

HURRICANE PARTY

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ALISON PELEGRIN
HURRICANE
PARTY

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for Ben & Sam

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River of Voices

I have this inarticulate theory of being wronged.
I can't shut up about it. I'm hooked on Katrina,
my worst luck (and I was lucky!) doling out
sucker punches, ulcers, and suspect fruit,
and who can make peace with bloody kisses?
There should be a twelve-step group, a safe house
FEMA trailer reachable by sea legs up the porch.
Once inside you'd gather around the card table,
light hurricane candles, and mumble the Serenity Prayer.
Starting over should be so easy. One day
at a time you wake and reenter a world
where everybody has flood stories and a Sheetrock cough.
The stories hum in my mind like bees in the wall—
river of voices rising to the watermark of what I choose
to remember, to breathe away from myself in one
long anonymous ode to mercy and decay.
Oh happy day, when it became okay to laugh!
Twinkle lights on the trash heap of soured clothes.
Our first practical joke, our first *faux pas* in months,
involving citrus from a neighbor's tree that stood weeks
in flood waters, feigned death, but come spring
flourished with fruit. Post-Katrina etiquette
is so confusing! Is it okay to take the oranges that fall,
and if it is okay to take, is it okay to eat the flood-
nourished fruit, and if one is unsure, is it okay
to pass the first taste off to an unsuspecting relative,
and once we see no harm is done, how long
are we allowed to laugh? A bystander would think
we took this on for fun, this reunion
of family at the table long after the meal
is cleared, telling our stories, which are one
story, the same story over and again,
only sometimes a few words added or missing,
story which, despite its heartbreak and body count
has always been about rebirth.

Louisiana

“The state with the prettiest name,”
and with parishes: Evangeline, Rapides, Avoyelles,
Tangipahoa, which in Choctaw means “corncob people.”
Fantastical sinking state, of a boot the heel-toe-heel
invisible, one football field a day drowned
to sop the Mississippi’s mighty slop.
(As pretty names go, in second place.)
I-will-not-speak-French-in-the-schoolyard state.
State snake-in-the-mailbox, and cane fields
lined with rails and jails, and two-seater churches.
Throw me something, mister state. Coonass central,
but don’t you say it. And don’t spell Cajun with a K.
Our postcard more faux than the jackalope:
alligator chomping on a wet-T hottie’s rump.
There hasn’t been a gator death in years,
but our license plates speak the truth—
Sportsman’s Paradise—for noodlers, nutria trappers,
boar wrestlers, ruff riders on land and at sea.
Frequent in this land are freak show fishing holes
where monster catfish breach for kibbles.
(No scales, you know. And those barbs sting.)
What’s not sinking here leans. Power lines
sag like jump ropes. Porches slope.
Unless nailed down, a rocking chair will drift
in the blue roof state. Katrina-rigged,
stagnant-minded state, with horns locked
in hoop skirt times where—look away, kudzu!—
where the rebel flag’s a favorite window dressing
and tattoo. Stomping ground of Civil War
rememberers, their gray coats muddying
the healing greens of Jean Lafitte.
State of roughneck uncles missing fingers,
their wedding bands on stubs instead.

Every other man a *parrain*, or a convict
on work release, like the mower who steered
his tractor clear of purple highway flowers.
Can he read? Does he know someone wrote back?
One word spray painted on the overpass—*Thanx*.

A Brief History of My Life

Call it a crap shoot or ambrosial luck,
a Hail Mary pass through galaxies of pink—
somehow I crash landed in my Gretna cradle
during the disco era, my back-of-the-house people
with their gap teeth looking down, singing
the Bee Gees, making Big Bird on the birthday cake
eat a fried shrimp, toke a cigarillo. Oh, shenanigans
and snapshots too stupid to label—picnic tables,
tailgating in the driveway, its ruts filled with blue rocks
from the fish tank. Cousins cooling off in jail
for slurred words or their general overexuberance.

Reformed through craft therapy, the Twelve Steps,
and the healing touch of duck named Pluto,
the ex-cop my uncle served time in Angola
for masterminding a den of cop thieves.

He made amends by rebuilding my first car,
a 1978 Mercury Comet, aka *La Tortuga*.

