

Laura Marshall

## A History of Flooding

It all started on the twenty-sixth of August, 2005, around 3:15 in the afternoon. The final bell had rung at my New Orleans high school, located just on the other side of the Seventeenth Street Canal from the suburb I lived in, and we were giddy at the prospect of a long weekend. See you next week, but hopefully not Monday, we said to each other, untucking our blouses from our brown plaid skirts. It was only the second week of junior year, and we would already be getting a hurricane day—something similar to a snow day in other parts of the country, or so we suspected of the form of precipitation foreign to most of us.

We knew everything would turn out fine, that after Monday we would all go back to our schools, our jobs, our lives. We had witnessed dozens of storms with no great consequences: rain, wind, scattered tree branches and leaves to rake, alarm clocks blinking a bright red 12:00 from a brief power outage. This one would veer eastward or lose strength, and until then we would play our music like Nero in a falling Rome, singing the song of people who should've known better.

Two days later, at ten o'clock on Sunday morning, the mayor was mandating evacuation. We, like so many other residents of the city, had no set destination in mind. My parents loaded the car with important documents and photographs and food and water and the dog. I took only a single change of clothes and the books I was supposed to have read over the summer, *Jane Eyre* being the one I knew I would have to be stuck in traffic to read.

Ten hours later, we had driven and driven and driven and everything was full and full and full. We found a place to board the dog, but for the four humans in our party, it was too late for a hotel or motel.

Somewhere around the Louisiana-Mississippi state line, we found ourselves in a Red Cross shelter set up in a Baptist church's community center. We were assigned to a small patch of carpet sectioned off by masking tape, the only borders between us and the families on either side of us. Eventually, we tried to sleep.

By the time the power went out four hours later, I was relieved. I was freezing under the air conditioning vent with no blanket, my legs tucked up into my shirt. The stereo static sound of the wind wrapped itself around the rain and although it sounded as though the roof might blow off, everyone in the room remained still, either asleep or

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pretending to be.

Three days later, we move to a hotel room. We learn for the first time what everyone else in the world already knows: that we will not be home anytime soon. My brother transfers to a college in Massachusetts and moves there with only the clothes on his back, and my mother and father and I check out of the hotel and start driving toward Houston, picking up the dog along the way.

One week later, I sleep on the olive-colored velveteen couch in my grandparents' living room—

Two days later, in a relative's house in Texas, a spare room—

Three days later, in the house of a couple with a seven-year-old genius daughter, her single ladybug bed—

Two days later, in an unfurnished Houston apartment, on a donated air mattress—

One week later, for a re-evacuation back to New Orleans because of a different hurricane, my grandmother's blue shag carpet—

Three weeks later, we are allowed back into our house for the first time by the National Guard. The front door is swollen with moisture and a stench of decay erupts from it, and we can see that the rooms have shifted, reorganized themselves in floating.

I step onto the carpet—

*Squish.*

It is June 30, 2010. I had moved into my first non-dormitory apartment in New York one year earlier, a three-bedroom in Harlem on 147th Street. My roommates and I adorn it with theatre posters and fill it with books, and wine bottles gather on the counter as we celebrate graduations and new jobs.

We have just renewed the lease for another year when I am called back to New Orleans because of my grandmother's death. Without her the whole city feels hollow and empty, but in brief flashes I swear that I can smell a whiff of her cooking: the smooth bitterness of vegetable oil cut sharply with garlic and onion; briny shrimp; sweet, earthy cornmeal.

The night before the funeral, my roommate calls. There was a fire upstairs in our building, he says. Not us, but upstairs. Fifth floor. Everything is fine, but there's water from the hoses coming down the walls and through the light fixture directly over your bed. We moved your mattress.

I return to a familiar and still-pungent odor of wet sheetrock and mildew. In my bedroom, my mattress is propped against the wall, and a bucket of brown water is in its place. A half-inch of water has pooled inside the ceramic light fixture, and the bulb sputters and blinks, casting reflective arcs from the water onto the walls. A storm cloud just

above where I am supposed to be sleeping.

I follow my mother and father into the house. The smell is something like death wrapping one hand around your neck and closing the other over your nose and mouth. It is everywhere, we learn, because the water killed everything and left it to rot in the late summer heat.

