

After the Flood

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For years after Katrina, the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast called the area the Invisible Coastline. It took more than two years and over \$266 million to rebuild the US 90 Bay Bridge from Pass Christian to Bay Saint Louis (the main access point to New Orleans or to any other major city close to these small towns). Meanwhile, people took a ferry back and forth. What was once a two-minute drive turned into a forty-five-minute commute across the water or a fifty-minute drive around the Bay.

Earlier today I crossed the Saint Louis Bay Bridge on my way to Pass Christian, the first time since the storm I've been back to what used to be my home. The new bridge opened in May of 2007. My grandfather was still alive then. Now it's May of 2008 and he's not. The funeral is in Alabama. I'm taking the long way there.

The old Bay Bridge was demolished in the storm surge—a catastrophic failure, as one engineer put it—but it once stood thirty feet above the water. The new bridge stands, at its highest, at about eighty-five feet. Though the piers below the deck of the bridge remained, the concrete decking and railroad ties were ruined and had to be replaced. In the past, it was the clicking of car wheels over the exposed rebar of those linked sections of platform that drew me home. This sound was my cue to relax into the known, the familiar. But the surge knocked the platforms off at the joints, and they collapsed into the Mississippi Sound like fallen dominoes. The new bridge is unbroken and smooth with a high tolerance for tension and no seams to come apart. All was quiet as I drove across.



Pass Christian, Mississippi (which locals all call “The Pass”), was so altered by Hurricane Katrina that maps made prior to the storm were no longer accurate representations of the town’s buildings, roads, or thoroughfares. Those coordinates were now imprecise; boundaries blurred, grids unraveled. Landmarks were simply gone, plucked surreptitiously from their foundations and deposited into the Gulf. When surveying the initial damage, a local police officer remarked to then-Mayor Bill McDonald, “You’re the mayor of nothing now.”

When my grandparents finally returned to their neighborhood in Pass Christian to survey the flood damage, they found it completely changed. Obliterated. Much as a tornado dodges homes and structures, somehow a few of the buildings survived the storm surge and battering waves, but all were at the very least caved in or were like my grandparents’ house: splintered and scattered for miles. My grandparents, along with their friends and neighbors, walked the skeletons of their homes and scavenged what they could, sometimes stumbling upon uniquely preserved treasures.

An unbroken and perfectly oval pane of beveled coffee-table glass that once rested in a wrought iron base, which was nowhere to be found. A DVD case for the film *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, somehow missing its outer jacket and inner booklet but found closed with the DVD inside. A cream-colored vase from Vallauris, France, painted with tiny flowers and found upright under a pile of boards, stuffed full of mud. A chunk of crystal from Hadeland Glassverk near Oslo, Norway, chipped in one corner but otherwise flawless. My grandparents collected these objects, which they referred to as Katrinkets.



Not many people outside the immediate area talk about the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, an expanse of shoreline stretching sixty-five miles from Waveland to Pascagoula and all but completely leveled following the highest storm surge ever documented in the United States. At its highest (a measurement taken in Pass Christian), the storm surge itself reached over 28.9 feet. That’s 28.9 feet of standing water; estimations regarding moving water were even higher.

There are many theories surrounding the ferocity of the surge and flooding along the Gulf Coast, though none have to do with engineering and city planning failures like the theories surrounding what happened in New Orleans. Water alone weighs 1,700 pounds per cubic yard. For the Coast, the speed of the storm did the greatest damage. Winds moved at 175 miles per hour and flood waves followed as a result.

Geologically, the Mississippi Gulf Coast has a particularly wide and shallow continental shelf, which perpetuated the flood. Simply put, the inertia of the water being pushed inland by the storm was increased by the shallowness of the shelf, amplifying the surge instead of dampening it, which the shelf would have done had it been steeper. The result of this amplifying process was a thirty-foot wall of seawater moving inland almost as a tsunami would (though slower). The seawater rushed and seeped into the small coastal towns and then moved out again, leaving them covered in layers of thick mud, smashing them into pieces of wooden boards and stones. Washed clean off the maps.



