years of doubting it existed. But of course even the best part of yourself isn't always safe from the rest, and this area is still crowned by poverty and crime, which can send sparks of violence and insecurity into its heart.

Even as fear raked through the neighborhood, it left behind a kind of fecund damage and pure history. Center hall plantations and cinderblock Section Eight housing. Fences of thick barge board held together by square nails and poisonous shreds of paint. Asphalt broken open by the constant tread of eighteen-wheelers to reveal carefully-laid cobblestone. Deconsecrated churches shorn of their relics and statuary, one now used as storage for burlesque sets from a local club. The low metal canopies of boarded-up storefronts turned studios or flophouses. Over its last jagged century, the Bywater has acquired the distinct character of someone whose life has fallen apart

time after time, but maintains just enough vestigial beauty and instinct to hold the wreckage together.

Fall 2005. The razor wire rolled back, the concrete barricades moved to the side, the Bywater was opened back up to us officially in early October. On one end of Clouet Street at the river, a block from our house, a fire, started by either looters or the police, depending on whom you talk to, had raged for several days during the aftermath and destroyed six blocks of riverfront warehouses and wharves. Unknown to us, thousands of propane tanks were being stored inside the warehouse on our corner and during the fire many of them exploded and shot all over the neighborhood into houses, throughout streets. You can still come across their dented blackened carapaces, in gutters, on sidewalks and untended yards, pocked with rusted, puckered holes where the roiling chemical pressure finally found its way out. Dresden on one end of our street, Sarajevo on the other at St. Claude Avenue, with its charred and gutted storefronts, furniture store facades, some three stories high, crumpled onto the sidewalks in cinderblock heaps, stolen and abandoned city buses left haphazardly along the neutral ground, their fuel lines cut by police.

In the early eighteenth century just after the 1718 founding of the city, land in what's now the Bywater was parceled off in narrow tracts that fronted the river, so that the plantations were close strips running parallel to each other, tapering off into unusable cypress swampland towards lake Pontchartrain. The street where I live with my husband and son in an 1850's Creole side-hall house was named for the de Clouet plantation; Louisa Street, where, though twice looted, Markey's Bar still thrives, was named for Louisa de Clouet. Bernard Xavier Phillippe de Marigny de Mandeville, the heir to the land that now comprises the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater was a Creole rogue who lived extravagantly and gambled away much of

his inheritance. In 1808, he was reduced to selling the land off into lots, but not before christening the streets with obvious melodrama befitting his legacy. Over the decades an integrated working class neighborhood developed among the dramatic street names and swampy avenues, just behind the gracious Big Houses along the river. Names and addresses from the 1865 Confederate draft rolls in our neighborhood read like this:

Hinton, G.A., policeman	Marigny & Levee
Hirn, Andrea, laborer	94 Music
Hobern, James, (none)	5 Peace
Holbrook, Wm., painter	Goodchildren & Louisa
Holgrave, Henry, cook	Craps between Poet & Enghien
Holmes, Henry, beermerchant	Piety & Love
Hooker, John, ropemaker	Greatmen & Elysian Fields
Hutchinson Geo., seaman	corner Love & Union

Many New Orleanians live in such close proximity to the romance and ignominy and mundanity of history that we are at times oblivious to it. After the various ethnic permutations of the Bywater from Creole to German, Irish and Italian immigrants to African-American, in the years leading up to Katrina, real estate along the river was once again becoming more desirable and increasingly white-owned, with the predominantly black population on the other side of St. Claude Avenue towards the lake. After all these slow and sudden churnings of history, on that same plantation land, some white artists who'd returned after Katrina to their near-empty neighborhood and wrecked gallery spaces began creating installations on the neutral ground of St. Claude Avenue, one of them being a collection of African-American wig-display heads mounted on sticks clustered across the street from the gutted Magnolia Supermarket. The artist was arrested, most likely by spent and exhausted cops, who

took offense at the disembodied black heads hovering between the debris-choked streets.

In one-time New Orleanian Walker Percy's prescient 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins*, the disasters of the soul, not nature, cause the devastation and social and racial upheaval. With a rifle on his knee, awaiting the catastrophe in a Louisiana pine grove, Percy's narrator ponders the state of things. *Has God at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we now feel is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the rollercoaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes, carries us up and out toward the brink from that felicitous and privileged siding...and that now the blessing or the luck is over, the machinery clanks, the chain catches hold and the cars jerk forward?*

During Katrina, New Orleans saw its sins exposed to the rest of the country and the rest of the country was shocked. But after the initial jolt, it seemed to sink into some quarters that these were the nation's sins, not just New Orleans' and not just the South's. Though no liberal apologist, Percy's narrator puts it this way, that centuries ago America had flunked the one test God had put before it, that of racial parity. "One little test: you flunk!"

Most folks in New Orleans right now can't help but feel caught up in those cranking gears, in the exhausting undertaking that has become life down here. The exodus of friends. The ongoing disgorging of buildings. Bumbling politics. Fires. But at the end of Percy's novel, the narrator finds a sort of redemption and liberation in the ruins. In his diminished circumstances, he's able to see and work and live and love more clearly. Unfortunately, without the clarity of an epilogue, very early on in our story, no one has any idea what's ahead for New Orleans in all this. History, which we lived around and through, both artfully and shamefully, has rushed up to us, violently forcing itself into our lives, and now it's not only ourselves

but the country that must face up to it. Painfully and poignantly, the city was reduced to its municipal footprint of roughly 1878, driving us back and making us rethink the last century of our development, all the vagaries of demography, nature, both human and otherwise, politics, economics and technology that brought us to where we are today.

In the mornings I walk my six-year-old son to a nearby Lutheran school that was established in 1840 and has endured fires and past hurricane damage. Though it remained up and running throughout the latest ordeal, it's again undergoing restoration, blue Army Corp of Engineer tarps pulled taught inside the belfry and over the roof. We walk past the blown-apart warehouses, man-tall piles of household debris from the storm or hasty departures or evictions, fetid, duct tape-bound refrigerators huddled on corners. We step across enormous messages, painted on the streets with rollers, GOV. HELP and SEND FOOD AND WATER. We pass the ubiquitous spray-painted Xs on the houses left by task forces from New Jersey and Texas and animal rescue groups from all over the country that swept through the neighborhood in the days after the deluge looking for survivors and victims, leaving cryptic markings of who they were, the date, what they found or didn't. Terse, urgent narratives scrawled across the fronts of our homes.

One morning my son pointed excitedly up. "Look, another X!" In the hard blue fall sky two jet contrails had crossed each other, and for a moment it wasn't just our houses, or city but the whole sky, the world itself, marked for search and rescue.





*the caveat onus ::: twenty-three*

beneath the veil of perfect meaning  
fantastic tortoises  
held out their arms like wings  
then came the armies of tumbling water  
giving birth to grey grass  
where I no longer go  
it'll take me 300 years to remember  
that afternoon  
what it was to ascend a staircase  
whose only escape was face down  
and whereafter we walked  
recounting the stories to our children  
the reasons no one came

*the caveat onus ::: twenty-five*

from porch to porch  
the waters rise  
finally to rest on canal street  
then comes the floatable mattress  
the shoe box the grocery basket  
the stuffed animal toys  
it doesn't have to make sense  
but in the geometry of the mind  
for one billionth of a second  
you hold a photograph  
touching the face  
where the eyes are  
and everything does

DAVE BRINKS

*the caveat onus ::: twenty-six*

for Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

imagine this city and no one in it  
little paths of lake and river  
where sunflowers sprout  
from the scales of dying fish  
how the mood of that  
forms two halves of a prayer  
next sunday is christmas  
and gray line bus passengers  
are paying \$35 to see the devastation  
is this supposed to be  
the happiest moment of our lives  
O Felicity you can't have it both ways  
I don't care what street it is

DAVE BRINKS

*the caveat onus ::: thirty-eight*

the sky of january is not blue  
and I feel like all of my ruling planets  
have turned against me  
so I'm painting myself out of the picture  
to include anything that doesn't include  
hurting myself or anyone else  
it's like that moment when laughter starts  
following you around like a baboon of despair  
O Maelstrom of Maelstroms & Abominations  
you've transformed the city of new orleans  
into a busted-face emotion no one can explain  
and like the watermelons of st. bernard  
it's hard trying to pretend the waters never came

*The Good Shepherdess of Nether*

when hurricane names reach  
 the greek alphabet  
 it takes us a long way away from the theory  
 of original sin  
 and the common housefly

all the way to the common sin  
 of wishing it was not the way it is  
 and the original fly  
 did you ever see one this blue, Dave?

no but I've heard whispers  
 from the blue depths of the wounded Omega  
 whose mouths are zero-shaped  
 and whose songs are all in the key of blue

as you at your bluest  
 or you over there at your pinkest  
 we are situated where the alphabet forms  
 in the mouth of Monsieur Dada Styx

near the headwaters of the 17th Street Canal  
 it's Monday, August 29, 2005  
 O good Shepherdess of Nether  
 throw me a rope made of your best linens  
 pull me up to your thighs

*O Pony South Derbigny O Leaping Yellow*

O Pony of South Derbigny o leaping yellow  
 on yellow pole carousel pony of South Derbigny  
 flooded pony o risen out of cobbled chimney of  
 shuttered mudhut of shutdown pawn shop  
 pony of South Derbigny in attic windows  
 in amphibious tanks in Black Hawks in styrofoam  
 boats in whale-muraled vans in the alligator belly-  
 up on the highway pony of South Derbigny  
 pony of South Derbigny the airboat mother  
 her Gatorade her S earrings  
 her babying her baby night-sky baby  
 blanket slipping off the slipping head  
 o yellow-crowned night-heron on the  
 upended light pole the golden  
 retriever in the black marsh the rotting  
 rottweiler on chain-  
 link pony of South Derbigny and stadium domes and sky-  
 lights of domes emptied of pony of South Derbigny emptied of  
 spotlights on boys mid-spree horsing and Boy Scout  
 knots across chests on gurneys o gurneys of South Derbigny  
 slick jackets knotted at the waist  
 waist-deep in South Derbigny  
 chest-deep and dog-paddling  
 pony of South Derbigny past steeple bell speakers  
 past six headbanging hotel palms  
 pony of South Derbigny they crash

onto crashed Pontiacs  
past umbrella oars past  
hands waterlogged into papier mâché gloves raising the dead  
reflected power line for reflected aluminum  
canoes to pass            past them all  
pony of South Derbigny o pony of the mudhut floated into the  
street  
boy clothes still on the clothesline  
pony of the thread count of those under sheets their feet jerking  
how can they still be jerking  
pony of the body count        on baggage  
carousels body on slate tiles in attics in lawn  
chairs in short sleeves        the lawn chair in parking lots count on  
grass in sunflower  
flip-flops in rubber banded cornmeal box shoes a girl I remember in  
shopping carts  
in a wheelchair under a t-shirt veil count in off-the-shoulder hospital  
gowns in uprooted black-rooted trees in prosthetic limbs        the  
limbs the souvenir boas  
the dyed jet hair body in the long-pelted mink backless on chain-link  
in armoires  
count in armories count in arms count  
on buses on interstate ramps arms raised like a conductor against  
the sky in cerulean housecoats with foam  
white buttons I count exploding on South Derbigny  
in one drenched sock hand-in-hand  
body sighing on plywood in the air on knees Indian style on the  
airport floor

you pony of South Derbigny in an Indian beaded ghost  
suit drying on the shredded screen door I remember  
concentric rings in the flood water  
cattle dog nosing        Black Hawk hovering  
pony pony of South Derbigny thing you inside  
the long yellow pelts of summer

*Soft and Splinter*

I

I had never thought destruction  
 could be so peaceful; the pure-white steeple  
 of a boat half sunk in the marina, curl  
 of torn dock boards, seagulls over everything. There is  
 something right about us crawling through the boat houses,  
 we scavenge stillness:  
 televisions, stereos, liquor cabinets, pool tables  
 become descriptors of weight: *this is the end state*.  
 The struggle for function—a tightness of parts,  
 longing of objects: rug: *I will soften*. Lamp: *to be beautiful*,  
 all ended, and the house, that fist of resistance to the world,  
 released. There is no explanation for our being here,  
 touching things, imagining the past on cracked stairs,  
 taking pictures, watching the dust. A week ago everything  
 leapt into the air to find these places, some devotion  
 setting them alive, sending boats onto balconies and plastic dolls  
 dancing. A barge full of trash rose  
 to bare its breast high to the winds  
 and through the levee to dig into houses  
 as the lake reached its arms around the streets  
 to lift them up, casting its shine  
 over wallboard, brick pile, and car.

2

She called to say she wasn't coming back  
 while Henry was charging his cellphone in the French Quarter,  
 to say that he could keep the fish, keep the television, the house,  
 that 'Texas is a big ol' pile of rock  
 and she's gonna stay, the space between them  
 fixed in asphalt and dirt,  
 in five hundred miles of waiting for spring  
 and engraved on every house he saw  
 in continuous black lines:  
 this was the water level,  
 this was the water level, the same everywhere,  
 this the trail her fingers left as she walked  
 before the tide receded and the water inched lower.  
 Henry climbed a porch, entered a house,  
                   objects become luminous when left alone,  
 spark in one another the image of nature:  
 plastic, paper, cotton.  
 He ran his fingers over everything: *tell me*.  
 He wandered through every house he saw,  
 their doors all broken open and marked by inspectors  
 with red Xs, nothing forbidden anymore. Henry  
 tracked the sun's passage through doorways  
 then walked out onto the blackening street  
 laden with old gallons of paint, and brushes,  
 and unopened bottles of wine.

The mountain of trash on Pontchartrain Boulevard  
 was the most permanent thing  
 I had ever seen, in it the end state of everything we build,  
 a reduction to essentials, my own endeavors nothing more  
 than mass, accumulating,  
 while far from the milky calm of Louisiana the things of my life  
 calcified, some tension in an American mold pressing up  
 against the horrid emptiness of her prairies. I drove in circles  
 around that dump: four stories of mattresses and bed frames,  
 computers, fishbowls, books, as if the city had taken off her clothes  
 in invitation. I took a right down 35th Street,  
 the refrigerators in my trailer thumping over the broken pavement  
 as a line of overfilled trucks crawled past,  
 a tiny ping of shame lifted through my body. A week ago  
 I sat in my room complaining of decay in my life,  
 and relaxing into the comfort of midday light  
 solid against the wood floors. I still desire that, the shine of red oak,  
 smooth under my feet; I'll never be at home  
 walking on the uncovered earth. The fields of FEMA tents and campers  
 flanked the road, so many temporary people  
 come to tear things down, their trucks idling  
 as they napped under their tents, the styrofoam and plastic containers  
 from lunch gathered in little piles by the curb.

Today is the day the birds came back, in full flutter and thrill  
 over the rotten refrigerators lining the streets. They shit  
 everywhere, so beautifully mundane, and John,  
 who I met last night in a bar on Frenchman Street,  
 has been waiting for me on the curb. Oh yeah, he says,  
 will you look at that, a working refrigerator;  
 I haven't seen anything so lovely  
 since I left, and his arms unfold  
 over the appliances. Down the street  
 a door creaks open, light pours out from  
 preserved rooms; it's like this at the tapering end of passion.  
 Last night everybody was asking each other How'd you make out?  
 and John laughed and said *it was the Baptists, in Alabama,*  
*the Baptists, man, who put us up—I will always remember*  
*those people. They took me and Henry and Nick*  
*and fed us hominy grits and chitlins, and when Nick told them*  
*Henry was a painter they got all rapturous and brought us*  
*into the schoolroom and there was this half-painted mural*  
*of Noah's Ark, and I thought*  
*you've got to be kidding me, but Henry*  
*was sailing. He filled that boat, I tell you, he filled that boat*  
*with snakes and grackles and spiders—spiders as big as your head—*  
*he had us all working. That was all we did there,*  
*filled that boat to bursting every day until they said we could come home*  
*and we packed the car but Henry wouldn't come. We left him.*  
*I don't know if he finished that thing. Have you seen him?*  
*I haven't seen him.*

Now he kicks an oak limb off the curb  
behind the U-Haul. *These things*, he says,  
*gotta be moved standing up*. I know. Nothing  
on the street is so heavy as an upright Kenmore 1500.  
I hadn't even considered  
how we might move it in a town  
where people walk through porches, breathe through walls,  
see what I see but all soft and splinter; I hadn't considered.