I lift a corner of the blue trash can that had floated from the foyer to the kitchen. It still has dirty brown water in it. We proceed in silence to the kitchen and adjacent living room. It looks almost normal; flooding does not always look like flooding. But there are subtle changes of disrupted space: furniture slightly removed from the walls, an overturned kitchen chair, white patches of mold climbing up table legs, the wilted cases of my parents' record collection with the peeling smiles of the Shirelles and the Carpenters and Linda Ronstadt.

I do not recognize the backyard for the swamp that has replaced it. The tree has been torn from the ground and flipped upside-down so its branches are now inside the pool, the water is now an opaque brown. The exposed roots have pulled an entire yard of grass up so that it is folded on top of itself like a blanket. We can see every other yard on the block because all of the fences have been reduced to splinters. The only things left standing are a few pale blue plastic water slides that are still bolted into the concrete.

Inside, the walls show a brown line a foot from the floor where the water rose, stopped, receded. We knew that we were lucky. We had friends who had nothing left, and we knew about the rooftops and the Superdome and the attic drownings. We had seen the spray-painted marks on houses indicating how many dead people or animals were inside.

My nightmares, though, fixate on the power outage at the downtown aquarium, where the failure of the generators powering the tank filtration systems resulted in the ironic deaths of hundreds of species of aquatic life. I obsess over the horror of cleaning it up—where do you bury the corpses of dozens of drowned sharks?—and every night for weeks I walk through an endless corridor of murky green tanks full of dead, rotting fish.

In January of 2011, my roommates and I move to a new apartment in Washington Heights. We have the sixth floor, which is the top floor of the building, which is fine because it has an elevator. This, this will be the one we make our home. We re-hang our theatre posters and re-shelve our books.

In late August, the weather reports start coming in. I didn't think New York had hurricanes, probably because they didn't before,

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probably because global warming was coming to taunt its few remaining naysayers.

I prepare as I was raised to. Non-perishable food, batteries, bottled water. New Yorkers, it would seem, just have no idea. On my way home from buying wine, the most necessary of emergency supplies, I see families with shopping carts full of frozen food and I wonder: Do you power your fridge by bicycle?

By that afternoon the subways have been shut down, and when the rain starts my boyfriend and I are sprawled out on my bed, drinking wine and watching a movie, when all of a sudden—

Drip. Drip. Cold water has stung both of us like insects. What was that? From the window? Is it open?

Drip.

A drop lands on my shoulder. We both look up.

On the ceiling, a dark gray patch of moisture is forming.

The sixth floor, which was okay because we had an elevator: the top floor, just under the roof, the roof that is now spilling what I was supposed to have escaped directly over the head of my bed.

The head of my bed.

I go out in the hall and confirm: from nowhere else in the apartment is the roof leaking.

It was then that I knew that I was being followed.

Again, the mattress is pulled away, a bucket put down to catch the water. We move to the living room and we sing, *Irene, goodnight Irene/Irene, goodnight—*

My parents and I go upstairs, which is, by all comparative measures, fine. My room is as it was when I left: the bright purple walls, the New York City subway map and flyers from the TKTS booth on the closet doors, the textbooks strewn across the floor. It has been so long since we have been home, though, that it seems like it might belong to someone else, a museum curator's best guess of what my room might look like.

In my parents' bedroom, the glass from the windows has blown in and, for some reason, this is what makes my mother start crying. I snap at her to stop, knowing half of my friends have lost everything they owned, that if the levee had broken on the other side it would have been us to receive a ten-foot surge of water that saturated our house for weeks and dissolved everything inside of it. We had won the worst coin toss in history.

My parents take photographs of the damage for the insurance company. I shove some of my clothes into a garbage bag to take back to Texas and help my father drag waterlogged newspapers, rugs, an armchair, and boxes of memories from the house. We peel the sleeves

off of the records and wonder if the music can be saved.

My mother pulls on yellow rubber gloves to address the matter of the refrigerator. It is still new, stainless steel, and she had been thrilled to purchase it. She ties a rag over her face, as if it could offer protection against the smell of meat and produce that had thawed, rotted for two weeks, and then refrozen when the power came back on.

She was the only one on the block who saved her refrigerator. Everyone else dragged theirs out onto the curb, rotting food still inside of them. They sat for weeks, months, waiting for a garbage carting service that no longer existed. Almost every house in the New Orleans area had a fridge on its curb, and now Wikipedia has an entry entitled “Katrina refrigerator.” Some of them were marked with drawings or messages: ones of hope, others of anger at the government. But mostly they attracted cockroaches the size of sparrows. They might have attracted animals, too, but everything else was dead.