I was sixteen when I moved to Pass Christian to live with my grandparents, right on the Bay of Saint Louis. It was a dramatic location, certainly the most beautiful place I'd ever lived. If you stood on the back deck of the house, you could see out to Mallini Point, a cove opening straight out into the Mississippi Sound. If you were to turn a boat sharp left, you'd run into the Saint Louis Bay Bridge; if you were in a car and you followed the bridge over to Highway 90, in an hour or so you'd end up in New Orleans.

235 Baywood Drive was a waterfront house. It was built on fifteen-foot stilts and was situated right off Mallini Bayou, which snaked its way down from De Lisle and around the neighborhood before emptying into the Bay. Sometimes porpoises swam in from the Sound, but since they couldn't survive the brackish Bayou water, fishermen would pile into crabbing boats and herd them out.

For me, the house and the elements were combined. Sometimes I would sleep in a hammock hung under the stilts of the house—a quiet cave I would fold over myself—listening to the sound of the water lapping the deck, the wind in the pine trees. My grandfather and I would sit on the back porch and watch the clouds roll in. He would smoke, and I would pretend I didn't steal

his cigarettes from their hiding place among the corncob holders and crab claw crackers. He called me Sari instead of Sarah.

During the two hurricane seasons I lived with my grandparents, we drew *x*'s on the bay windows with tape. We tied things down, charged generator batteries, and turned off the power. When the storms hit, sometimes we would drive deeper into the neighborhood and take shelter with my great-aunt and uncle whose house was closer inland. This is what my grandmother did when Katrina hit, too, but the flooding was worse than anyone had ever seen or heard of. My family watched in horror as the house slowly filled with water they, at first, mistook for rain whipping in under the sliding glass door and tried to soak up with towels. Then the refrigerator was floating, the tables were floating; lamps were falling over into the water. If the water made it that far up, past the fifteen-foot concrete stilts forming the base of the house, then the cars were flooded too. The roads. Their whole world was a flood. By the time they realized they needed to get higher, there was nowhere else for them to go; the freezer had turned over and was floating, blocking their way to the garage attic. It didn't matter anyway: the water outside had equalized to the water inside. There was no escape.

My grandmother and her sister floated in separate bedrooms on mattresses my uncle hoisted them onto—neither could swim—while my uncle swam underwater through the doorways between them. Aunt Lois had only an eight-foot ceiling above her and soon was dangerously close to the ceiling fan, so my Uncle John swam to the garage and retrieved a life buoy to cover her head while he moved her into the living room where the ceiling was higher. My grandmother rose by herself in a room with a recessed ceiling. She kept her head out of the water by propping it up with her hands and a bent elbow and watched her sister's possessions float by, every so often inching her way toward the higher end of her waterlogged mattress. When the water finally receded a few hours later, the ceiling was only centimeters away.

Though no one knew it at the time, while this was happening, my grandfather was on a bus headed to the Superdome in New Orleans. He'd recently had heart surgery, and the hospital realized too late how bad the storm would hit Bay Saint Louis and Pass Christian. Everyone was too late. No one could have known it wasn't a safe place to go. It took weeks to get him home, and by then, there wasn't a home to come back to.

I was already long gone by then, twenty-two and living alone in New

Mexico in a studio apartment and working as a cook. I wasn't able to reach my grandparents for more than a week. Everyone feared the worst had happened to everyone else, and sometimes they were right. My grandparents were among the lucky ones.



Sir Francis Bacon supposed the brain's inability to consider what is absent to be among its greatest flaws. When we move through a landscape, we consciously or unconsciously locate landmarks to direct us. We search for cues to tell us how to move forward. We can think of a cue as a cause for memory to surface. Cues are hints from the world; they are prompts, voices waiting in the wings.

We cue the lights, signaling to the audience the end of the show. A conductor cues the wind instruments with a flourish and gesture, waves them inside the melody, brings them in. Cues do this. They bring us in, bring us back, bring us in, bring us back—like the rocking of a boat in the waves.

A cue is an object we touch that transports us back through time. But what happens when the object takes you back to a place that no longer exists? You touch it, and it takes you nowhere. Time moves us through history, putting distance between minutes and memories, but the destruction of a place collapses those barriers, flooding the consciousness. The map of the past is lost. Memories and dreams surge together.