MICHAEL TOD EDGERTON

from *Wake*

II

Draining into,

Sleep      Sleep caught

On glottal folds

Caught

Where sound gives out

Sleep

Up early for the news

Random bursts

Bodies in the water

The news shut out

Water pumps Oil pumps

Sleep caught on

Random bursts

Only sense as Only place As severed The moment It's severed

Siphoned funds National Guard A richer Gulf

Caught Draining into

Water pumps Oil pumps

Toll the toll rises Rise

If it were an earthquake aftershocks

★

Transit Brook Waterman Prospect *The Atlantic*

Where I was not there Will not Remember

Rampart St. Claude Dauphine Sister *the Gulf*

Sound suddenly caught

A sound suddenly burst the throat

Small poolings of weighted sleep

View slants ground gives

★

The dead next to the dying on the overpass the rooftops *The water*

Caught on Draining into

Bywater Ninth Ward North Shore Lakeview The Superdome

The levee in the East The levee in the North

*Dodged a bullet all day* CNN all day the day pouring in

Not there *Happened* It happened I was

Water pumps Oil pumps

Shut out the images the mediated

Her screams to her —*Take care of the*—husband their roof recedes

Draining into

The French Quarter desert

Feeling *there* Feeling *am* Feeling *not*

On the streets surrounded as if a city if nothing as another

Sleep draining into

Happened to me I wasn't

Not alone wholly

Oil pumps Draining into Sleep

As if it hadn't happened

*Carolyn and Jon leaving if leaving*

Caught on sleep always rising

Somewhere my absence marked Their absence

*Hattiesburg isn't Hattiesburg too close Did or didn't they*

Into certainty

*Gina in Virginia Claudia in Florida Utahna in Texas*

What would change Has changed Will

*Bill and Nancy in Mid-City Caught*

*No Claudia went back for the weekend Police at the door Leave Leave Leave*

Question of Certainty of

*Claudia and José and Bill and Nancy and*

Draining into

*leans presses*

Into certainty Caught in the throat

*That they could have Could be Could*

Place (What suffices) as severed

*Because of the cellular calling be reached*

Draining into

What rose through A wish to be Marked into certainty

III

The body opened

To many views at once

Can no longer be certain of ground

The ground opened on many bodies

At once

Is wanting of view

The view wanting of ground

At once bodies certitude

no longer at hand

You open the window and the voice goes adrift

You open the voice and the window is less transparent

Open the sky

Open the throat

Open the ground

Perhaps there is nothing that isn't beneath the earth (the water)

View Bodies Ground (beneath water)

Beneath the dusky skin (sky)

The sky opens Closes

You feel threatened you fell ill (at ease)

The startling trajectory of the cardinal

Through your lungs

Runnels of current filling Filled

Waves of

Diluted sun spanning

The space that intersects (your eye)

The space between near and nearer (the distance)

Measuring the incalculable

Between

Your body and its other

The scope of mind Articulate

Form (the human)

Formulations

Close the window the wind won't burst in (the water)

Won't force

The house moves with the pressure of the current (the insistent)

Thrust

The black will

Recede to blue will (rise)

Raise the window (close)

Your eyes

No longer certain of ground

Your eyes

No longer wanting of body

You body the view

The view bodies ground

Ground the body Open the sky

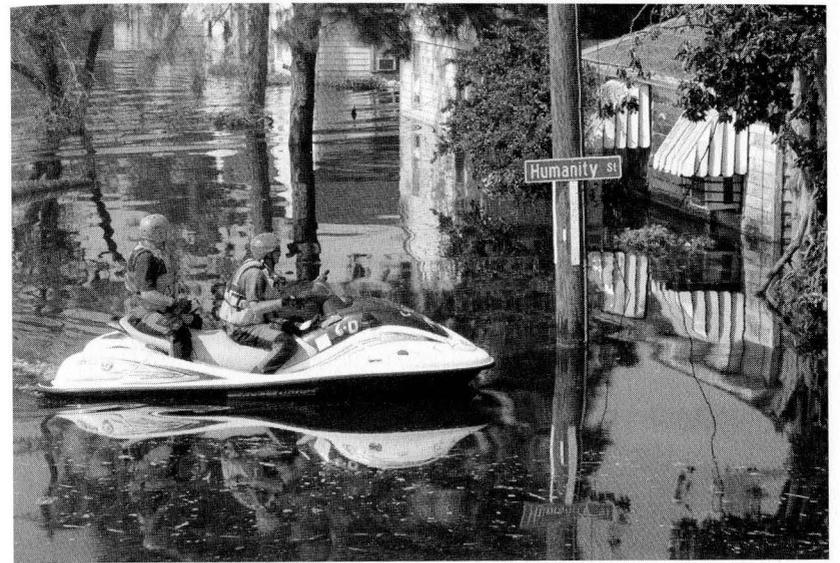
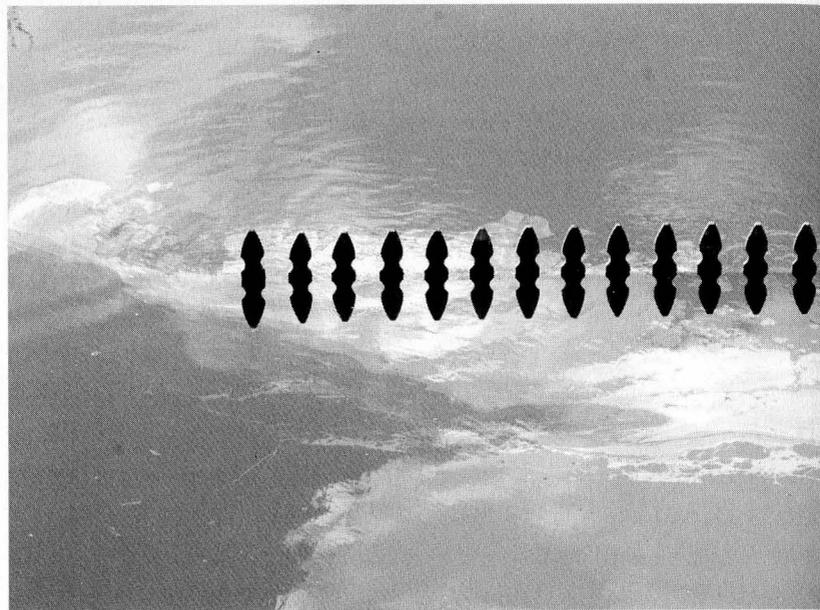
The blue spills in

Human form

Between (runneling)

From South to North (to East)

To North to East to East





## *Our Hell in High Water*

The real nightmare began on Wednesday morning, when the city cut off the water supply two days after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Until then, I hadn't regretted the decision not to evacuate my second-story French Quarter apartment, even when the electricity flicked off in the middle of the storm, plunging the city into darkness and ending most outside communication.

I still had hope.

I'm not particularly brave, but I am a fifth-generation New Orleans native raised in a culture that knows how to deal with hurricanes. As a matter of fact, the first light I ever saw streamed from a generator at Hôtel Dieu, the hospital that the Daughters of Charity had founded in the nineteenth century. I was born during the unnamed hurricane that wiped out New Orleans in September 1947, and was rowed home to the Faubourg Tremé along a flooded Canal Street.

So as clouds darkened on Sunday afternoon, generations of storm folklore—sheer instinct by now—sprang into action. I filled the bathtub with water, cut the wick on the hurricane lamp, froze water in plastic jugs to keep the refrigerator cool, secured the dilapidated wooden shutters on the front gallery, stocked up on batteries, food, and drinking water, and got out the portable radio and the plug-in white Princess phone. Then I opened a bottle of wine. By the time my friends José Torres Tama and Claudia Copeland arrived to weather the storm with me, I'd cooked a three-course meal, which we topped off with a bottle of Spanish cognac.

"Here's to Katrina," we toasted, "the Russian spy," even as the TV broadcast its unrelenting instructions to *evacuate, evacuate, evacuate*.

After Katrina began to pound us at 7:00 a.m. Monday, the only moment of panic took hold when a storm shutter tore open and a buckling set of French doors threatened to usher the hurricane into my study. While José and Claudia wired the doors shut, I held them in place with a wooden cooking spoon wedged inside the handles. Then we retired to the back gallery to watch the howling wrath of the storm whip through the brick courtyard. My building dates back to 1810, and has survived two centuries of storms from the Gulf. It knew what to do.

Or rather, the original architects of the city knew just what to expect, and designed houses on brick pilings, windows and doors with jalousied shutters, thick plaster walls, and enclosed courtyards. Most of the buildings constructed before 1910 have been waiting during centuries for a storm of Katrina's magnitude, and survived her with iron-lace grace, as did my place. Houses with concrete slab foundations poured on reclaimed swampland, and towering plate-glass hotels and office buildings, were chewed up and spat out. As my mother complained after her suburban home was flooded several years ago, "Honey, things like this aren't supposed to happen anymore. These are modern times."

Nature hasn't changed, but the city certainly has.

Summer camp by kerosene lamp didn't last long. By Tuesday afternoon I was already beginning to hear about martial law, widespread looting, and the city's mandate that everyone leave and nobody return. "You have nothing to come home to," the lone local radio station announced to the evacuated. "New Orleans as we know it has ended." Friends from both coasts called to inform me that the French Quarter was under water, even as I was peering down from my balcony into a bone-dry street. When we took a walk around, the Quarter resembled a cross between the morning after Mardi Gras and a B-war movie. Choppers swooped overhead, sirens wailed, and army trucks rumbled through the streets. At night,

for the first time in my life, I could see the stars in the sky over the French Quarter, and all I could hear were tree frogs and the crash of shattering glass in the distance.

I began to notice groups of residents lugging water bottles and suitcases, heading for the Convention Center. Hours later they straggled back. At this point my chief means of communication was shouting from the balcony, and I learned there were no evacuation buses. The city had ordered us to leave, but was allowing nobody in to rescue us and providing no transportation out. On Tuesday evening, my skeletal neighbor Kip, a kidney-transplant patient, waded home alone by flashlight from the Convention Center, where there were neither dialysis machines nor buses to get him to one. His last treatment had been four days earlier, and he was bloating.

"I hate to bring this up," my neighbor Tede told me, "but what are we going to do with his body when he dies?"

We had to get him out.

By Wednesday morning, when the water was cut off, the city was already descending into mayhem. A looter had shot a policeman in the head, a car was hijacked by someone wielding a machete, gas was being siphoned from parked cars, mail trucks and school buses were being stolen, and armed gangs of kids from the projects were circling the streets on bikes. The social problems in this impoverished city had been simmering for decades; now the lid was off, and the pot was boiling over.

Despite orders to evacuate, roadblocks had been set up, and nobody was being permitted either to enter or leave the city. Molly's, a local bar, opened by candlelight and the rumor spread like wild-fire: They have ice. If evacuated residents and proprietors had been allowed to return, to take a stand, some public order would have gradually prevailed. Yet the only advice from the city was to head for the Convention Center and not to drink the water.

We knew the water wasn't potable, and seldom drink it anyway. If I learned anything growing up here, it was never to buy a dead crab or to drink the tap water after a hurricane, the two most sacred

writes in the Creole catechism. The water was turned off to force us out, and the city's heavy-handed tactics made me bristle. "We got too many chiefs and not enough Indians," the mayor complained. I knew what that meant: Nobody was in charge. The Homeland Security police state had collided with Caribbean inefficiency, and the result was disaster. I took action. I latched the shutters, kissed my deceased mother's rabbit-foot and cat's-tail ferns goodbye, and in five minutes had packed a bag. In a daze, I was acting out a recurring nightmare: The borders are closing, the Nazis on their way, grab grandfather's gold watch and run.

I'd heard that hotels might be busing their guests out, and the place to head was the Monteleone Hotel on Royal Street, a Quarter institution. So at 5:30 p.m., José, Claudia, Kip, and I arrived trailing luggage and low expectations. But it turned out that the Monteleone had gotten together with several other hotels to charter ten buses to the Houston airport for \$25,000 to do privately what the authorities should be doing publicly. We bought a few of the remaining tickets at \$45 each. The sweltering lobby was littered with fainting bodies, grandmothers fanning themselves, and children seated in shadowy stairways, a scene straight out of *Hotel Rwanda*. The last bus out of New Orleans was set to leave at 6:05, the Austrian hotel clerk informed me.

I had my doubts.

We weren't the only locals in line. I spotted the legendary jazz musician Allen Toussaint. "Allen," I said, "where did you hear about this?" He shot me a broad grin and walked on, as if we shouldn't talk about such things. By 9:30 that evening the buses still hadn't arrived. Five hundred people were milling around in front of the hotel, guarded by a hotel-hired security force of teenagers in New Orleans Police t-shirts with shotguns slung over their shoulders, the pitch-dark street illuminated by the beams from a lone squad car. An obscenely obese man was hauled in on a beeping fork lift, and a row of passengers in wheelchairs formed at the corner. A run on

the buses was expected, and we were warned that only those with tickets would be allowed to board. Anyone else would be dealt with by the kids with shotguns.

Bus headlights appeared at last. A cheer went up. And then a single yellow Jefferson Parish school bus rattled up, bearing the news that the ten chartered buses had been confiscated by the state police. We heard on the sly that this bus was offering passage to the Baton Rouge airport at \$100 a seat. Allen Toussaint was the first to jump on, and after negotiating the price down with the driver, we crouched on the floor and held our breath. Ours was the only vehicle sailing along the dry, unlit Crescent City Connection highway. Why, we wondered, isn't the city providing hundreds of these vehicles to carry people out by the same route? The authorities may fix the electrical grid one day, but who is going to fix the authorities?

Later my neighbor Tede, who stayed behind, told me that the ten chartered buses never did show up. The five hundred passengers were ordered to walk to the Convention Center, and then attempted to march across the river on the Greater New Orleans Bridge, where they were shot at by the Gretna police.

"You mean you all escaped on that stolen school bus?" Tede shrieked. The news, she said, was all over town. As in the Battle of New Orleans, the pirates were better organized than the soldiers, and saved our day.

We're now luxuriating in a friend's air-conditioned house in Baton Rouge, taking hot showers and sucking on ice cubes. I'm safe and dry, but however comfortable, this isn't New Orleans. The minute the lights flash back on, I'll be back home, unlatching my shutters and staring down a French Quarter street that I hope stretches as far into the future as it does into the past. As Stella says to her sister Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I wish you'd stop taking it for granted that I'm in something I want to get out of."

### *All for the Radio*

A day alone without electricity is not terrible. I learned that the radio my son Werner said "will work if you just use that battery out of the smoke detector" did not, so for news I figured I'd rely on the telephone. By noon Tuesday the phone service shut off. So I'd rely on my cellphone, I reasoned. The floodwater was only two feet deep, and I had my daughter Esme's Jeep in the garage; surely I could ration the cell-phone bars for a few days. I was fine. I had running water and some food. With candles, pencils, paper, books, and a deck of cards, what could go wrong?

I knew I had a low-grade sense of terror. I never had heard such silence in the city before. It was a thick silence, the kind that makes a person rustle a sheet of paper just to be sure her ears still are working. I could not have explained what frightened me that day except possibly an undercurrent of common sense. I knew my children were flapping around: having gone east, they then had gone north to turn west and had wound up in Baton Rouge. Bored and finding no electricity, they headed back to New Orleans, and only my screams of protest had turned them in their tracks and sent them toward Houston, where it seemed the entire population of New Orleans already had moved.

Maybe I also was concerned for myself. I was seeing no one around. One family or two might pass during the day, all wading for Carrollton Avenue, little girls with Hello Kitty backpacks, mamas with bright yellow shoulder bags, sometimes a daddy floating a garbage can full of groceries. Plastic. "Pack in plastic," they must have said. They were going, but when I asked they said they didn't know

why. The neighborhood was empty. I knew when a family passed because I heard them splash. It was that silent.

Before I lost cellphone service, I heard from my husband a few times. He and I are permanently separated, and I'm sure it's because our parting is so recent and so thoroughly painfully tied up in the house that I've been unusually strange about my home. It took him two months to move to a luxury fifth-floor condominium, and in those two months and the one since, I've been slightly crazed about purifying my house. That has meant cleaning the basement. I've wanted to know what every item is, where it is—and that I want it. That has meant sorting through memorabilia—souvenir sugar cubes from my 1961 Europe trip, letters home from camp, college art portfolio, letters from a man no one knew about during my first marriage, photographs from always—and *deciding*. I had saved it all to look back at when I was old. I was old now. I looked. Some of it I saved. Upstairs. Some of it I saved in the basement. On saw horses. The basement has flooded, memorably on May 8, 1995, to three feet, other times to lesser depths. When Katrina started coming, I just had finished saying good-bye to my marriage, and it felt very good being in cellphone contact with my husband. Up there on the fifth floor. We had fought often about messing up the kitchen. Now he was stranded with an electric stove. I had a gas line coming in. *The 17th Street Canal levee has been breached*, was his last message on my cellphone. It was the last word I had from anyone. The cell towers failed shortly before the water was shut off. My only source of information for the next two days would be my neighbor's fence—and nearby landmarks. I took reassurance in the visibility of the lower fence hasp, and then it disappeared overnight, so soon I began to rely on cars on the street. License plates submerged with alarming speed, then hoods, then rear windshields. Of course, I also could go down my basement steps and watch landmarks there, but eventually I made myself too unhappy. When the washing machine, which was on a raised concrete slab, floated away, I knew how easily

I would extrapolate to photographs. And to the Jeep, my means of escape.

I was stranded. I had joked to friends beforehand that my house would feel like Mont-Saint-Michel at high tide. I thought I was definitely safe because no one would swim through three feet of poison to hurt me. I had a ten-mile moat. I felt I could go on like that for quite a while. I was all right without power, water, and phone services. I recognized that if I was going to panic it would be for lack of a radio. Werner had left me thinking I had a radio, and if I had had one, I could have made predictions and choices. Without information, I was utterly alone.

It was ninety-five degrees outside much of the day. I walked around in my underwear, splashing water from the tub on my arms to cool off. Because New Orleans is a murder capital, my windows are painted shut, and my only entryways are the front door and the door to the basement. My house is a house for air conditioning, though it was built a hundred years ago for cross-ventilation. I have ceiling fans, but they do not turn without the same electricity that powers the air conditioning they force down on me. My only breezes were the ones I made when I walked. Eventually I took my size XL t-shirt from Lemuria Books, soaked it in the tub, and walked around in that.

And that is what I was wearing Wednesday morning when I heard Anthony. In the silence the sound was instantly recognizable, though I hadn't heard it in years. Well-crafted wood thunking against heavy aluminum. A rowboat with one oar. He was rowing up my side street, and even though his progress was slow and my voice might have been audible for a mile, I felt extraordinarily swift to have caught him. "I'll pay you anything to take me to the other side of the streetcar tracks," I said.

Anthony had been in that boat off and on for two days, and he was taking money from no one. He was on his way to check on his father, but he would come back. I believed him. I needed to go to a radio.