In January of 2012 my boyfriend and I don’t take the Irene water as a warning, and we move in together to a new apartment. We paint the walls gray-blue and hang curtains and get the good wine glasses from Crate & Barrel. We have a dog and a cat, a happy little family.

That October it happens again: the weather reports, the rumors of subway shutdowns. I feel like I drag hurricanes with me like the train of a gown.

But by the time Sandy makes landfall in New York, it’s hardly raining. We drink wine and wait for the rain and wind to worsen. Eventually my boyfriend falls asleep, and awakens the next morning distressed that he “missed it.” I smile because I did the same thing once as a girl, waking up after storms whose names I can no longer remember. That was fun once, too: will they name one after me?

Later on television there is news of the fires on Breezy Point spreading, as it were, like wildfire, and the rain creates an ironic obstruction and worsens the problem, preventing firefighters from accessing the little island where many of their retired colleagues and their families reside.

Among the residents is my boyfriend’s great aunt. Everything she owns is gone. She is featured in a television interview in which she cries and tries to gather pieces of broken ceramic and scraps of fabric to try to make sense of them. But there is nothing left, so much nothing that she cannot even determine what the something is from where the nothing came. This is how I learn: better the flood than the fire. At least water I could outrun.

My boyfriend moves out the following May, skipping out on three months’ worth of rent. I come home at the end of the month to

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an eviction notice tucked into my doorknob as though it is nothing more than a takeout menu. I pay the debt he left, determined to anchor myself to the home I had painted, decorated, invested in.

In June a pipe bursts behind a wall in the bathroom, and water spreads out past the tile to the hardwood floor of the hallway. I call the super while wearing rubber rain boots. What do I do, I asked him. Turn the knob to the left, he says. But that's not what I meant. What I meant was *what do I do to make it stop chasing me*.

A month later, the rent goes up, so I have to leave anyway. I repaint the gray-blue walls white.

The home I spent my childhood in did not flood in Katrina, and it never had. This was the primary standard to which my mother held homes and neighborhoods: did it have a history of flooding? And this neighborhood did not. My parents built my childhood home there, its neat rows of brown and beige bricks contrasting sharply with the rusting aluminum siding of the shotgun houses on either side of it.

We drive past it once the National Guard's curfews have relented, and we can survey all of the storm's damage: diving into the wreck. Its roof had been stripped bare of shingles, and the old pecan tree—from which my brother and I once gathered pecans for my grandmother to make pie—was shorn of its branches. I try to look through the front window, where I used to wait for my father to get home from work.

I wonder about the family there now, and if they, too, had sought it out for its history, and what they might run away from. I wonder if they knew that if they left dry land, they might never find it again.

In 2014, I live in three different apartments over the course of the year. 120th Street in Morningside Heights, Grand Street in Williamsburg, Crown Street in Crown Heights. Slumlords and flaky roommates bump me out of each one after three months each. I hemorrhage my belongings, get rid of things by compulsion: the books are too heavy, the clothes take up too much space, the dishware is mixed with other roommates' and lost. But nothing else bad happens because I leave each one before the tide comes in.

In March of 2015 I find myself on my old street in Washington Heights. I cash in all of my savings to live in a one bedroom for a year to hang out to dry. Every day I pass the building with the sixth floor apartment of Irene, and down by the park I can look right into the windows of the apartment of Sandy.

The new apartment is small, but everything is mine mine mine. I have exposed brick in the kitchen that I hang colored lights across,

and I have lavender candles in the bathroom that match the rug and towels.

The week I move in, I scrub the counters and the sinks and the tub and the floors. After I flush the blue liquid from the toilet I lay on my bed, exhausted. And then I hear it: the insistent, ominous trickling. I am on my feet before my brain can process its meaning. The blue has been spit back up all over the floor and is stealthily arcing out to the living room. I splash through it to turn off the water and call the super.

The previous tenant, as it turned out, had taken to flushing cotton swabs down the toilet, leaving in the pipes a dam of red plastic sticks, which the super pulls out from the ground in a gloved fist.

It's a few months after living here that I go on vacation, my first one in years. I go to Barbados alone and stay in a small hotel with a balcony overlooking the Caribbean. The water is warm and so clear that even up to my neck in water I can see my feet brushing the sandy bottom. I never would have gone so far out into the water of my childhood vacations, the murky green Gulf of Mexico, which was ridden with seaweed and jellyfish and, later, spilled oil.