The house on Baywood Drive was my first real home, the longest I'd lived anywhere in all of my childhood. It was the most stable version of the past I had to hold on to, an anchor in an otherwise turbulent ocean of memories. Maybe this is why, for years after, Hurricane Katrina existed in my mind as a cartoonish occurrence.

In my dreams, the landscape acquiesced to the storm and went willingly down into the depths. I imagined our house sliding into the Bay in one piece, and I saw the Bay as bottomless. I imagined the crabs and shrimp we used to haul in during the summer months living in our home under the water, swimming through our memories, reading our letters and looking at our photographs.

But in this new landscape of memory and invention, a strangeness seeped

in when I tried to look back and recall things as they were. I would remember myself crawling out of my second-story bedroom window onto the roof to smoke a cigarette, ducking low to avoid being seen by the next-door neighbors. The wind would toss my hair like always and whip in over the water in the distance. But suddenly I would fall through space, the roof and floors below me crumbling into emptiness.

Other times, I would imagine myself sitting in my grandfather's car, backing out of the stilted underground of the house and then onto Baywood Drive. In front of me should be the woods where my grandfather buried a sea otter he'd drowned accidentally when trying to trap and release it somewhere far away from his crab bait.

After the storm, when the woods and the otter were already long gone, my grandmother told me the story that my grandfather begged her never to tell me—of his mistake with the trap. How the cage tipped, fell into the depths, and closed.

In my imaginings, we are all there at first—my grandfather, the otter, the woods, and me. I pull out onto Baywood Drive and see my grandfather out in the Bayou, pulling in the crab traps. But in front of me, there is no otter buried in the woods. There are no woods. There is only empty sky. When I turn back to look behind me, there is no house, no grandfather—nothing.



At one time I knew how to navigate the streets of my old neighborhood without a thought, but I'm lost here in the present. The foundation is still in place but nothing else. The Bayou is on the wrong side of the road. It isn't just that houses and buildings are missing—the very landscape has changed into a mirror image of itself, something flipped and twisted but so resembling the other that I feel a sense of vertigo.

The houses under construction look ridiculous raised twenty feet in the air instead of the standard fifteen for waterfront homes. That won't help if anything like Katrina ever happens again. The storm surge in this neighborhood reached a height of thirty-two feet, higher than most one-story houses are tall, even built on twenty-foot stilts. It occurs to me, for the first time, that I do not know what I will find when I reach Baywood Drive.

I pass my great-aunt and uncle's house, still there but long since gutted,

remodeled, and sold; the two of them along with my grandparents relocated to Alabama together after the storm. The wooden dock out back where I once saw an alligator while fishing is gone, replaced with artificial aluminum. I brake briefly as I drive past where there once was a stop sign and then again past what I used to call the Oyster House because it was once an oyster shucking factory. Everything becomes something else one day. The building is gone, but oyster shells sit piled, iridescent and purple, by a telephone pole that never used to be there. I stop the car and get out. I reach down to pick up a shell, and it is rough but also smooth like I remember oyster shells to be.

And then it's forward on to Baywood Drive. I weave around the curves (more than before), past the neighbor's house (still standing). I almost drive right by our house before I realize what I'm doing, and I pull into what once was a driveway, but now it leads nowhere. There is nothing—no house, no carport, no garden, no stairs. Only grass, a few trees, and an expanse of naked concrete. And even that has chunks missing. Nothing is left but memories. I get out of the car, and it strikes me there is no difference between it and this alien landscape. Both are new to me.

Down by the water, the dock is gone in parts and twisted in others, but I think I can see my grandfather pulling in a long red net. I can hear his voice, "Sari, light me a ciggie, won't you?" He's a ghost now. We're all ghosts, running down a dock that isn't there.

I sit and listen to the wind blowing in the upper boughs of the remaining pine trees. Just like before, water laps at the dock, and I can see tiny minnows swimming between cracks in the wood. I close my eyes and imagine it is all the same.

When I open them, I see something catch the sunlight and glint by a tree ringed in pyracantha bushes. Almost concealed in red berries is the head of a silver golf club and a few pieces of what look like trash bags or paper. Something else shines—a luggage tag with a corner of the plastic exposed. A Katrinket. A cue. A luggage tag to nowhere.