I threw random items into a small red canvas carry-on. Toothbrush and toothpaste—travel size. I forgot deodorant. VISA card, license, health card, and all my cash. Two shirts, two pairs of pants, underwear. A piece of my new novel that I'd tried to write on legal paper right after my laptop battery died the morning of the storm. My friend Lynn Pruett's novel. Grapes, carrots, cereal, tuna fish. All my meds.

And Nookie. Most of what I brought was Nookie. Nookie, who started out life as a handful of black fur scrabbling blindly into the path of the Claiborne Avenue bus. Werner insisted on taking her name from the Limp Bizkit song, "I Did It All for the Nookie": the name was prescient. Nookie had been left with what seemed to be about two tablespoonfuls of cat litter and an equal amount of fresh food. I packed it all into her litter box, shoved her into her carrier, and waited for Anthony.

He came. And I took my sad, solemn tour of what was left between my house and my sister Lynda's. Sitting up in a rowboat paddled by an exhausted young black man, I did not feel proud of myself at all, cutting straight across Palmer Park, riding right over wrought-iron benches, passing meticulously restored Victorian houses that Anthony told me had taken months of painstaking work; they now were half submerged. Anthony works in construction, and he knew the wires we had to lift as we passed were phone and cable, but it wouldn't have mattered. Power lines had no power.

We clunked up to Lynda's steps, making the only noise in her empty neighborhood. Cleopatra and little Anubis on our barge. We heard "I cannot believe it" screech from the upper window of Lynda's neighbor's house. It was one of my finer moments, sitting up in that rowboat like a fool, waving and hollering something like, "What the hell are you doing over there?"

Lynda, who never had lived outside New Orleans except for her four years at Harvard, had been adventurous enough to have de-camped to the empty house next door because it had an upstairs,

unlike hers. She made the decision when no one knew how high the waters might rise; it was her one sensible move. She hadn't evacuated because she didn't want to upset her slightly undisciplined two dogs; now she was letting them leave their effluence in the spaces that eventually would be reoccupied by a family who had considered her a friend for nineteen years. I knew the Halls; I liked the Halls; I'd never been inside the Halls' house. Married to a white-shoe attorney, Tricia Hall was socially prominent, an unassuming member of New Orleans's beloved Hubig's Pie family. Now I was going to have to use her toilets and not flush.

But Lynda had a radio. And batteries to back it up if we ran down. I was so happy to be at Tricia Hall's house that I gave Anthony half of my cash, a hundred dollars. He didn't want to take it, but I insisted. The ride was that important. Because now I was alone with one other person, in a new neighborhood. With a radio. Anthony promised to come check on us. I believed him.

Lynda and I didn't have silence, but not just because we could converse, and not just because we had a radio. Shortly after I arrived, the helicopters began what seemed to me to be random, constant flyovers. They were tantalizingly close, some hovering over the block, some coming in dangerously low; I was sure they could see us. I went out on the porch, hung out the windows in the daytime; I tried to do S's and O's on the flashlight aimed at the sky when they passed at night. I didn't know that Lynda, elsewhere in the house, was making an "OK" sign at the same sky. She reasoned that people were dying and we weren't. I agreed with that. But her truer reason was that other people didn't have dogs, and we did. She was fanatical about those dogs. Though in truth I was pretty fanatical about that cat. I figured Werner didn't want to see me without that cat. At least the choppers made a good breeze. Even if they blew leaves in through every open door.

## *I Am a Homeless Man*

I am a homeless man.

Last week I had a two-story home in a city called New Orleans. My wife and I left that home with our toothbrushes and a few shirts on a Thursday, expecting to return in two days. Now it seems I won't be able to see my house again for three or four months.

This is what happened in my city today:

An old man in a chaise lounge lay dead in a grassy median as hungry babies wailed around him. Around the corner, an elderly woman lay dead in her wheelchair, covered with a blanket, and another body lay beside her wrapped in a sheet.

In my house on Pine Street, there are some poems I'd like to have back. There are some pictures of my wife and my children I would like to see again. Looters, you are welcome to the tuna, to the television, to the jewelry, even. You are welcome certainly to the peanut butter. There are bottles of water in the laundry room. Please drink. You may find it more comfortable to sleep on the couch downstairs than upstairs in my bed, where surely it is very, very hot. There's been no power for days, no air-conditioning. Late August and early September in New Orleans, after a big storm, is not a place to be.

In the backyard, the key limes are small, but they are ripe. Please help yourself. Their juice is perfect. The Meyer lemons I don't think are quite ready, fat as they are. It's funny what you miss. I miss my lemon tree.

Two days ago, we learned our city was flooding. That night, my wife suddenly woke and remembered that she had taken the old photos and scrapbooks that were kept on the second floor downstairs. We don't know how far above or below sea level our house is, or how many feet of water will come in. After the levees broke, we were trying to understand how high the water would go, but we kept getting confused. Would the water go to the ceiling of the first floor? What happens to a hundred-year-old home that sits in water for days or weeks? We could not do the calculations and kept subtracting when we should have added.

My wife and I have been waking up in the middle of the night with thoughts that we've not thought all day. She remembered the piano that I had not thought about. My mother had given it to me before she died, and my brother had helped me move it to Louisiana. I felt a wave of sadness, and then it crested and subsided and we let the piano go. We let the pictures of our children go. We let the old books go, and we let the new kitchen go. We let the water cover it all.

But the thought of all that water did not let me go. There is an image I've seen on the television of the water from Lake Pontchartrain floating over the broken levee into the city. It is very beautiful, that image. Peaceful water going about its business, which is to flow and seek its own level. It is powerful and terribly violent to be so peaceful.

Water is very heavy. That is something to think about. Surprisingly dense and nothing stops it very well. For a whole day we'd felt and seen the water flowing into the city, though the gentle word *flowing* hardly does water justice because water is so basic and so powerful and so necessary and we human beings are very arrogant but very weak and frail. We can't stop a common thing like water. Not easily.

So I imagined the water rising on my street, up the steps into the first floor, and lifting that old spinet my mother bought—it was for her such an important investment in culture and a different way of living than her poverty and depression—and then in my dream I saw this: my wife with a pile of photographs, beautiful images, and under one, which seemed to show water flowing in grey lines into the sky, I saw underneath this legend in black print: An image is a pump.

Then the dream seemed to shift, and I saw my mother's piano lifted up in the living room, turning delicately—water can do this, lift whatever it gets underneath, an SUV, a tractor trailer—so why not a piano? It lifted the piano as the first floor filled with black water, and the piano turned daintily, like an elephant dancing under the big top.

But none of this happened. The piano is not wet, probably. The living room is not full of dark water. It was just a dream about the house I remember and imagine—part remember, part imagine—the house I cannot live in, and won't for months and maybe not ever again.

Houses are fragile. Wind and water can take them down. And fire. And indifference and neglect, and racism and separation, the separateness we feel from others who don't look like us, or live like us. The others for whom we are an us.

Today I learn my house is dry, and so it is now the looters I fear. I fear them, but I don't condemn them. Some are criminals going about their criminal business, but others, most of them, are just me. They are just me.

If I were there, I would be them. I would thirst as they thirst, and hunger as they hunger, and I would break any door, I would enter any store or home, I would steal, I would do whatever I needed to

live and to make sure those I love would live. My wife, my children: Yes, for sure, for them, I would do what I needed to do.

And I feel the same way about my city. My beloved New Orleans, which is submerged right now, and which I hope one day will rise again.

An image is a pump. An image has the power to move energy from one realm to another, from the realm of reality to the realm of imagination, from the realm of imagination to the realm of reality—from the realm of dream to the realm of fact, and sometimes back again, recycling, pumping.

So we absorb televised images of people we don't know, of people who are thirsty and sick and scared, people on rooftops who are lifted in the air by rescue helicopters and dangle there, the children too afraid to look up as their rescue basket ascends in the sky. Images of people who have lost husbands and wives, children and grandmothers. Images of men and women and children, abandoned by all of us—abandoned by “us” because they are not us: They are poor and we are not; they are black and we are not; or they are ill and we are well. They are old and we are young. Images of those abandoned because of indifference bred of separation. But images break through barriers, they flood us.

An image is a pump, from the realm of dream to the realm of fact, and then back again, turning, turning like the piano floating in a pirouette, then delicately spinning down to the ground.

That is how an image plays in the mind.

An image is a pump to turn fear into beauty, and maybe beauty into terror. My fear of losing my house to water becomes a piano spinning in the dark, and an elephant turning on its toes.

And then the water subsides and the piano settles down. But all is not well. I have an image of my house, and that is the only house I have right now, because I am a homeless man, but only one of many homeless men and homeless women. In a city that is no longer a city. And though I know that no home is permanent, it is something different when that is no longer a spiritual metaphor you read in a book, but a felt reality, when the image pump turns an abstraction into a stabbing pain in the heart.

Homelessness is something different and true, and it has been felt before by many people, felt deeply by them every day. We live in a world, and a nation, of far too many homeless people, and I have done too little about it. So I am just one of many, and not the worst off either, but still, it is my home and my image and I am entitled to it. It doesn't cost anyone anything for me to be carrying my home with me in my heart.

It is one thing to miss a house. It is another thing to miss a whole city.

There is so much room in the heart—enough room not just for my home, but for a whole city that is going under, that is overwhelmed, inundated. Right now, the city of New Orleans is an image in the hearts of those of us who love it, because the reality of the city is too terrible to bear with our eyes.

And the heart is a pump too.

JOSHUA CLARK

### *American*

Chartres Street was empty of anything but sun and heat and a silence I expected at any moment to be filled with the bird's call that unfailingly swoons into the quietest pockets of the world. But it wasn't there yet. There wasn't even an insect. Hadn't been since yesterday morning. It was unnerving, just standing there, hearing every movement, every creak of bone, every swallow, breathing in pulses of silence while we gazed vacantly over sagging pastel shotgun houses.

"Looked just like mannequins floating out in front of my house," said Big Shot Trey Nasty. Foam from his tall boy ran down his six-inch fire-red goatee, the bubbles at last settling into its horned end. "Then one of them turned over and I saw the fingertips all puckered. A woman and a kid, this kid I'd pay five bucks to mow my lawn."

Nelle looked down at the unopened beer in her hands. Big Shot's block on the other side of St. Claude had taken eight feet of water.

"When it started flooding, I figured the storm drains were clogged," Big Shot said. "I put on my waders and went out into the street, felt along the gutter, but the drain was clear. They'd turned the pumps off. The city must've turned the pumps off. Then I bumped into the woman floating there. Her hand touched me. Them puckered fingertips."

"Tayl," I said, "your house on Lesseps, your mom's place too, they're not flooded?"

Tayl retched. He was siphoning gas from a Toyota, the only other vehicle on the block. The only tree on the block had fallen on it and crushed the hood and windshield.

"Water's just on the other side of St. Claude," said Big Shot. "His place is fine. Bywater's dry. How about you?"

"Same." I nodded toward Nelle. "She lives out by Lakeview. We haven't been over there yet because of all these shootings we keep hearing about. So is it going down now, the water?"

"It's coming up," said Tayl, wiping gasoline off his chin, his eyes red, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"From where?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Tayl spit. He screwed the funnel onto his gas can, walked across the street and began filling his SUV.

A wiry old man wearing boxers and flip-flops rounded the corner, a couple tattoos long ago turned to green splotches on his chest, his skin brown and taut and smooth as driftwood. He bummed a beer and told us that Robért's was open. He said they were letting you take whatever you wanted. So the four of us piled into Tayl's Denali and headed for Elysian Fields, leaving the old man standing there in the middle of the street sucking on his beer.

There were only six other vehicles in the Robért's parking lot, but people of every color and age were spilling out of the grocery. The few who'd scored shopping carts were pushing ungodly masses of food, the others carrying loads in whatever makeshift containers they could find, some just kicking all the food they could through the parking lot.

The grocery store was cavernous in its darkness, cloudy liquid creeping over our flip-flops, our eyes trying to make sense of the dark, and the darker shapes within it, scurrying, colliding. We felt our way past the cash registers, past shifting figures, the dank black space around us pierced only by the flicker and glimmer of matches and lighters and a flashlight or two deeper in the store. I grabbed the latest *Atlantic* off the magazine rack, something on the cover about how Arafat ruined Palestine. "We need a flashlight," I said.

"Yeah, in the truck," said Big Shot.

We felt our way back outside. Big Shot pulled the largest flashlight I'd ever seen out of the back of the Denali. It was rectangular, the size and shape of a large shoebox. "Use it for alligator hunting," said Big Shot, storming back toward the entrance with us in tow. "Sun got nothing on this baby."

He was right. When we got back into the heat of the place, he turned it on and the whole grocery store became blinding noon. People who'd been groping in the dark could now see what was in front of their faces, their feet sloshing through the light's glare off the inch-deep colorless muck.

People started to follow us, scrambling to get into the light, pushing each other out of it. Big Shot shut it off. He flipped up a panel on the flashlight's top that emitted just enough of a glow for us to follow him and not bump into anything.

We found the beer section. Big Shot hit the light just long enough to see that only three dented cans of Milwaukee's Best Light were left. We stood shoulder to shoulder, crestfallen. We took apart some Barq's Root Beer display shelves, I handed one back to Nelle but she didn't take it.

"Nelle?" I called quietly.

Nothing.

"Nelle?"

Again, nothing.

"Goddammit. Nelle!"

Two hulking figures stopped moving beside us. We stood silently facing each other, breathing in sweat. I could feel their stillness, their eyes, the frailty to the calm, the latent fear we all had of each other. Then the darkness began shifting around them again as they went back to loading their own trays with soda cans. I wanted to scream for her, but was too afraid it would shatter this fragile civility, give voice to questions—Who is it that's just behind me, bumping their ass into mine? Who just hit me with their elbows? Who just splashed me, knocked my tray over, took the last Sunny D even

though he already had eleven of them? We were all waiting for the first drop of panic, and I wasn't about to let it out.

"Nelle," I whispered with all the rage and volume a whisper can carry. "Shit. Hit the light for a second." He did. She wasn't in the aisle.

Tayl tapped me on the shoulder, pointed behind me, "Look."

"Oh my God," I said.

"Jesus Christ," said Big Shot.

"They haven't touched the imports," said Tayl.

The first few cartons we picked up fell apart from all the slop they'd been sitting in and the bottles slid onto the floor, smashed and added to the sludge. We picked the rest up from the bottom, loaded up and the three of us headed back to the Denali—Dos Equis, Dos Equis Amber, St. Pauli Girl, Fosters, Becks, Harp, Bass, Red Stripe, Corona, Corona Light, Negro Modelo, Newcastle, Boddington, and Guinness. The Heineken was gone.

As we walked back inside, a teenage girl, her lips and cheeks pierced, strings of red tear tattoos falling from both eyes, pushed past us on her way out with what looked like an industrial-sized laundry cart loaded with enough food to start her own small grocery store. A girl with a pink mohawk poked her head out of the top of the cart between bags of Frito's and asked me what time it was.

"3:30, something like that," I said.

"We all need to get out of here, because at four they're going to blow the levee to save the Quarter," she said. "Doesn't that suck?" Then she disappeared back into the Frito's.

We hit every aisle one at a time. Tayl and I would stand behind Big Shot at the beginning of each one as he illuminated it for about two seconds, before anyone else had a chance to see anything, then we'd scramble in the dark, fumbling around for what we'd seen that we wanted, trying to remember where it was. It was about hit or miss. I still hadn't seen Nelle, and I continued to whisper for her

intermittently, still breathing the sweat of the place in darkness so close it seemed to press my own sweat back into my pores.

When we walked out for the fourth time, the edges of the trays slicing into our bleeding fingers, I had salted and unsalted peanuts, almonds, macadamias, cashews, roasted walnuts, red beans, white beans, white rice, brown rice, long grain rice, wild rice, saffron rice, dirty rice, basmati rice, broccoli and cheese couscous, twelve boxes of white chocolate sugar-free Jell-o instant pudding mix and four liters of prune juice which I'd thought was Cran-Raspberry Cocktail. I heaped it all on top of the already two-foot deep pile in the SUV. Big Shot had five cases of the Big Shot strawberry soda from which he'd gotten his name. Tayl had meant to load up on Cheetos and instead walked out with twenty bags of sun-dried tomato vegetarian chips cooked in olive oil that left an aftertaste like pennies in my mouth as we walked back in again.

A kid who couldn't have been older than thirteen, wearing a red bandana pulled high over his nose and mouth, heaved a large black safe out of the manager's office just inside the entrance. He picked up a sledgehammer and started going at it. We agreed this would be our last trip in. It was time for liquor.

And every ounce of it was gone. Big Shot hit the light to see what was in the darkness past the liquor. There must have been hundreds of bottles of wine, every shelf full up and untouched. We knew we weren't getting ice anytime soon, so reds it was. We didn't waste time looking at the brands, only the prices in the dim glow of the flashlight, grabbing anything over \$10 as the sledgehammer clanged away steadily behind us. By the time we'd loaded a couple dozen bottles on each of our trays, the kid was really getting into it. He paid us no attention as we shuffled around him back outside, sweat dripping off the pointed tip of his bandana.

I dumped my wine in the truck, tossed the Barq's shelf in after it, told Tayl to wait a second and dashed back inside.

I stood in the entrance, screamed, "Nelle!"

The sledgehammer stopped. The kid looked up at me, the whites of his eyes just above his bandana catching some spark of light that perforated the darkness. In ringing silence the shuffle of the place behind him roared, chaos building without the rhythm of his sledgehammer. He looked at me as if to ask why I would let such a thing happen, did I know the consequences, what beast could come tearing out of the dark if he didn't keep its pulse steady? He shifted his man-sized fingers around the shaft, forearm muscles twitching, shining ribs heaving, white boxers sweat soaked, beads of sweat still falling from the bandana's tip.