That was in high school. Then for a decade
I ignored the red flags of blessings and luck.

A made-for-TV life. A honky tonk cliché.
*You can take the girl out of Gretna, but never Gretna
out of the girl*—mother's prophecy haunting me
more accurate than DNA. How true in my stormy age
of clove cigarettes and escape. My crossed eyes
bored by everything—I thought it made me wise.

I've gone soft. It only took the church to rid me
of malaise, healer Pat's anointing with a touch of oil.

Wait till you hear what she said—*Get the devil
behind you, child, and write the poems.*

The Creeps

For starters, wrinkled hands, the veins
that show, elbow skin sagging
over table's edge, snakes in my shoes,

the babysitter's retarded brother watching
while she rinsed my hair. Blindness,
especially Granny's—her cloudy blues,

her hibiscus slip covers specked with crumbs
because when she swept, she swept nothing,
or she swept roaches thinking they were raisins.

Prophecies, eye teeth, toy breeds,
being cut on, the wrong limb removed,
and that's just me. Among my kind,

sirens in the heart at the hint of blood,
of the hospital, or its white-coated troops,
ever since Grandpa Thompson in his youth

so panicked in the baby ward he split
and never met his twin spawn, Earl
and Pearl, until they came home,

natural-born wincers the pair of them.
Home sweet home, no haven
if you spook easily and look for signs,

jumpy in broad day thanks to thigh-highs
in the tub drip-drying like disembodied
line dancers, or the ghosts of pudgy legs.

All my life, cool air through the door
and their coven of voices calling out bets
on Up and Down the River. Almost at ease

but for their imperfections—the toupees,
the meaty moles, the yellow teeth clacking,
constant metronomes of chatter.

How they cackled about the wall mount,
a moose whose ham, they swore, peekabooed
in the guest bedroom. Well, hear me testify.
I searched Nanny's closet, split the coats in half—nothing.

Mid-City Tours

Marching band in the street, flock
of green parrots wild in the palm trees' fruit,
and only my son looks up, double honks
a bird call on his plastic trumpet.
A tour guide, whose job it was to point,
my father could have moved the crowd
to notice. He befriended random people,
even at red lights where he'd roll down
the window to chitchat and give a peace sign
to jaywalkers who ignored him.
In the hatchback on the way home
after a day of city tours, his hand gestured
out of habit to Bayou St. John, called
by the Indians *Tchoupic* for its muddy water.
No such thing as a day of rest—
we ghost-hunted after the good luck of rain,
listening for whispers in cemeteries
and elsewhere, and it's true that steam rising
from the streets really does seem to call
your name. Bring-your-daughter-to-work day,
this time a plantation tour, he used
his hobo charm on cooks
with white skin and period dress.
They heaped us with loaves of bread,
bounty enough to share, and so
we took the ground streets home—
Canal Street to Carrollton, our escort
a drum line of grit and dragged feet.

Self-Portrait in a Tourist's Snapshots

Tourist, in a white carriage by a donkey
pulled backwards, is that what you call
the Big Easy life? Look at you—

feather boa bold at the piano bar,
bugging your waiter for the same old songs.

I've been there, at the fountain, holding court
with a tambourine and a shot glass of limes.

Mira! My gringa foot inside the powwow circle.

Blur of red sequins, red carnival mask,
pencil beard smeared—can't always tell
which devil I am, which baby doll,

what the glitter letters on umbrellas spell
when the divas line up in order of height.

At the second line parade, I'm one step
closer than you to the fanned-out ostrich plumes
and orange, thrown-down tuxedo jackets.

Sammy, my youngest, rides my shoulders.
We're in the gig. Tuba boss blows back at us.
The gravediggers shovel and sing.

Do me a favor—right the plastic flowers
in the vase before you start
a charcoal rubbing of my people's names and dates.

When you look down from the charter bus window
like a politician on a goodwill tour,
I'm drinking hose water

against a backdrop of pink insulation thistles.

Burying the Hatchet

Robber barons of the coffers of joy, zealots
of good times squandered on a lark of mean.
Beware the rage that dogs you to the grave.

The schism in the House of P broke out
fifty-something years ago. In Thibodeaux.
Good times squandered on a lark of mean.