Every morning in Barbados I walk to the beach and lay in the sun and drink rum punch and go out into the water whenever I get too hot, and every night I eat dinner alone on my balcony after making half-hearted passes at the dreadlocked bartender downstairs in the hotel restaurant. I stare out at the water, listening to the low roar of the waves, and every night I think of how nice it would be to walk out into the water and swim toward the horizon and never stop until I had turned into salt and sea glass. If I couldn't make my home anywhere, maybe I didn't belong anywhere. Maybe the only way away from the water was in it.

But I pack my suitcases and return to the apartment and enjoy peace and quiet for almost a year, finally in one place, the water receded for the longest it ever has. I try to ignore the feeling that something bad must be coming, that this apartment can't last because the cotton swab-toilet flood had to be a harbinger of something and things had been going a little too well.

I receive my lease renewal around the same time I receive the news that I'm losing my job.

It's the 26th of July, 2016. July, because floods prefer the heart of summer, whether they are caused by human error or changes in atmospheric pressure that cause collected moisture to return to the earth.

I am in Riverdale, a part of the Bronx that it is essentially in the suburbs, in a sublet in a friend's apartment. I am sitting on my sublet bed, trying to find a new job, slightly more hopeful than the

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week before.

Then I hear the trickling.

Did I leave the faucet running—

No, too much trickling, more than trickling—

I look up, glance toward the hallway and see it: water coming down the radiator pipe from the apartment upstairs.

It even followed me to the Bronx. In a place that isn't even mine.

The water stops at first but later carves a hole in the ceiling and reveals a toxic splash of mold. I find out I have to evacuate.

One week later: a stranger's couch—

One week later: a friend's childhood bedroom, pink walls—

Two days later, a new lease, an apartment, an air mattress—

My parents and I are allowed to move back to the house in October. You can't drink the water, the local government says, but it's fine to bathe in. This is supposed to be reassuring.

My father and our neighbors have ripped the sheetrock from the walls and pulled out the carpet, which is left in moldy rolls on the sidewalk. There is nowhere to buy new walls or carpet or furniture, and no one to hire to help with repairs. We position the aluminum patio furniture in a semi-circle on the cement floor in the living room and it resembles a dollhouse prison.

The oven and stove have also been removed, and we have to live off of fast food or whatever we can microwave. I become repulsed by the chemical smell of McDonald's, and by the time we have a proper kitchen again, I have lost ten pounds.

The repairs on the roof begin first, and I wake every morning to the hammering of shingles above my head. The sheetrock comes after a few more months, and then carpet around when I begin my senior year in high school. By the time we have a couch again, I am sending graduation announcements and booking a one-way flight to New York.

In the summer of 2015 I visit New Orleans for the first time in over a year. I have missed the past two Christmases and a growing list of weddings and funerals, and though something about the humid air tugs me toward it, I almost don't need to miss it because the city feels less like a place I am from and more like who I am.

I am in the Quarter getting a tattoo for my deceased Cajun grandmother. The words of her nearly-erased native tongue: *cher bon dieu*. The artist asks me where I'm from.

Here, I say, struck dumb by the question. But I live in New York now.

When he finishes he says, Have a safe trip home.

I fly back to New York and get a cab from JFK. The driver says, You're from here?

No, I say, and then, sort of, yes. So he knows I'm not a tourist. As far as lists of what makes you a New Yorker—although the real barometer is being born and raised—there is always a time marker. Ten years. Before 9/11. Half your life. More years than you lived anywhere else. How do you measure time in a place like New York, with old layering new layering old, shiny condos on leaking pipes, sodium lights versus neon? I think of it in the apartments I lived in—all thirteen or so of them—and the different lives that occupied each of them. I imagine the ghosts of all the people I used to be wandering through walls of chain stores where the doors of my favorite bars and cafes used to be, never to leave the lives they built.

I've been here for ten years, I add. I'm from New Orleans originally. He nods. So that's home, he says, and we pull up to the new apartment.

I wonder who is right, the cab driver or the tattoo artist, the place that drove me out or the place that won't let me in. Either way, the flooding follows: the solid ground disappearing beneath me no matter how hard I cling to it, no matter how deep the claw marks I leave in it while getting dragged away in the surf. How could I explain to either of them that home followed me everywhere I went?

A month later, the bathroom ceiling starts to rain small pieces of plaster and splinters of wood. One day a small crack becomes a hole and a steady stream of water begins to flow down. I look up, and I sigh, and wonder what will happen next.