"Here," came her voice from somewhere too far away for me to know where "here" was.

"Nelle!" I shouted louder, and bolted past the kid. "Nelle!"

The sledgehammer made a deep crash, then it shifted into a more tinny, piercing ring with every blow like it had struck another level of the safe.

Little fires lit dark faces all around. Someone knocked me into a magazine rack. "Where?" I called. Only the sledgehammer's ringing echo called back. I walked down an aisle, whispers crowding around me, the air too close to hear them. I came out into the very back of the store. A wet hand grabbed my ankle. "Here," she said. A flickering match, someone rummaging through cold cuts, lit her silhouette and splashed out in the thick muck on the floor. She was sitting there below me.

"What are you doing, baby? We got to get out of here."

"American Cheese," she said. She was crying. "Where's the American Cheese? That's all I wanted and I can't find it anywhere." She broke into sobs. The person beside us dropped the match into the liquid on the floor. It hissed, then he swore, bumped into me, jabbing me with an elbow before flailing and sloshing through the darkness toward the exit.

I leaned down. "Baby, listen. We need to go."

I reached out, searching the darkness until my hand ran into packages of shredded cheese. I felt further down, found her shoulder, her hips, her knees. She'd fallen over onto her side and folded her knees into her chest. "Now, baby. Right now."

I grabbed her underneath the arm, pulled her up.

We took little steps, shuffling through the sludge now well over our toes, all the little flickering matches one by one going out around us, the sledgehammer's pace quickening as we approached it. I looked hard at the safe for the first time as we made our way around the kid. It didn't have a single scratch on it.

Nelle shielded her eyes outside, water seeping past us out into the parking lot now. People stood there guarding enormous quantities of food heaped on the ground before them, unsure what to do next.

Nelle was soaked, her hair clotted, dripping with something the color of sour milk, her eyes swollen but impossibly dry. She smelled sweet, of fresh ruby red grapefruit juice and banana-strawberry yogurt.

Tayl had the truck running. He looked at Nelle, and shook his head. I popped the back, grabbed a bottle of a Cabernet-Shiraz blend from southern Australia. I told Tayl we'd walk, meet them back at his place in the Bywater, the car was too full as it was. He told us to round up anyone who wanted to eat well tonight, said he'd have a couple dozen lamb chops going on the grill by the time we got there.

As he pulled out, a gray-bearded man, his skin barely a shade lighter than the black polyester shirt which hung loose over his sunken, hunched frame, walked up to Nelle and me and held out an opened bag of cookies. "Y'all want some shortbread cookies?" he asked.

"No thanks," I said.

"You sure?"

"We have plenty," I said. "Thank you."

"I only wanted a couple. You see, I got me a sweet tooth and just couldn't resist having a couple shortbreads. I was going to put the rest back inside, but, now, well it looks like it's getting a little scarier in there now. I can't just let them waste."

We began walking out of the parking lot. Nelle broke away from me, turned to the old man who was still watching us. "Do you need anything else?" she asked him. "Any food or water or anything?"

"No, no," he said.

"You come with us," said Nelle. "We have plenty where we're going. It's not far. We'll have a barbeque. We can get your family. Do you have family here?"

"No, no, that's okay," he said. "I only wanted a couple shortbreads. You see, I got me a sweet tooth."

He looked down at the cookies in his hand, extended them in offering to the people scattering around him, away from him and away from the building with all the food they could hold, ignoring him on their way back into the neighborhood. And then there were the people with garbage bags slung over their shoulders, the ones paying no attention to the old man or Robért's, walking along St. Claude Avenue in the opposite direction, ones who'd given up waiting on the Industrial Canal levee for the National Guard and had already walked through the entire Bywater on their way to the Superdome.

Across the street, on the other side of St. Claude, was water, the first flooding we'd actually seen. Just a few inches at first, then deeper and deeper into the distance until it swallowed cars, then trucks, then homes. There was a heap of mannequins piled up in the neutral ground, torsos, arms, legs, heads dirty and mutilated, all of them white, more and more black people walking by them, by us as I sifted through the mannequins, broke the index finger off one. I picked up a brick from the crumbled wall of some crumbled building, put the wine down on the sidewalk. I held the mannequin finger, its tip pointing down on top of the cork, and pounded the

broken top end lightly with the brick. Wine flew up into my face as I knocked the cork into the bottle. I took a sip, handed the bottle to Nelle. "Here."

A young couple with dreadlocks and backpacks walked by, asked us if we'd heard the news—"They just shot some girl dead in the back of Robért's," said the girl. "Just a couple minutes ago. Some white girl who'd gotten lost from her friends. They shot her for cheese. We're getting the hell out of here."

"What time is it?" Nelle asked them.

"About quarter to four."

"Here," said Nelle, holding the wine out to them. "They're blowing the levee in a few minutes."

The couple studied her, half her body wet with the cloudy muck now congealing in her hair. When they handed the bottle back to us, we said farewell and walked along the neutral ground toward the Industrial Canal, Nelle's puckered fingers entwined in mine. The water stayed just to our left, the Bywater dry to our right, both within reach. We could practically smell the barbeque, the dirty rice cooking on a skillet on the grill, peppers and onions simmering while women dragged their children past us in the opposite direction toward Canal Street, their fathers and brothers and husbands hunched beneath the weight of what was left heaped into green garbage bags over their shoulders, dizzy, so dehydrated they were no longer even sweating. And we waited for the levee to blow, for the explosion, the water, for the day to die so we wouldn't have to see Big Shot's house a few blocks up from Tayl's while we ate those lamb chops.

*Gentilly Home*

I could tell you whatever you want to know. I could tell you that my mama and daddy's house in Gentilly, the one I grew up in, the one they lived in for the last thirty-one years, took in about ten feet of water. I could tell you that they've been staying at our house in LaPlace ever since Katrina hit. Or I could tell you about the day we went back, how I was too nervous to eat, or how the tree in their front yard, the same one I busted the side of my head on as a child, was the only one left. But none of that matters. The house is ruined now.

We came back on a Saturday morning, me and my wife, Keyan. We drove down from Shreveport. Her job relocated her after Katrina, and we had been up there ever since. But this weekend I wanted to go home. Sitting in a hotel for a month and half watching the news just wasn't doing it. I wanted to drive across the I-10 and see the Superdome for myself. I wanted to stop on St. Charles, get a drink and just drive. I wanted to go home.

On the way back, we picked up my daddy in LaPlace. He had already been into the city, so he knew the drill. Passing through Metairie neither me or Keyan said a word. We just looked out the window at the toppled trees lying on people's roofs and front lawns.

"This ain't nothing," my daddy said, pointing at a torn billboard hanging in front of what used to be a Spur station. "Out here they mostly got wind damage. Wait till we get closer to the city."

The closer we got to the city, the more deserted it was. Abandoned cars sat on side of the interstate all dented and rusty with their windows blown out. Trees hung over the fence that separated

the 610 from Pan-American stadium. And the traffic had slacked up, too. By the time we exited onto St. Bernard Avenue, we were the only ones around.

"Watch where you drive," my daddy said, looking down at branches and pieces of wood in the street. "You roll over something and catch a flat, there ain't nobody to call to come help you."

It took us about ten minutes to get to their neighborhood. After seeing trees on other people's houses, I thought I was ready. But when we pulled up to their house, the screens were hanging off the windows, all the flowers in my mama's garden were dead, a tire was in the front yard. I don't even remember seeing the mailbox.

I put the car in park and got out. Up the block, power lines were down, branches were all over the street, the few trees that were left standing, didn't have any leaves. Not another person was in sight anywhere, no dogs, no cats, nothing. "Does this look like any place I ever lived?" my daddy asked me.

"No," I said.

We stood there staring. David's house across the street, the door hung open, and you could see everything scattered inside. Mrs. Nicholas' hedges, where at ten I got stung by a bee and had to be carried inside by my cousins, looked like two moldy loaves of bread. Even the bricks on the houses seemed worn.

"There's just nothing green." I turned to Keyan. "Nowhere."

We walked to the backyard, dry mud crunching under our feet, the brown watermark on the side windows standing at least three feet above us. "Look at my truck," my daddy said. The surge had left the truck in a slanted position. OK was written in big letters with white chalk on the back glass, meaning no bodies had been found. The wind had blown all the other windows out.

"Go see the shade," he said. The shade stood behind the carport, the roof gone, but the frame still intact. I remember at night, me and my cousin, Ferd, use to sneak back there and blow joints. And

that was where my mama first taught me how to wash clothes.

"Don't mix the dark with the light," she'd say. "And make sure you don't overload the dryer or fill the washer up with all that water."

I left the shade and found my daddy by the back door. He had a rusty hammer in his hand and he was yanking at the lock. He yanked until he pulled out a nail fit for a coffin.

"Search and Rescue," he said, turning to me. "They came, and the only way they could get in was to kick in the back door. After they finished, they left this nail to lock it."

He dropped the nail on the ground and threw the hammer in the grass. "You might wanna tie that shirt around your nose," he said. Then he pushed open the door. Hot air, smelling like rusted copper, came rushing out. I put the shirt over my nose and walked in. Mud covered the den floor. The table where they played Spades on Saturday nights had been flipped on its side, mold creeping up the legs, tiles missing from the top.

"Don't be shy," my daddy said. "Turn on the radio." He was trying to keep a sense of humor.

I looked around the room. "Where?"

"There," he said and pointed. A pile of rubble, what used to be the entertainment center, sat next to the big screen TV.

Keyan walked in the door behind us. She took two steps and pulled her shirt over her nose. "Oh my God," she said.

We went into the kitchen and it was no better, refrigerator lying on its back, cabinets twisted, counters splintering, the floor buckling. I looked at a spoon jammed into the wall and shook my head.

"Just what do you do?" my daddy asked me.

I just stood there. I didn't have an answer. The only thing I could think to say was, "Rebuild."

"Are you crazy?" he said. "Every house in this neighborhood gotta be torn down. And then we don't even know what neighbors are coming back."

We walked into the bedroom and then the bathroom. No better. It was all the same, wet carpet, TV on its back, flipped dresser, mud in the sink, mud in the tub.

In the dining room, my daddy packed away the last of the dishes. "You see these," he said. "Your grandma gave us these as a wedding present. Five thousand dollars and we never ate off'em once."

I watched him get down on his knees and pile those dishes into an ice chest. Thirty-one years of memories and that was all they had left. I wanted to say something. But what do you say to somebody who's lost everything?

We walked out the house that Saturday morning and my daddy slammed the nail into the back door. That's it, I thought. The coffin's sealed. But then I felt something. I didn't want to go. I just wanted to sit there until somebody pinched me, and I woke up and realized that none of this ever happened.

*Between Is and Was*

A satellite map claims that our corner of the Ninth Ward, back by the naval base, two hundred feet from the Mississippi River, is, somehow, dry. Four of five friends who remained concur. Our house survived: our huge, gorgeous, rented house. We own nothing, except Chauncey, our pygmy goat. Where else but New Orleans could we live with a goat?

For \$800 a month, Chauncey had a thousand-square-foot backyard behind a huge double shotgun with an attic renovated into a comfortable bedroom in one of the most enigmatic neighborhoods in the country. It hurts to say was, but the present tense sounds wrong now. And now—especially after each mounting governmental insensitivity—New Orleans feels like the only place I could stand to live within the United States. The Bywater is paradise lost.

The real estate bubble in New Orleans was due to pop months ago. We moved off Esplanade Avenue a year ago, when that idyllic area began turning from a neighborhood into a Monopoly board. But the Bywater's laid-back neighbors remained its big draw. Nobody would rat you out for selling egg tacos and coffee out of your bedroom window, or hosting a twenty-band Noise Fest in your backyard. Or harboring a farm animal. Chauncey, in fact, was a beloved Bywater celebrity. Walking down Royal Street, munching tropical plants and cigarette butts on his way to Sugar Park Tavern and Vaughn's, Chauncey brought down racial barriers and introduced us to every one of our neighbors.

Our favorite old, loud neighbor, who sold Viagra from his apartment, would, like many black New Orleanians, make barbecue

jokes whenever he saw Chauncey—to which we'd always quip, "Oh, haven't heard that one in four and a half minutes!" On the morning we fled Katrina, the old man laughed and told us no way was he leaving New Orleans for no hurricane. Most of our old black neighbors stayed—and some probably died. Months ago, when the oldest Mardi Gras Indian, eighty-nine-year-old Big Chief "Tootie" Montana, died, the papers loudly mourned the loss of the man and the vast historic knowledge he took with him. It's old-timers like Montana who did not leave—Katrina peeled the epidermis off the city's history.

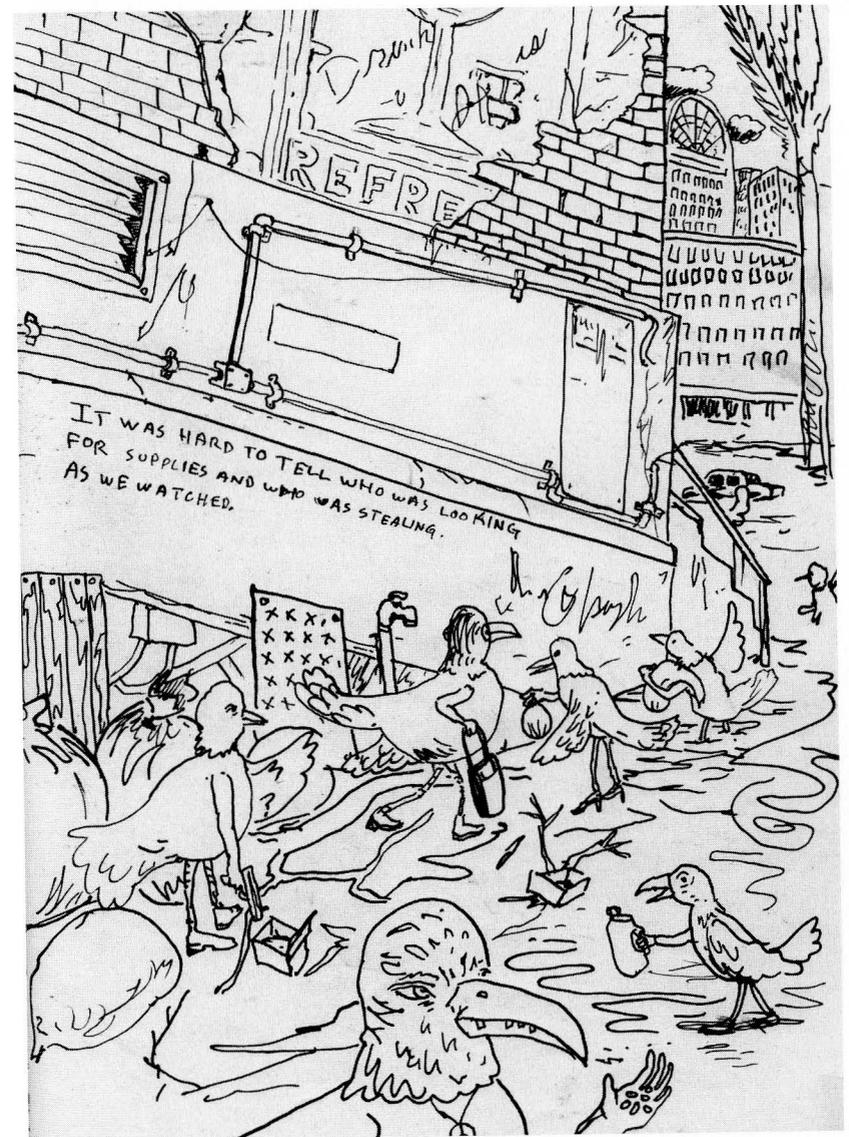
My girlfriend and I wouldn't have left either. But another neighbor forced his car keys on us. As I'd grown up in Florida, the false alarms, the stockpiling of canned goods, the window taping—all for naught—had steeled me against panic. It only happens to the other guy. But last year, after we bought Chauncey for \$75 from a farm on New Orleans' West Bank, Hurricane Ivan threatened, and I evacuated for the first time ever. We drove eight hours to Baton Rouge—normally a forty-five-minute trip; I-10 from New Orleans is not suited for mass panic—with Chauncey in our laps. And then, even Ivan turned away. New Orleans residents also play a silent psychological game—especially we transplants—trying to outdo each other with their loyalty to the city. And staying in New Orleans, despite Mayor Nagin begging his citizens to flee, is a bold declaration of love. We almost love the city that much. We almost chose to tough out Katrina inside our huge, wonderful house.