The Mason-Dixon drawn inside our name.
Two *l*'s to one. Don't know exactly why.
Fifty-something years ago. In Thibodeaux,

everywhere, my name misspelled on signs.
Just passing through, my hackles rise.
Two *l*'s, not one—don't know exactly why.

Pellegrin Homebuilders. Pellegrin Marine.
Lies! No matter how they spell the name
just passing through, my hackles rise.

Once a decade, when snow falls in the swamp,
we reach across parish lines, kiss and make up.
Yeah, right. No matter how you spell your name,
beware the rage that dogs you to the grave.

Joy Ride on the Gretna Ferry

In summer we are all alike—
storm-wary and reckless for a breeze.

Bikes and cars on the lower deck, pedestrians above.

A procession of the good people of my world,
murder capital of the world.

Mismatched office ladies who will scatter
into the mirrored office buildings downtown,
waiters trailing apron strings, street dancers
stomping bottle cap taps in their shoes.

My sons follow suit, beg me down to the lower deck,
and so we go, and they go straight to the edge.

They could fall in. They could chip a tooth,
but rather they offer gum wrappers
from the bottom of my purse to the water, to the wind.

Dizzy when the boat moves—looking forward,
pulled back to school days I made this trip with my mother
not for a joy ride, but because we missed the bus.

She'd get us as far as Jackson Avenue then transfer
and leave me as ward of a bus driver who could not care less.

I smeared my name, circled it with a heart
in the grease spot on the window, mistrustful of street signs
and others' directions, and thus eternally disoriented
by landmarks creeping up over the wrong shoulder.

The levees rimming the Mississippi hide everything—
of churches, only the steeples remain.

City of crosses and skulls, of teddy bears and bouquets
along fences to remind that some have fallen, some floated away.

I think I hear cathedral bells, or sirens, or else my sons
in their musical shoes. Life jackets everywhere,
a bright orange wall of bricks.

Daughter of the Confederacy

Down here, news travels slow. Fathers and sons,
they fall and rise, they raise the Southern Cross,
they pilgrimage to battlefields in Vicksburg,
Richmond, and swing the metal detector
with prayers for a crop of stunted bullets.

Photo op all through childhood: Me and my brother
beside Fort Jackson's black-washed cannon
in order of height. Picnic and relic hunting after.

We found skipping stones, nothing more,
but kept the faith, believed ourselves transformed
by a stroll through damp brick caves.
Chilled ankles while we stooped
for a cannon's view of the river's curves—
we thought it was a dead man's breath.

Ancestor worship. One foot in the past.
In Baton Rouge, retirees underfoot
at the front desk of the special collections library
where I fetched their maps, disarmed them
of contraband ink pens and coffee thermoses.

Any visitor could be a vandal with a vat of paint,
and the curators so mistrusted enthusiasm
I crept by, traitor with a whitewash heart
set against my name written in gray
in the roster of Union and Confederate dead.

Reckless before I quit. Sloppy, bored, irreverent,
tempted to alter the files, the endless files
in rows like headstones in Arlington cemetery.
Hardly wrong when no one knows to come looking,
and if a scholar wastes her footnote summer, so what?

The whispers hounding me down the halls—
at first I chalked it up to white guilt, or a Yankee ghost
showering dust on the displays, karma hounding me
for all those school trips to the Confederate Museum

where I marveled at a guide detailing hacksaw amputation,
Confederate bills stamped with cotton bales,
and what seemed ladies' hats behind the glass. . . .
Did they have shrunken heads?

The whispers came from preservationists,
idolaters of factoids and fading paint,
plotting how best to preserve portraits
of Southern generals. Their battle plan?
When no one is looking, flip them nose-to-the-wall.

I know about their reenactments and period falconry,
the Farbys and thread counters, buffs
groomed with pockmarks and period grimaces,
the beards in shaded portraits their hand mirrors.

Perhaps you have seen them at close of day—
the regiments, moth-bitten, gray,
that slouch towards a battle lost long ago,
bottlenecking all the back roads.
I wait them out at the gas station
that sells moonshine and meat pies.

Across the street, reenactment brides.
In a circle they pray—thanks be given—
again their rebels rise up from the dust,
stinking of sweat and antique wool.
They call themselves the new endangered species
and walk among us resurrecting history.