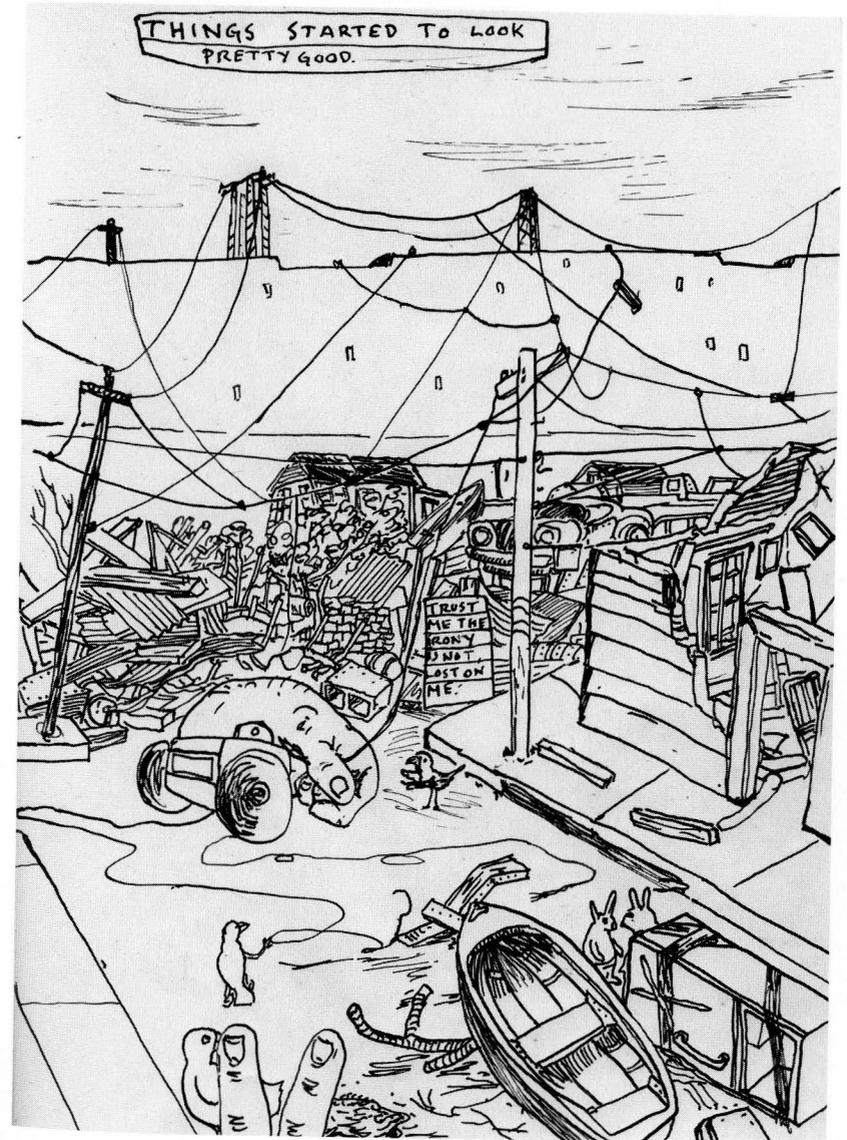
But we grabbed our neighbor's car keys and crept along I-10 to Tallahassee, where we sat with friends of friends, eating pulled pork and roast beef and fried chicken like some inverted Thanksgiving, and watching our favorite thing in the world disintegrate on live tv.

Chauncey, despite living in a carrier, remained a peppy prince. Our friends of friends loved him, squealing with laughter as we punched Chauncey in the head. (It's how goats play. He loves it.) We

are refugees, sir. Take us in, please. Our goat will do tricks for your amusement. After five days in Tallahassee, Chauncey's transport instinct kept him calm for another fifteen-hour drive: my girlfriend lost the argument, so we drove through the wounded South all the way to Texas, rather than flying over it, which to me would have seemed very wrong. We filled the tiny gas tank in Florida and hung north of the disaster areas, but still witnessed enough downed power lines, uprooted trees, brick buildings knocked off their bases—but not another drop of gas until Natchez, Mississippi. When my girlfriend's cellphone died, she lost her cool. Chauncey kept his all the way to Conroe, to my parents' gated community.

But after three days in Conroe, Texas, our initial shock had worn off. I thought of our dead neighbors in Bywater. Somehow I saw and felt it all less clearly than I had at first. Shock had almost felt better. There had been electricity running through us then, at least, even if it was a negative charge. Chauncey's ears were drooping, his movements visibly slowed, as if he were as lost and despondent as his owners.







*Body*

On Bayou St. John,  
the Dumaine Street Bridge  
always collects its corner of flotsam

once it caught Egypt the pit bull  
last seen pregnant  
pups stolen from her slit belly

now it's snagged itself  
just another face-down man

right there where I used to walk the dog

*Delta*

The video store is broken. I mean,  
closed for good, the tapes all sold,  
or else boxed up and taken home  
by those bird-eyed men who  
used to run the place.

Live in any city long enough and watch  
the cracks branch out, give way.

Already the silt-smell of river  
rushes in. Already the people  
take to the trees, build a city  
of ropes, stretch back to reach us.

*Zoya*

your mother sings  
*once upon a time there  
was a tavern where*

*we'd raise a glass or two  
and you kick your fat  
feet three months old*

you do not know her  
life was left on Poland  
Avenue that back in

New Orleans we  
used to walk beside  
the river those months

when we waited for  
you your mother  
wondering how she'd

raise you alone first  
time you smiled was  
as we fled the city

your brow creased from  
birth the month before  
you smiled as we panicked

in the Mississippi sun—  
two dogs three cats five people  
and you—and tried to map

a route a plan as  
pressure dropped  
and wind quickened

lines at pumps no  
rooms no rest  
made as you were

on the wrong side of  
the levee born just up  
from the flood did you

know a buoyancy  
we all lacked did you  
think of the sleep

in your mother as  
her tears dripped  
on your soft head

while she fed you  
from her frightened  
body did you know

*Sabadi*

Sabadi hides with yellow eyes behind the Red Cross tent. One tent one day, different tent another. He hears them ask, do you need diapers? No, I say, thanking goodness for at least this small miracle, and I know Sabadi wants to knock me up. Wants to knock us all up. They ask if I need water, and how much, and I always say as much as they can spare and they put a flat of small bottles in the back seat or maybe some days it is one large jug. They ask if I need cleaner and I ask if it is non-phosphate and explain that the Preservation Resource people told me that phosphates feed the mold. Of course they do. Feed the algae, feed the mold. The environmentalists were right. So were the survivalists, but I still won't buy a gun. I don't want to kill anyone. I might consider killing Sabadi, when his constant, cheap-chartreuse gaze becomes too much. He slips from the first-aid tent and lurks behind the small stack of ice chests. Every day I hope for an ice chest, but they always run out before I reach the front of the line. They are such a calming blue, the same color as the FEMA tarps, and the air is filled with dust and spores. Today the last one goes to a couple three spots in front of me who are on foot. They fill it with diapers and phosphate-containing cleaner and each grab a handle. I think Sabadi is in the cooler now, going with them, but of course he is not. He slips into the last box of flu shot serum. I fear he will never die.

*Through the Green Water*

Through the green water  
I saw the face of the king.

I will take the men by the hair to the river  
And burn the sign of the swamp on their brow.

*Skeleton*

I used to live in this house,  
yellow on the outside as stale ice.  
Lugustrum bloomed out front in May, and  
bees lingered by my window.

I once found a bone beneath the porch—  
a hex, or the stray's dinner.

The floors shined, not from wax, but sunlight  
breathing through curtain sheers. Nudity didn't matter  
then and Proteus' beads hung from my doorways,  
red seahorses always watching.

Now mold grows on books, green bearded  
and black, photographs—my best friend's eyes bruised shut.  
Mud stays slicked on the floors and the closet door  
is swollen shut, keeping my winter coat as its secret.

There is a new horizon line in my home  
where water met plaster at four feet, above  
the chair I bled on last year.  
The kitchen table is too bloated to stand  
and ceiling beams lay exposed above my bed,  
a ribcage holding no heart.

I've lost my spotted cat. The smell of river water.  
The street musician's eyes.  
Trombones will not precede men where I am going.

Tomorrow I'll leave New Orleans in a rented car—  
a funeral trail north, my only brass the turning leaves.

*Pry It Loose*

A street is a strip of evenly-laid  
concrete that grows in a chokehold over  
every city. Dirt taints the clean black  
asphalt on my block white and ashen, as squad  
car tires crush gravel from a church parking lot  
into dust on the road.

Sam told me about how he stole  
an empty keg for refund and  
a Magnavox twenty-six inch TV with  
a combo DVD player/VCR inset. That  
was two weeks ago.

What if nothing's left?  
I put my foot down the throat of  
that notion and march up a street  
turned pale blue by rock dust  
crushed under car tires.

A dilapidated wood slat hangs  
loose against its nails and molds through  
the hot July night. The frat house,  
seasonally abandoned, asks for it,  
with its shining white vinyl siding  
and the gaps broke open in its rotting back  
fence. I hold the bottom plank  
to the horizontal stud with  
the side of my right boot. Sam  
crams a tire iron in back  
trying to pry it loose.

Flat rock lies fake  
making the streets in my city  
smooth where they're paved new.  
Fake flat rock faces the soles  
worn thin on my combat boots  
on this, the last night's trip.  
We've already pawned two  
stereos, one with a phonograph  
and one with outdoor speakers.  
A rickety-ass cruiser hides half-assed  
behind a ginger bush,  
overgrown with bittersweet,  
honeysuckle and seeding  
grass shoots that snap above  
the root when I pull the bike out.

Humans are the hardest things  
to fit pipes behind and pry against.  
Everywhere they're stuck  
to rusted stoplight poles and  
street corners in the shadows  
of tall urban assault vehicles, civilian trucks,  
squad cars crushing white rock's dust  
to taint flat asphalt.  
Everywhere they're stuck:  
in white shell-covered parking areas,  
hiding behind wrought-iron fences  
topped off by sharp ivy-leaf, fleur-de-lis and  
coils of razor wire, chains, and locks, or incarcerated  
like post office clerks behind

three feet of windowless concrete and  
barred, meshed windows.  
New Orleans counts children  
spilling into school yards  
like slats on a wooden fence,  
like corn-stalk sprouts  
in rows. Some kids try to go home early.  
Some try to fall asleep on desks. Some  
try to stay drunk or stay in school,  
school to school, in spite of  
the pale grey blocks they  
find in the concrete  
boxes built around them.

My town remains a bowl of a city,  
flooded for decades  
by the obscenity of all cities—  
East St. Louis, Chicago, New York,  
Oakland, Dallas, Juarez, Belfast,  
Bangkok and even Baton Rouge: the idea  
that people should be painted as uniformly  
as concrete crushed on a fresh-paved road.  
My town remains  
a city where kids grow  
fast into withering adults.

Even with the second slat destroyed,  
there's no room to move my  
new bike through.

I look for the next wood slat  
and pry it loose. Then the rusty pedals  
of the cruiser will be pushed  
by the soles of my worn combat boots  
until the graying leather  
loses grip and even  
rubber is pried loose.

*Evening of the First Morning*

How to say  
bagatelle  
a dear but useless  
attention to things  
satisfied  
as they are

What portion  
can we have  
who awakened  
from a common dream  
no language  
plain enough  
to saw what the real  
is made of

Let out late  
to meaning  
in hesitation  
at the rail  
before evening  
and black water  
collide

In the Quarter  
slant-light striking

one corner of  
a darkened cross  
one intersection  
at the end of Dauphine Street  
lit with blaze

*Season Finale*

My last look around the house  
 took so long that the vine  
 climbing up the rosebush  
 beneath the bedroom window  
 climbed into my eyes,  
 and a lizard climbed, too,  
 mouthfirst from the grass,  
 skin changing color from grass-green  
 to a green almost without green,  
 the color of dust on feather.  
 How changed from last winter,  
 when the dog pawed the bed  
 and I let him into the yard  
 where we both whizzed  
 in moonlight, while rats ran  
 from the mimosa to the fence.  
 Small clouds pawed the galaxy.  
 The shingles of the lawnmower shed  
 sparkled, and in the grass,  
 a cold lizard raised a claw.  
 Miraculous change,  
 but not enough to tell us  
 about the coming flood,  
 about the black line  
 the water would write  
 as it rose along the plaster,

like a madman's scratches.  
 Safe in California, I'll hold  
 the cellphone hot against my ear  
 while in Louisiana my friend kicks  
 the back door in, and enters,  
 recording the damage  
 with the phone's camera,  
 and the images come through fast,  
 the bedroom window broken,  
 the rosebush ash gray, the yard  
 ash gray and without lizard.

*Basso Continuo*

is wet land and the river  
that makes a high tide out of spring—

goat on the stilt-house roof,  
ripples lapping the floorboards

as a cockroach flies from one screen to another,  
its wings, a wild card caught in the shuffle.

Down the road, a house done up in parlor chintz  
whines into the early hours

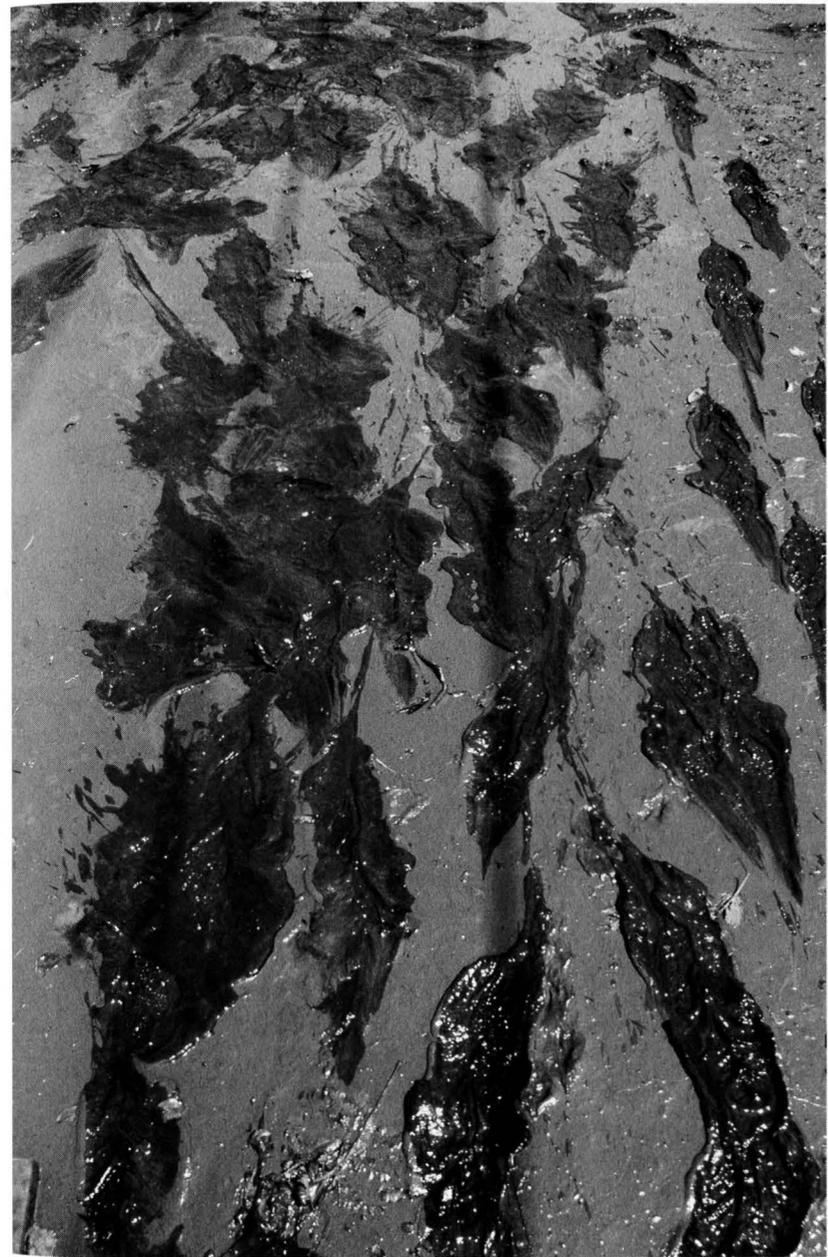
with some dead baby's ghost.  
What fitted this land-of-sorts

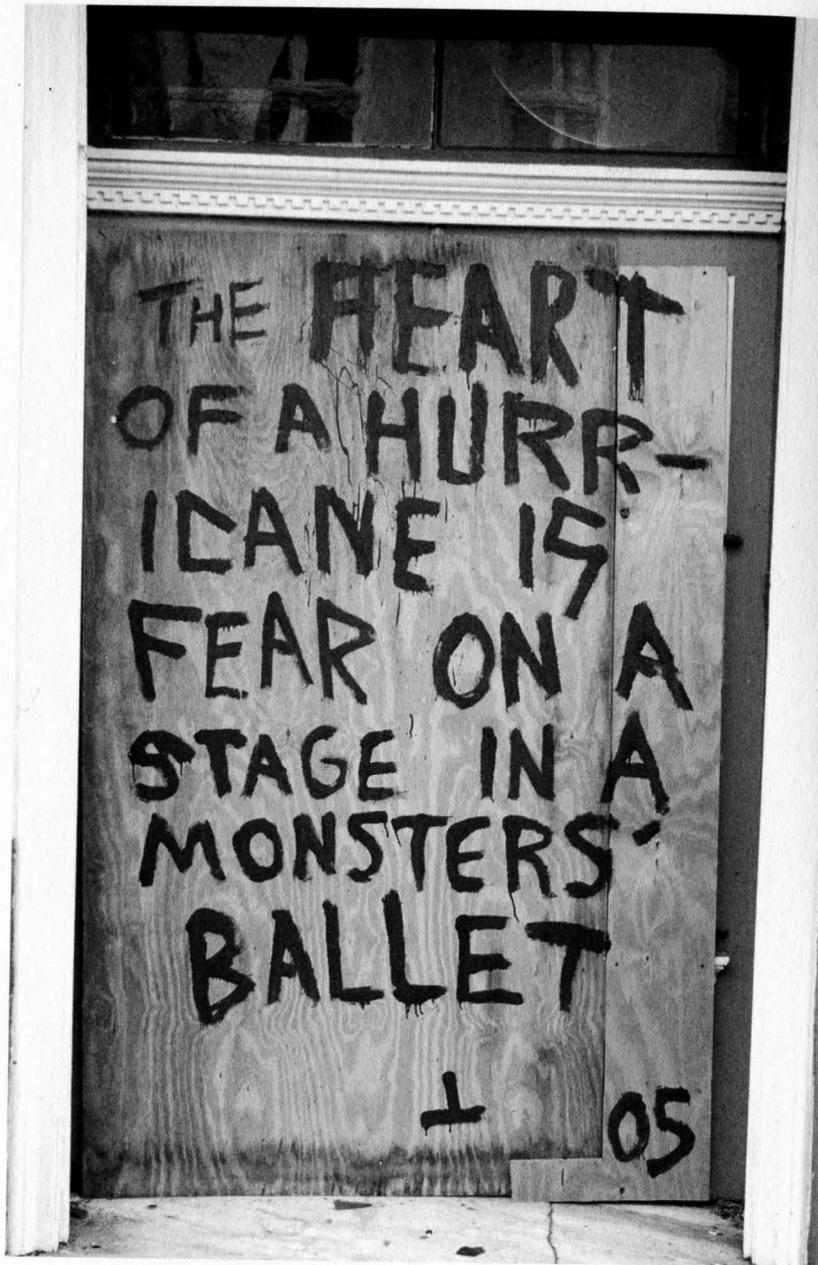
with a brain-of-sorts?  
Rainy atmosphere marbleizes into myth,

clouds fatten on the river.  
A god of cumulus presides

over marsh that flies sunset as warning,  
over lizards that bloat their throats

at levees meant to hold.







*Seepage*

Under the water, silence.  
In the air, silence.  
Above the deserted streets, silence.  
From the capital, silence.

Through the attic roofs not axed out,  
out of mouths of the infants, empty with hunger,  
below the crypts, sodden  
and grazed, at the bottom of highways,  
near the corner groceries,  
in the birds' nests, dangling now  
over stagnant pools, silence.

Silence for the benefit of the others:  
For the yellow-smocked men and women, taxed  
by exhaustion, drained of their brains,  
behind the shadows left by the high winds,  
inside the kitchens, dark with stench,  
outside the long rows of busses, rusting,  
within the laboratories, within the microbes,  
surrounding the still cat, curled on the deck  
next to the drain spout, its fur curdled from mercury  
absorbed in the water,

absorbed in the water,  
under the air where anxious onlookers, edging

toward the borders, crowd the brown basins,  
where not a breath of moisture stirs  
now, not the cusp of ease, not a camellia,  
not a live oak unblemished,

silence.

And still from the capital,

*There are no accidents*

If only the sheet pilings had been driven deeper. If only that barge hadn't been moored in the Industrial Canal. If only FEMA had responded in hours rather than days. If only Bush had behaved like Lyndon Johnson when Betsy hit (Johnson was on the ground in New Orleans five hours after the storm). We should view these events as Freudian slips that reveal the repressed, or simply unspoken, wish. What lives in the dark secret heart of America now is a fidgeting desire to see it all burn. Jefferson's America, Whitman's America, even Ginsburg's America—where are these visions now? Who among us can muster the optimism (much less the literacy) for a romantic vision of the nation and its possibilities? But then again, wouldn't it be cool to watch the water rise, first New Orleans and then Miami and then L.A. and New York slipping under, til there's nothing left but a handful of survivalists on top of a building in Denver, surrounded by floating debris and bloated corpses, stashing their MRE's and loading their guns.

*The Great Sunken Quarter*

September, 2132. The sun started to come up behind the clouds, turning the sky from pink to white, and then the Pontchar Sea was all silver. Port Gramercy shrank into a line on the horizon. The Islands of New Orleans were thirty miles distant, and not yet visible. We were headed for the greatest of the wonders there, the Sunken Quarter.

"Do you sing?" Serpenthead asked, midmorning, not waiting for me to answer. "You heard any of the Great Kat songs?" Then he sang: "*When the black Kat crawled cross the East at dusk / My eyes saw but I didn't trust / Ma went for the roof, with the tuna, the cell / But the Kat was toting hell, toting hell, toting hell...*" He paused "You know that one?"

"Way before my time," I said.

He insisted on singing the whole Kat ballad inventory—a genre, apparently. That got us through to lunch.

In the late afternoon, we came to the landing platforms for the cable gondolas, which once went all round the rim of the Pontchart. Five years before, when I'd been here last, they were high and dry. Now they were half submerged. We passed a sign that read: PONTCHART SEA SKYRAIL TERMINAL CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE; and another, BOATS: DETOUR CARROLLTON TRENCH, PROCEED AT OWN RISK.

He maneuvered our launch into that trench, but I couldn't tell the difference between it and the sea we'd just crossed, not until we passed the tops of some old concrete floodwalls, which I recognized. These had once held the sea back, rising from the water six or seven feet, but now they were only ledges, you could hardly make them out.

We passed a few hipped roofs—what was left of the old shore homes, peeking out of the slow waters. A mile or so inside, we came upon our first occupied house, and then our second, then a row of five. These were really just the tops of old two and three story houses. I recognized the fan shaped attic windows of the tall Victorians. Abandoning the flooded lower floors, the occupants had moved into the upper rooms, and turned eaves into living space, former upper balconies into front porches. Ringed by rails and gates, which served as the lounging spaces, docks, and security perimeters, these rickety homesteads looked like stationary houseboats. On the gatepost of one, the sign: “Leave a Wake, You Won’t Wake.” And the skull and bones.

“Almost empty anyway, we’ll cut the engine,” he said.

We went from a growl to a whisper. Then we could hear things inside the compounds—human shouts, harmonicas, the rough harmony of semi-wild dogs, the rattle-roar of generators—a cacophony, almost pleasing over water. But we had to turn up the engine a bit when we came into the Tchoupitoulas Trough.

After that curve, he said, “Slow down—just let her drift.” The current was stronger along this route. The squatters’ camps were more fortified, and quieter. They were surrounded by high chain link fences, guarded by bigger dogs. Their the tall rusted fuel tanks were wrapped in barbed wire.

“More bandits on this stretch,” he shrugged. “Different neighborhood.”

The light was getting low, and I had not eaten since the fish at lunch. I went to the cot below decks for a few minutes. I must have dozed, for I startled when he said, “The Quay, Malcolm, you can see it now.”

I came up the stairs. The setting sun bit at my eyes.

It took me a while to realize what I was seeing, for the water reflected the sunset, flashing orange and blue and gold. But then

something sorted itself out. It was wet and shining as the water, but smooth. It might have been the flat back of a giant snake, a leviathan, for it had something like scales.

They were paving slates.

It was a curving road I finally distinguished. It was the edge of the Old River. Big thick poles the size of children poked up from it as we got closer. He threw a rope over the head of one them, and called it a bollard.

This was a busy place. Around us were other craft—boats with bigger cabins, several with swivel seats for fishing on the back. Along the quay were stalls and stands with provisions for the sailors.

“But where is the Quarter?” I asked. Surely it had to be nearby.

“You can see it now,” he called out proudly, as if this wonder belonged to him. “Over there.”

I had never been to it, even though I was raised in an orphanage not five miles away. We weren’t allowed to go, for there was too much “mixing” there, as it was called. I had always wanted to see it, terribly.

But I saw absolutely nothing, save for one pointed narrow tower, which seemed to stick up out of nowhere. For a second I thought this Quarter might be a myth. There were so many stories about it. And there we were, after all, at the “shore” and the horizon was perfectly empty.

“Over there, and *down*,” he said, exasperated.

I looked.

The slate road wasn’t a road at all, or a proper bank. It was the wide top of a huge, encircling flood wall. We were at the top of an amphitheatre, a bowl, which had an irregular perimeter, and held back the river. In the middle distance I saw the gigantic elbows of pipe, bigger than buildings, coral pink in that light, like the arms of a giant. They must have led to the pumps that kept the water out.

And then, the wonder.

At the bottom of the bowl, a small and perfectly beautiful city. What I saw first were the bronze roofs with their steep dormers. Next, the crowns of palms, which I'd never seen from above before. They were enormous green blooms. Underneath, buildings with handsome windows, colorful shutters. The old cathedral, that ancient edifice, was right in front of us. Its spire was the thing that pierced the horizon, the one structure taller than the level of the quay. It alone caught natural light, the sun sinking at the horizon. Everything below that, in that valley set into the water, had already descended into a gaudy, electrified night.

All of it gleamed down there, for it was coated in preserving glazes and polymer shields. The city seemed to be made of porcelain, like something kept in a cabinet for the delight of a Colossus. I felt I was committing trespass, finding this secret museum city, finding these huge and precious toys.

Nothing, nothing before my eyes seemed real.

HELEN SCULLY

### *In the Wake*

There's talk of secession, talk of being "dropped"—cellphones go out—that the rest of the country, and the government, cut us off like a gangrened toe. And more talk. With the pool sharks, the poets, the Cubans hatching plans to sell the city to Chavez, Chirac—to Evo Morales, the new president of Bolivia—Fidel—a reverse embargo—back to Spain?—plans to tax the oil refineries, plans to take the proceeds of our parking tickets back from the loan to the state of New Jersey, plans to stage a hunger strike. But no one knows how to go about it. The projects are empty. The levees are untouched, there're unfair evictions, and stores that are open are cleaned out of liquor.

The National Guard is still at Camp du Monde, their makeshift base on the river side of Decatur, and their fluorescent Xs still mark most of the houses. I used to spot the Guard sitting in lawn chairs on neutral grounds uptown, as if waiting for a parade, but it's rare to find them uptown these days. Sugar Park was filled with them the other night, in brown camouflage with rifles on their shoulders. I guess they can't leave them in the Jeep, but the guns make it difficult for me to eat my pizza. I smile, keeping my eyes down. I wish they would sit down in normal clothes, or better, pick up hammers, felt, slate, and fix a roof. Could they be trained to repair phone lines? Traffic lights? Electricity?

Here is a consolation: The weather is unusually warm. Grass seed scattered on the ash-colored lawns a week ago has asserted itself with florescent green blades. The happy fuscia of bougainvillea is

back; the walls of jasmine. The days are sunny and mild, the skies a cheerful, eggshell blue. It might be time now to put away my instruments, my tracking charts, wind vanes, barometers and rain gauges and just relax. We are growing. I don't know if global warming has anything to do with it. I don't know if it caused the hurricane or the Florida shark bites, but now is the season for planting.

Tiny tank tops, open-toed shoes are back, along with some of my least favorite things—carriage rides, mosquitoes, ghost tours, squirrels, the pipe organ along the Mississippi—but I don't mind them anymore. The Mardi Gras Indians are busily sewing their costumes. The painters are back in Jackson Square. Even the train whistle—back!—harmonizes with the radio playing from living room stereos, spilling over the galleries, over the courtyard walls into the street—into the ears of the hot delivery boys sailing by on their bicycles, to the clusters of neighbors on porches or in folding chairs on the sidewalk drinking beer. The Quarter blossoms with *Now Open* signs, which creep across Rampart, across Elysian Fields. On damp nights, the doors of the FEMA trailers are open. People light campfires, bring out guitars.

Growth is slow. It's difficult to get a reading on things; it's difficult to see the larger picture of our lives now, so the blessing of such fine days helps us take small, mellow steps. Dusting the books. Dragging the water heater out to the curb. Throwing away the spices. Changing the address or changing it back or waiting in line again at the Zip Code Depots. Such exertions cause a light sweat to break out on my forehead, but not the sweat of August, of evacuation and the awful two weeks after the storm. This sweat is nothing like that other one. It's the sweat of patience, barely maintained.

The sun sets in corals over Rampart Street and with the new moon, a damp chill comes into the air, a dampness that helps things sprout and rot, a dampness that inspires me to light the gas heater for a few minutes and thank God it hardly ever rains. Rain gives me a profound sense of unease.

Last week I stopped working, stopped answering the phone and lay on my bed to read. Three days later, Danielle rings my doorbell. "I don't know what's wrong with me," I tell her. "All I can do is read. It must be some post-Katrina malaise I can't identify yet."

"I can identify with you not being able to identify it," she says.

The buildings look legitimate, sufficiently weathered, with the usual identifying marker—the blue and white wings—posted on the door. Inside, I hand my money to people behind a counter; some of them even have uniforms on. But nothing. I don't know where this mail could be, some holding zone in the sky. They call certain pieces "priority" just to make me feel better. And I pay for it. Last week, I had some important papers *overnighted* to me from Mobile and they still haven't arrived, no matter how religiously I walk to the post office. Finally I exclaimed to the lady behind the counter, "Nothing?!"

"There's very little coming through here. For anybody, sugar."

Each morning I shuffle my cards—credit card, driver's license, debit card, Alabama food stamp card—and strategize. I can use the credit card at the coffee shop, only until noon and not on Sundays or at Verti Mart until eight—but not at Angeli's or Sugar Park. The debit can be used, sparingly, if I figure out a way to dispute the late fees without going to the bank, where the line stretches out the door. A&P takes the EBT card until eight, but not for soap, toilet paper or cigarettes. If I buy the right groceries, I can stretch chicken and rice for six meals. Other nights I meet up with Ernesto to look for food, but we rarely have the necessary combination of cards and cash and one of us has to go off in search of an ATM. Or we're too hungry to decide what to eat. Or the restaurant is so packed that, by the time we get the paper plates of food, we eat too fast.

The bowl, so recently filled with floodwater, is filled again with debt, pleasure clubs, shots, propellers and six-packs and pirogues.

And talk: the governor had a breakdown; the mayor supposedly bought a house in Dallas. And love and talk. Flood control and birth control. And the sound of helicopters. They start about ten most mornings and circle at least twice, including today, New Year's Eve. I bound out of bed and call Virginia, a few blocks away.

"Do you hear the helicopters? What are they doing up there? Are there pockets of violence that I don't know about?"

"Yes," she replies, "There's armed insurrection in Mid-City."

"Armed insurrection?" I laugh. "Against which government?"

She pauses. "Against the helicopters. They dropped MRE's from the sky; people thought they were bombs and opened fire."

"Those MRE's are heavy," I offer.

"Yeah," she says.

The joke fizzles. When we meet a few hours later for champagne, she fills my head with talk of her errant lover. I raise my eyes to the ceiling.

"Why can't you just avoid him?"

It's a foolish thing to ask. You can't avoid anyone in this shrunken town. It is impossible not to be warm to the other fools who stubbornly try to live here, impossible not to love them.

Before the storm it was obvious what to sidestep: the projects along MLK, Bourbon Street, the cemeteries at night, but there is a new perimeter now. Go two blocks past the new line, and confront an emptiness that also has weight. Grass lots are filled with trailers and tents. Two more blocks out, all the vegetation is dead. Front doors hang open. The streets deserted except for out-of-towners taking pictures of houses, swept off their foundations, lying crumpled in the middle of the street and collapsed roofs folded over the sides of mauled cars. Everything is caked with yellowish dirt, the dust of which lands on my face. I can't look for long. The smell of plaster, soil, and mold lodges in my sinuses and dampens my appetite, sickening like an allergy to clams.

Back in the Bywater, people are in a flurry discussing their costumes, rehearsing their chants and dance steps, licking King Cake icing off their fingers and inviting everyone they know and don't know for Mardi Gras. The sound of hammers and sewing machines and radios is momentarily interrupted by the Red Cross's ice cream truck, which comes around, without the popsicle poster or the song, announcing over a loud speaker what corner they're on.

Everyone drops what they're doing and peels away. Painters put down their brushes, workmen climb down ladders, young people abandon their coffees and computers at little café tables, mothers leave the kitchen sinks, and old people push themselves off their porches. Everyone lines up in front of the little window for a hot dog, green beans, Ruffles, bagged granny cookies.

"How many meals would you like?" the lady asks. Her bright smile fills me with loneliness. Just being here doesn't always feel heroic.

*Dark Crescent*

The only paradise is paradise lost.—Marcel Proust

Far enough from the high ground near the river and St. Charles to be in standing water, three blocks from the Garden District side of Napoleon on an intersecting street named South Saratoga, our 1895 cottage awaits, the home we lived in for almost a decade, and left behind when we moved to Houston in 1980. Once metallic tape traced right angles on its handmade glass. When the present owners set their electronic alarm to evacuate, they must have stared down the long hall and beyond the back filler glass, a central pane surrounded by side yellow and corner red ones etched with fleurs de lis, into the fig leaves of the cypress-fenced back garden. Perhaps they thought a two-day supply of clothes would be enough. Perhaps they later wished they had rolled up the Heriz, bagged the cloisonné, and brought the portraits and photographs. Perhaps they wonder as I do this Sunday morning, six days after the hurricane and failure of the levees, whether the water reaches above the brick piers, softens the sheetrock that replaced the broken plaster, destroys the wiring. Perhaps they wonder as I do this Sunday morning whether yet once more a thief enters their home.

An insurance settlement would not have erased our grief after the first thief broke an unlocked old wooden family letter box, nor could we completely regain our sense of well being after the second tried to enter at night while we were asleep. The landlady of my first apartment on Lowerline near Tulane, Mme. Marcelle Peret, now deceased teacher of art and French at Newman, told me, long before I read any Proust, that whatever pleases us either itself changes or we lose the capacity to enjoy it. I remember the walks

down our long hall, the wrinkles and ripples of the windows making the leaves of sweet olive, of ligustrum, of magnolia dance as my gait moved me past them. We possessed that lovely cottage only for a time, but talked of wanting our ashes scattered under its fig trees. We could not foresee the lure of jobs in Houston, and our eventual divorce; we could not imagine life beyond it.

Sarah, our son, and I rejoined one another from our separate cities, met in New Orleans close to Christmas of year before last. As we walked through familiar neighborhoods, rode the streetcar, and ate at the Gumbo Shop, Napoleon House, and Galatoire's, we experienced a sense of our paradise lost. The thick dawn light still invested its heavy colors on ironwork, slate roofs, and chimneys. That trip has become even more important after Katrina and as I look through generic metal windows with machine made glass onto a city where people do not walk and are usually too over-scheduled to relax. This spring the musicians from Preservation Hall perform in Houston. As I revel in their sad and joyful jazz, I will grieve with them, but will also rejoice that their kind of energy may eventually relight the crescent.

Marcelle Peret hung her painting of a Mardi Gras scene in the entrance to my furnished apartment beneath her raised cottage. I recognized the style, one similar to the thirties illustrations in my childhood books. A harlequin in the foreground watches masqueraders parade. Her paintings displayed on the Napoleon House walls sold, but I did not think to buy this one, and left it when I moved. I did not realize then how much pleasure its memory would give. According to Proust, we never have completely what we desire, but our desires change. The painting may or may not have survived, but it and the bright crescent I knew still shape both my present and my sense of paradise.



*Sleeping With Poppy Z. Brite*

Sitting here in Austin in the shadow of great change, it feels almost the way it felt the early spring of 2002 on a day back in New Orleans, a day when the weather had taken a turn for the better as a cool front had broken the growing humidity. It was a day when people in New York were still exhuming a mass grave in Lower Manhattan, using bulldozers, buckets, and blowtorches, and the war was on (when was it ever off?). The image of that second goddamned plane hitting the building is still too fresh, even now, an infernal apparition rising out from the national campfire of television. But only months later, I was writing about how things were pretty good, even though the Super Bowl was scheduled for the Superdome, and I wondered, does that make us a super target?

I wrote about how New Orleans orbits anarchy and flirts with chaos, and how perhaps this is related to the weather somehow. On that cool day in 2002 I saw the city as New York's idiot savant little brother. Mayor Morial was pushing for re-election despite term limits, just as Guliani had considered doing. Close your eyes in some parts of town and you'd swear you were in Brooklyn. I used to drink with friends in the revolving bar that sat atop the World Trade Center building, right off the French Quarter. And then there's that word that we share. Of course, back then, we needed a new war to avenge New York; even a hopeful case like me, sitting dazed and drunk in New Orleans, could see that, could see that the shadow falls down and west and all the way to the end.

And now this hurricane business. I'm in Austin, dazed, and things don't look as clear anymore. I *almost* feel that New Orleans way, but not quite. Mayor Nagin could have been a Guliani. Federal aid could have arrived sooner, as quick as fighter jets in the forenoon sky.

Maybe it's because I'm not in New Orleans now that I feel the shade of the shadow a bit more. Which leads me to think about how, despite our grim recent days, the city can still party. I am looking forward to Mardi Gras this year, the first since the storm. It will be sad and glorious; we'll all be skeleton dancers, aware and alive.

I missed the Krewe de Vieux parade back in 2002. I had friends in the Krewe who had invited me and my girlfriend to parade with them. We had a friend in town. I even had a costume. But no. Sometimes, things just don't work out the way you want them to. Certain persons couldn't handle the chill wet winds that were blowing that late January night. Others imbibed too much smoke and drink to move much beyond the couch and *Saturday Night Live* (with Jack Black hosting, it was a good one—some measly consolation).

The Krewe de Vieux's Marigny and Bywater street parade kicks off Mardi Gras season. It's the freak parade whose goal is the Quarter. And that year's theme was "Depraved New World," and its royalty included a famous New Orleans author, *the* famous New Orleans author in some people's opinion.

And I'm not talking about Anne Rice. Or Poppy Z. Brite. Though I will admit at this juncture that I have a collection of photos of Poppy in the nude, culled from magazines over the years. Poppy, if you're reading this, please send more! I remember back in '95, you gave me a salacious look at a book signing in Austin. Oh yes. Poppy! Surely you remember me! You signed my copy of *Book of the Dead* at Adventures in Crime and Space Bookstore on Sixth Street, all saucy-like, remember? You entreated me to praise Kali. And now I'm back in Austin, and New Orleans has survived its own kind of zombie apocalypse.

No, the scribe I'm talking about is Andrei Codrescu, one of New Orleans' literati and editor of a terminally hip pub called *Exquisite Corpse*. His distinctive Romanian accent can be heard on NPR, where he is a regular commentator. I think he's in the Ozarks now. He's written several books of fiction and poetry and essays, including *Road Scholar*, the mandatory haywire road trip book which takes

him across this oh-so-kooky country. It was the first thing of his I ever read and it was quite a bore, actually (I'm enjoying his recent *The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape* more).

Codrescu sat in on a panel discussion at the Hotel Monteleone in the Quarter a few years back, a panel composed of writers who discussed literary bohemianism. He was the only one who took the time and effort to look the part, slouch and all. Poet, editor, and City Lights Bookstore founder Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who was also on the panel, should have and would have kicked his ass, if given the chance—but I digress. I guess I should just accept that I am plugged into the übermind whether I like it or not, just like Codrescu and every other American who gives a damn. Poppy! Where are your hard words and soft thighs to comfort me!

At least he got one thing right on that panel. There *was* still a bohemian element alive in this town. There *is* one alive today. There *will be* tomorrow. It's hardwired into the city. The genuine article is there. Witness the following, two books published by local small DIY presses prior to Katrina, a post-Katrina website of wit, and an online archive of street-level articles exploring the city.

New Mouth From the Dirty South has an interesting little book in circulation called *Tales of a Punk Rock Nothing*, a miniaturized *Invisible Man* for punk scenesters. Written by Abram Shalom Himmelstein and Jamie Schweser, both principles in New Mouth, this book was originally sold, according to the authors, on the street before being appended with a very un-punk bar code and ISBN number and sold in local bookstores. Good for them I say. This clever and funny book is classic high-school journaling raised to the next level of twenty-something self awareness, a heteroglossia of journal entries, issues of Eliot's 'zine *Mindcleaner*, and letters. The earnestness of our youthful narrator may turn off some readers, but its charm overwhelms. The book documents well the DIY 'zine making, hellraising, low-job working, punk show arranging, political activism engaging, sex pursuing, guitar playing, angst ridden straight-edge D. C. scene of the nineties.

Specters of bohemia gone by still linger in this city of ghosts. There's a press here in town called Surregional Press, run by poet Dennis Formento, whose inspiration comes from the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the Black Mountain poets. The journal he edits, *Mesechabe*, reflects these inspirations, publishing folk like Gary Snyder and other nature poet holdovers (bohemians, if you will—yes, *Mesechabe* has published Andrei Codrescu, too).

*Portraits from Memory: New Orleans in the Sixties* by Darlene Fife, published by Surregional, reflects this countercultural bent, essentially telling the story of *NOLA Express*, an anti-war newspaper published in New Orleans in the late sixties and early seventies, and the circle of people associated with it and the larger counterculture scene happening at the time. The story is told circuitously. Fife relates the story in a casual memoir style, using as touchstones several colorful individuals who ran in the French Quarter-based counterculture. She wanders from year to year, moving back and forth as the memories dictate and lead, recounting bits of long-ago conversation and snippets of scenes, accounts of the in-fighting between the SDS-affiliated publishers and anti-war activists, and the ideology-mad Spartacists and Progressive Labor members. Fife also discusses informers who infiltrated the groups, the harassment meted out by the N. O. P. D. against vendors of the newspaper, and the court injunction against the cops. Included are photographs, drawings, poems and pictures from *NOLA Express* (including a letter from Charles Bukowski, a regular contributor).

Altogether these compose a loose mosaic of memory which hints at a history. This book certainly does evoke the spirit of the sixties revolution, and is a worthy contribution to the primary source material on the era. It also places New Orleans, and the French Quarter of *Easy Rider*, into a revolutionary context.

Some of those living New Orleans writers still in New Orleans that I mentioned earlier? Some of them are writing for a post-Katrina website called NOLAFugees.com. Taking a *laissez-faire*, fuck-all fatalistic stance (rather, slouch) on life post-apocalypse N. O.,

the brief pieces by such writers as Sarah Inman, Adam Peltz, David Dykes, and Joel Dailey offer tragicomic commentary, black humor insight, some *Onion*-esque wit—stupid fun for stupid times.

While you're online, check out *Scat Magazine*, another venue of New Orleans writers. The digest-sized print edition, which had been distributed for free around New Orleans regularly before the storm, featured "Talk of the Town" style essays by local writers, offering lively glimpses into some unique corners of New Orleans. Unfortunately, *Scat* did not survive the storm, but you can find back issues online at [www.scatmagazine.com](http://www.scatmagazine.com).

Finally, let me say a few words about Garrett County Press. I love Garrett County Press. When it was out of New Orleans (the press relocated to Philadelphia before the storm), Garrett County and principle G. K. Darby were instrumental in realizing the New Orleans Bookfair, a remarkable convergence of DIY publishers, presses, and authors from around the country. Garrett County Press also published *The Garrett County Press Guide to New Orleans*, a city guide as 'zine with sections headed "Sleep for Cheap," "Hospitals," "Late Night Food," "Sex," and "Misc. Shit," all biased listings geared toward travel as a means of "serious, intellectual boozing." Hostel info, secret taxi phone numbers, substance abuse hotlines, inside tips on what the 3-for-1 drink specials really mean on Bourbon Street and why the "Live Nude Orgies" ads are a sham—this little guidebook was freaking great. Just try to find one now.

Change, turn, and face the strange. No more zombies for Poppy. These days, she's writing about the New Orleans service industry. But baby, I read that obit of William Burroughs, a few years back. Poppy! What has Burroughs's corpse got that I haven't got! You felt it too, I know it. As for you, Codrescu...oh, whatever. You get published, get on the air, get to be king of the freak parade, and slouch for Ferlinghetti. More power to you.

Just remember, I get to sleep with Poppy, whenever I want to.

### *Beyond Beauty:*

## David Rae Morris' Do You Know What It Means?: The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

In his *Critique of Judgment*, the late eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant describes an aesthetic that, as both more awful and more awesome than our experience of beauty, defies judgment. He refers to this aesthetic as the sublime. "In what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them, that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might." Unlike the "restful contemplation" and "positive pleasure" of beautiful forms, Kant's sublime chaos, in nature as in art, produces a "mental agitation" and "negative pleasure" that commands admiration and respect.

In his exhibit, "Do you Know What It Means?: The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" (November 19, 2005 to March 22, 2006, The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans), photographer David Rae Morris captures something of the Kantian sublime wrought by Katrina and her aftermath, evoking with his camera the confounding magnitude of this monstrous event. While Morris appears to seek understanding with his title, playing on the song ("Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?"), his art, as an echo of the event, resists.

Upon entering the gallery, one is brought up short, emotionally ambushed, by the haunting and miraculous pictures that populate

this show. There are the many stirring images of humanity, at once tragic and enduring. In "Reunion," Keith and Sandy embrace in Molly's at the Market on Decatur Street. We see only Keith's face and momentum, eyes squeezed tight, face flushed, pipe in hand, as if the gesture were sudden and spontaneous, an unexpected gift. Behind the couple we glimpse the profile of an unnamed woman with tattoo and cap, beside a dim bar that is packed with liquor. "Live Music" illuminates Coco Robicheaux, guitar in his lap, bent low over the glow of a match as he lights a cigar, during one of the first, perhaps the first, amplified gigs in the Quarter after the hurricane made landfall.

In "Fresh Ink," Joshua, framed from his chin down, pulls up his purple t-shirt, a beer bottle opener dangling from his hand, to show off his new tattoo, the name "Katrina" inked in fancy script on his boyish torso. "First Look #2" captures the profile of Sharon Patterson, who sits aboard a bus, one of the first to ferry residents (who were not allowed to disembark) to the site of their homes in the lower Ninth Ward. Though Patterson's face appears set with grim resignation, her eyes belie an ancient grief. "Tryptich #1" documents the poignant evacuation of eighty-six-year-old Clara DeWitt from her Bywater home. This visual spectacle of a large and tired-looking search-and-rescue worker moving the painfully frail DeWitt, dressed in a faded yellow nightgown, away from her doorway, his massive hand gripping her upper arm in one frame, and scooping her up, in the next, as she maintains throughout the same desperately gaping mouth and sorrowful expression (one imagines her wails), is at once embarrassing and heartwrenching. In dark contrast, "Neighborhood Guard" presents the defiant "Rob Z," seated on his grandmother's front stoop, a rifle held alertly across his lap, as he peers, squint eyed, to one side, while his dog Terra cowers beneath his knees.

And then there are the images of armed soldiers patrolling the streets of an American city, misfitted saviors in a fearsome land. "Do You Know What It Means?" presents the jarring specter of a military

convoy speeding down St. Charles Avenue past a hand-painted sign that reads: "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans? Welcome Home." "Guard Patrol" frames the sober and determined expression of an Oregon National Guardsman, flanked by his patrol, as he marches along St. Claude Avenue.

Finally, there are those disorienting, yet perversely appealing, photographs of the post-apocalyptic landscape of New Orleans and the Gulf; a landscape tortured and refashioned by the storm. "Road Warrior" features the dust-covered, yet still elegant grill of a rose-colored antique automobile in a cracked and drying yard of muck near the breach in the Industrial Canal of the Ninth Ward. In "Stray" a lone German Shepherd stands uncertainly before the fallen and mud-bedecked Jourdain Street sign, framed by the silent desolation of the lower Ninth Ward. "Burned-Out Warehouse" provides a panoramic view of a burnt and twisted warehouse in the Bywater with the darkened downtown skyline of New Orleans as backdrop. "Fence Posts" renders aesthetic a row of traditionally crafted fence post tips protruding from the smooth surface of floodwater, their graceful curves mirrored by their downward-facing reflection in the water. And perhaps the show's most masterful feat of composition, "Tryptich #2" transforms the dreaded toxic muck and mold of flooded neighborhoods into a three-part mosaic of subtly varied tones. The first frame displays the forbiddingly black and drying muck of the lower Ninth Ward. The second frame, also from the lower Ninth Ward, evokes in paint-like spots of mold a beautiful patina of black and gold. The third frame exhibits the muck in its final stages of dryness, lined and ancient, a symbol of death or the passage of all things to dusty gray.

"Do you know what it means?" the photographer seems to challenge his viewer, through this painfully attentive and poetic documentation. "Because I sure as hell do not...."

RALPH ADAMO has lived in New Orleans most of his life, and has taught at most of the area universities, including Loyola, where he edited *New Orleans Review* in the 1990s. Katrina cost him all of his current jobs and he is now an unemployed New Orleanian, looking for work here or anywhere else. He has published six books of poems and, in 2003, received an Individual Artist grant for Creative Writing from the NEA. "New Orleans Elegies" first appeared in *Waterblind: New & Selected Poems* (Portals Press, 2002), in *The Ashville Review* and in the NEA website Features Section.

MORGAN BABST is a New Orleans native. She attended the Academy of the Sacred Heart and NOCCA, where she studied writing with Brad Richard, Anne Gisleson, and Tom Whalen, all of whom she'd like to thank upon this, her first journal publication. A recent Yale grad, she is currently living in New York, where she spends most of her time sitting in cafés, revising her first novel, *The Girl of His Fancy*, and eating too many scones.

BRAD BENISCHEK lives and makes art in New Orleans. He is currently working on an illustrated book titled *Revacuation*.

ANDREA BOLL, before her house flooded with the waters of broken levees, lived eight feet below sea level in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans. She was a professor of English at Dillard University. She swam in Lake Ponchartrain, drank beers by the Mississippi. She sweated and tried to avoid the cockroaches. After Katrina, she found herself five thousand feet above sea level in Salt Lake City. She thought New Orleans didn't want her anymore...but she was wrong. Currently she awaits her FEMA trailer on the sixth floor of the Marriot on the edge of the French Quarter.

DAVE BRINKS is a New Orleans poet and lives with his poet-wife and their two children in the French Quarter. He is the editor of

*YAWP: A Journal of Poetry & Art*, publisher of Trembling Pillow Press, director of the 17 Poets! Reading Series ([www.17poets.com](http://www.17poets.com)) and founder of The New Orleans School for the Imagination. His poetry has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Fell Swoop*, *La Reata*, *Meena*, *New Laurel Review*, *Slavery*, and *Xavier Review*. His collections of poetry include *The Caveat Onus*, *The Light on Earth Street*, *The Secret Brain*, *How Birds Fly*, *The Snow Poems*, *Trial And Eros*, and *A Pot of Lips*.

ABRAHAM BURICKSON was trained in architecture and is currently a fellow at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, Texas. After visiting many times over the last decade, he moved to New Orleans just after the storm. His work has been published in *Gumball Poetry*, *Hubbub*, and *Epicenter*.

KATHLEEN BURK, Ph.D. is Associate Academic Dean of the Constantin College of Liberal Arts of the University of Dallas. She called New Orleans home from 1963-1984, graduating from St. Mary's Dominican High School and Spring Hill College.

C. W. CANNON's first night in New Orleans was the night of Hurricane Camille, August 17, 1969. He grew up in the Faubourg Marigny and attended the New Orleans Public Schools, including McDonogh 15, Gregory, Franklin, and NOCCA (where he studied music with Bert Braud and Ellis Marsalis). His first novel, *Soul Resin* (FC2 Press, 2002) is an apocalyptic ghost story set in the city. He teaches writing at the University of New Orleans.

TARA JILL CICCARONE was once abandoned in New Orleans by a scorned lover. She has since received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans. She now spends her time picking through flooded houses and painting images of mold patterns. There is nowhere else in the country she can see herself living.

JOSHUA CLARK, founder of Light of New Orleans Publishing, edited *French Quarter Fiction: The Newest Stories of America's Oldest Bohemia*, as well as Judy Conner's *Southern Fried Divorce*, and other books. He regularly contributes fiction, travel, and photographs to various national publications from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Miami Herald*, and has covered New Orleans for Salon.com and NPR. He lives in the French Quarter.

ANDREI CODRESCU's new book is *New Orleans, Mon Amour: Twenty Years of Writing from the City* (Algonquin Books). He is the editor of the online journal, *Exquisite Corpse* ([www.corpse.org](http://www.corpse.org)) and MacCurdy Distinguished Professor of English at LSU in Baton Rouge. He is also a regular columnist for *Gambit*, the New Orleans weekly.

PETER COOLEY has published seven books of poetry, six of them with Carnegie Mellon, which will publish his eighth, *Divine Margins*, next year. He has lived in New Orleans since 1975 and taught creative writing at Tulane that long. Though not from New Orleans, it is indisputably home for him and he will not leave unless swept away—which was the rumor during Katrina, though he and his wife were hiding in St. Andrews Episcopal Church and were and are just fine.

KENNETH COOPER grew up in Gentilly where he lived for the first twenty-five years of his life. He spent a year on the West Bank in Algiers, and now lives with his wife in LaPlace. He is currently a sophomore at the University of New Orleans, majoring in English with a focus on Creative Writing. This is his first publication.

MARLENA CORCORAN now lives in Munich, but she remembers living on a Decatur Street that, even before Katrina, had disappeared forever. Her play, "The Birth of the Christ Child: A Divine Comedy," appeared in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. Her electronic

narratives have been broadcast in Berlin and Vienna, performed in Munich and exhibited in New York. She performs in online improvisational theater, and has published two novels in Germany.

JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON's first collection of poetry, *Where We Are*, appeared in 1962. Three more collections followed: *The Anatomy of Love and Other Poems* (1964); *Mr. Clean and Other Poems* (1964); and *Lines to the South and Other Poems* (1965). In 1966, he moved to Loyola University as Associate Professor of English, where, with Miller Williams, he was instrumental in founding the *New Orleans Review*. At age forty, he decided to study law, and he obtained his J. D. from Tulane Law School in 1975. He practiced law in New Orleans for three years, and the influence of his legal training and law practice found a place in his fiction. Corrington's legal fiction consists of six short stories, and two novellas published under the title *All My Trials* by the University of Arkansas Press in 1987. Corrington gave up the practice of law to pursue TV, literary and intellectual history writing projects. He wrote crime/detective fiction and screenplays in collaboration with his wife, Joyce Corrington. He died in Malibu, California in 1988.

MOIRA CRONE is the author of four books of fiction, including *What Gets Into Us* (2006), a novel-in-stories. Her story, "The Ice Garden" won the Faulkner Wisdom Prize for Novella in 2004. The "Great Sunken Quarter" is from a novel-in-progress, *Elysiana*, which describes a New Orleans where the wealthiest have life spans over one-hundred-fifty years while the rest barely survive. It was begun long before Katrina—the original sketches appeared in the *New Orleans Review* in 1997 and 1998—but there are post-K updates. She had the uncanny experience in late August of watching things happening in real time on TV that she had imagined and written years before.

MICHAEL TOD EDGERTON, while in New Orleans, lived Uptown, in Central City, and in the French Quarter. He co-directed the Lit City poetry series with Bill Lavender and Camille Martin. To pay the rent, he worked as a telemarketer, the manager of the Cyber Bar & Café at the Contemporary Arts Center, a clerk at the Tulane bookstore (from which he was fired for dyeing his hair blue), a “Camel Fairy,” and as an extra in the film *Double Jeopardy*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Chelsea*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Fell Swoop*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Word For/Word*, and *Yawp*. He’s currently pursuing an MFA at Brown University.

UTAHNA FAITH has lived in New Orleans for six years, most recently in a cottage in the Lower Ninth Ward. She is now in Austin, Texas. Utahna’s writing appears in *Exquisite Corpse* and *French Quarter Fiction*, and is forthcoming in the Norton anthology of flash fiction. She is a co-editor for London-based *3: AM Magazine* and is editor of *Wild Strawberries*, a journal of flash fiction and prose poetry.

KENNETH H. FRENCH lived in New Orleans the last twenty-five years in the French Quarter with his partner, John Moran. “I was often inspired to write while walking our dogs, Betty-Van and Zola, on the neutral grounds of North Rampart by the characters I encountered.”

PATTY FRIEDMANN was born in New Orleans, and has always lived here except for slight interruptions for education and natural disasters. All of her five darkly comic novels are set in New Orleans, among them *Eleanor Rushing*, *Secondhand Smoke*, and this year’s *Side Effects*. Her works have been Discover Great New Writers, Original Voices, and BookSense 76 selections. She is also an essayist, reviewer, and short-story writer. Eventually rescued from her Carrollton neighborhood, she spent seven egregiously antiseptic weeks in Houston, returning home before she had electricity, gas, or phone.

W. LEWIS GARVIN is from dairy farm country near Dallas, and went to SMU. After instructing at the University of Southern Mississippi, and at William and Mary, he attended Tulane, and taught English at the University of New Orleans and at Metairie Park Country Day. While in New Orleans, he resided on Lowerline, Royal, Bourbon, Napoleon, Soniat, Rosa (old Metairie), and South Saratoga.

JOHN GERY, a New Orleans resident since 1979, is the author of five books of poetry, including *Davenport’s Version* (Portals Press), a narrative poem of Civil War New Orleans, and *A Gallery of Ghosts* (Story Line). He is a Research Professor of English at the University of New Orleans and directs the Ezra Pound Center for Literature at Brunnenburg, Italy. With his wife, poet Biljana Obradovic, and their son as part of the Katrina diaspora, he is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota for Spring 2006.

ANNE GISLESON directs the Creative Writing Program at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Louisiana’s arts conservatory for high school students, and helps run Press Street, a literary and arts collective and publishing concern in New Orleans.

ANN GOETHE lives in Virginia, but spent most of her formative years in south Louisiana; her novel *Midnight Lemonade* (Delacorte) was a finalist for the Barnes and Nobel Discovery prize.

ELIZABETH GROSS lives in New Orleans.

CAROLYN HEMBREE and Jonathan Padgett spent their December honeymoon in New Orleans in 1999. In 2001—sans vocations, sans acquaintanceships—they moved to the city for good. When she was a kid, her parents annually traveled to New Orleans for beignets at Café du Monde, meals at Galatoire’s, and jazz at Preservation Hall.

Carolyn has poems in *Colorado Review*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Indiana Review*, *Jubilat*, *New Orleans Review*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Puerto del Sol*, among others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, she received a 2005 Individual Artist Fellowship from the Louisiana Division of the Arts. She is currently looking for a teaching job.

RODGER KAMENETZ is a poet and writer. His last book was *The Lowercase Jew* (Northwestern, 2003). He is working on a book about the revelation dream for Harper Collins. You can reach him at [www.talkingdream.com](http://www.talkingdream.com)

ROBIN KEMP is a native New Orleanian, born on Mardi Gras Day and raised by NOPSI, Jazz Fest, Newscene 8, and the OPSB. Her poetry appears in *Mesechabe*, *Texas Poetry Journal*, *Texas Review*, *Verse Daily*, and elsewhere. In 2000, *Gambit* named her "Best Poet in New Orleans." She co-founded the Women's Poetry Conspiracy reading series, and graduated from the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in 2002. She lives in Atlanta, and volunteered in Mississippi as a ham radio operator in the days following Katrina, and coordinated direct aid to New Orleans poets and writers. Along with Dave Brinks, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Kysha N. Brown-Robinson, she is editing a collection of New Orleans poets post-Katrina.

BILL LAVENDER has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans, where he is an adjunct Assistant Professor of English. He works for the Division of International Education in the Metropolitan College as the director of the Low Residency Creative Writing program and coordinator of the Madrid Summer Seminars. His books of poetry include *While Sleeping* (Chax Press 2004), *look the universe is dreaming* (Potes and Poets 2002), and *Guest Chain* (Lavender Ink, 1999). His poetry and essays have appeared in *Jubilat*, *New Orleans Review*, *Gulf Coast Review*, *Skanky Possum*, *YAWP*, and *Fell Swoop*, and online in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Muse Apprentice Guild*, *CanWe-*

*HaveOurBallBack*, *Moria*, *Baddog*, *Poets Against the War*, *Big Bridge*, and *Nolafugees*. "There are no accidents" is an excerpt from "After the Storm: A Primer of American Politics from the Isle of Denial."

DAVID RAE MORRIS has served as a contributing photographer for Associated Press, Reuters, and Agency France Presse. His photographs have been published in such diverse publications as *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and the *Angolite*, the official magazine of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, and *Love and Rage*, a national anarchist weekly. An exhibit of his photographs of New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina is on exhibit at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans this spring.

GLENN MOTT lived in New Orleans in the 1980s, on Magazine Street and then on Magnolia. *Fulcrum*, an annual out of Cambridge, MA, will publish his interview with Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto, along with a translation of his poetry, this spring. He lives in Brooklyn.

JAMES NOLAN was born during the hurricane that devastated New Orleans in September of 1947. A fifth-generation native, he is a widely-published poet, fiction writer, essayist, and translator. His two collections of poems are *Why I Live in the Forest* and *What Moves Is Not the Wind* (both from Wesleyan University Press), and he has translated volumes of Pablo Neruda (*Stones of the Sky*, Copper Canyon Press) and Jaime Gil de Biedma (*Longing*, City Lights Books). He directs the Loyola Writing Institute at Loyola University.

WALKER PERCY, although a prolific essayist, is best known for his philosophical novels, the first of which, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1962. He taught at Loyola University in the 1970s, and was a Contributing Editor of the *New Orleans Review* from 1968 until his death in 1990.

BRAD RICHARD has lived most of his life in New Orleans, having moved here in 1975 with his father, the painter Jim Richard. A creative writing teacher at NOCCA|Riverfront, he lives uptown near Palmer Park, which flooded, although his second story apartment did not. In Gentilly, which flooded heavily, his father's home and studio were destroyed. The St. Roch chapel described in his poem took on about three feet of water, and the fate of the objects offered there as testimony to the Saint's intercession is uncertain. Brad notes, however, that the city is now littered with testimonials.

DAVID RODRIGUEZ says: I lived my entire life in New Orleans until fourteen days before Hurricane Katrina, when I moved to Cleveland, Ohio. I didn't get to see my hometown again until December 24, when I found that what I love about the city is still here, but the illusion that we, its citizens, are in control is gone. As a result, I feel as if I've lost the profound connection I once had, the same as if I'd lost a lover. At least, the questions are the same. Is she okay without me? Is she being taken care of? What can my role in her life be now? Every day, I wish for a better New Orleans that will retain its essential camaraderie and emphasis on celebration and gratitude. The only way to do that is to give the people who possess those qualities a reason to come back.

ALIISA ROSENTHAL was born and raised in uptown New Orleans. She attended Isidore Newman School from kindergarten through 12th grade, where she was the winner of the William Faulkner Prize for Best Short Story by a High School Student. She attended Brown University, graduating with a degree in International Relations. She now lives and works in Manhattan.

HELEN SCULLY is the author of *In the Hope of Rising Again*. She has lived in New Orleans since 2002.

ED SKOOG lived in New Orleans from May 1998 to August 2005, and worked at various times for the New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts|Riverfront, UNO and Tulane. He and his wife, Jill Marquis, still have a place in Hollygrove but for now are in Idyllwild, California, working at Idyllwild Arts Academy. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Slate.com*, *The New Republic*, *NO: a journal of the arts*, and previously in *New Orleans Review*. "Season Finale" is part of the Epistolary project at [www.sidebrow.net](http://www.sidebrow.net).

MARIE SLAIGHT has been living in New Orleans off and on since the late 1980s, with time spent also in Buenos Aires, Montreal, and Sydney, Australia. She has worked with musicians, taught acting, raised three sons in the French Quarter, written, married, divorced, got mugged, and last left New Orleans a week before the hurricane.

SRDJAN SMAJIC' was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1974. From 1997 to 2005 he lived in New Orleans, where he got his Ph.D. in English from Tulane University and taught for two years at the University of New Orleans. He now lives in Asheville, North Carolina, and teaches English at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina.

KATHERINE SONIAT's *The Fire Setters* is available through Web Del Sol online Chapbook Series. Her fourth collection, *Alluvial*, was published by Bucknell University Press, and *A Shared Life* won the Iowa Poetry Prize. Work is in recent issues of *Willow Springs*, *Iowa Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Arts and Letters*. She lived in New Orleans until 1984, but did not focus on it in her writing until she arrived in Virginia. The poem in this issue is from *Alluvial*.

JULIA SORRENTINO has lived in New Orleans for the past three years, where she received her BA in English Writing at Loyola University. "Skeletons" is her first published poem, and with continued inspiration from New Orleans, she hopes to share the city's magic and authenticity with readers.

DAVID TOLAR was born in New Orleans and brought up in its sprawling suburbs. He is currently studying writing at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina.

MICHEL VARISCO, a New Orleans native, has lived in Mid-City for years and only recently, post-flood, has relocated to the Irish Channel. She has received a B.A. from Loyola University and an MFA from Tulane University, and teaches at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. Her recent work explores post-industrial remnants of rural and urban areas in the South. Varisco's work has been published in *Adbusters*, *USA Today*, *Common Ground Archeology*, *Cultural Vistas*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Gambit*, *the Times Picayune*, *Louisiana Weekly*, *New Orleans Tribune*, *New Orleans Magazine*, *The New Orleans Art Review*, and *New Orleans River Region Renaissance*. Her work has been exhibited nationally and is in private and corporate collections.

PEGGY VARNADO taught in the New Orleans Public Schools and earned a Master's degree from Loyola University before moving home to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she is an educational consultant and college instructor. Her work has appeared in *New Orleans Magazine*, *Calyx*, *the Magnolia Quarterly*, and *Voices*, a literary publication of Duke University.

OWENE HALL WEBER attended Newcomb College, as did her mother and daughter. She is a retired Assistant Professor from Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida.

MICHAEL PATRICK WELCH is the author of the New Orleans novel *The Donkey Show* (Equator Books), and the Floridian diary, *Commonplace* (Screw Music Forever). He pioneered *OffBEAT* magazine's first ever alternative music column, *Alt N. O.*, which he believes sheds light on the real musical soul of the city, while the tourist board continues to shove the past down y'all's throat. His one-man electronic

rock and R&B band, *The White Bitch*, was nominated 'Best Electronic Act' at *Gambit's* 2005 Big Easy Awards. He recently ruined his only pair of good shoes, painting the entire lead float in the 2006 Krewe-de-Tat parade, all by himself.

EVE WONG is a New Orleans designer/writer/photographer currently living in New York City. Her work appears in various anthologies, websites, and literary journals.

ANDY YOUNG is the co-editor of *Meena*, a bilingual Arabic/English literary journal based in New Orleans and Alexandria, Egypt. She is an artist/teacher at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and has lived in New Orleans for the past eight years. She recently received a Surdna Fellowship.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *New Orleans Review* is made possible thanks to the support of the Department of English, and the College of Arts & Sciences, at Loyola University New Orleans. Our special thanks to all of those who helped make this issue happen in spite of the difficult circumstances.

Nikki Barringer  
Shannon Cain  
Grace Clerihew  
Joyce Hooper-Corrington  
Douglas Ebbitt  
James R. Elkins  
Brian Fitzgerald  
Carey Herman  
Peter Hodgson  
InPrint, Houston  
Mary Bernice Percy  
Ashley Schaffer  
St. Stephen's Episcopal School, Houston  
Aaron and Brenda Tuley  
Debra Woodfork

"New Orleans Elegies" by Ralph Adamo appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, 2003. "Luna" by Andrea Boll appeared in *Spout*, 2004. "Adieu to New Orleans" by Kathleen Burk appeared online in the *Melic Review*, 1999. The first section of "The Chain Catches Hold" by Anne Gisleson appeared in *Desire*, 2005. "Acts of God" by James Nolan appeared in *Hawaii Review*, 1997. "Our Hell in High Water" by James Nolan appeared in *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2005. "New Orleans Mon Amour" by Walker Percy appeared in *Harper's*, September, 1968. "In the Wake" by Helen Scully appeared in the *Mobile Register*, February 5, 2006. "Season Finale" by Ed Skoog appeared online in *Sidebrow*, 2006. "Basso Continuo" by Katherine Soniat appeared in the *Seattle Review*. "Between Is and Was" by Michael Patrick Welch appeared in the *Houston Press*, September 22, 2005.

C. Morgan Babst  
Brad Benischek  
Andrea Boll  
Dave Brinks  
Abraham Burickson  
Kathleen Burk  
C. W. Cannon  
Tara Jill Ciccarone  
Joshua Clark  
Andrei Codrescu  
Peter Cooley  
Kenneth Cooper  
Marlena Corcoran  
John William Corrington  
Maira Crone  
Michael Tod Edgerton  
Utahna Faith  
Kenneth H. French  
Patty Friedmann  
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John Gery  
Anne Gisleson  
Ann Goethe  
Elizabeth Gross  
Carolyn Hembree  
Rodger Kamenetz  
Robin Kemp  
Bill Lavender  
David Rae Morris  
Glenn Mott  
James Nolan  
Walker Percy  
Brad Richard  
David Rodriguez  
Aliisa Rosenthal  
Helen Scully  
Ed Skoog  
Marie Slaughter  
Srdjan Smajić  
Katherine Soniat  
Julia Sorrentino  
David Tolar  
Michel Varisco  
Peggy Varnado  
Owene Hall Weber  
Michael Patrick Welch  
Eve Wong  
Andy Young