

## Editor's Introduction

---

Douglas B. Chambers

Everyone has a story to tell. Some times they are their own, of harrowing escapes or near misses or prescient forethought or careful planning, or usually of plain dumb luck. Other times they are the stories of those who can not or will not tell theirs – some out of pride, some out of despair. There are those who stayed, those who fled, those who came back, and those who came to help. Other voices were silenced against their will in a rush of rising water, in the crack of falling timber, in the whisper of a hushed death, praying no doubt for deliverance, dear god. Many stories of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath will never be told, in fact can never be told.

It takes a map to grasp the scope of what happened on 8/29 along America's "third coast." Look at a map. Katrina left a great arc of destruction across some of the poorest parts of the U.S., from eastern Louisiana to western Alabama, centered on southern Mississippi. A common joke in Mississippi is that the state's three most important cities are Memphis, Mobile and New Orleans. And the most important one, New Orleans, is now largely a goner. For 100 miles along the Gulf Coast, and 200 miles inland, from the Louisiana parishes of Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard and St. Tammany; through all those formerly quaint historical towns on the Mississippi coast, from flattened Waveland and flooded Bay St. Louis through Long Beach and Biloxi to Pascagoula, where all and I mean *all* of the grand bayside mansions are simply *gone*, miles and miles along Highway 90 simply *gone*; and on to Alabama, where the little town of Bayou La Batre suffered some 800 homes destroyed or substantially damaged, and where even in Mobile the water backed up into downtown; then inland up I-59 and US49, through hard-scrabble Pine Belt counties, roadways converging as the storm itself did on the university town of Hattiesburg before barreling on to old-money Laurel and scrappy Meridian. By my count a contiguous area of some 35 counties (including Louisiana parishes) was in the direct path of this storm, the most destructive in American history.

Statistics evoke part of the larger story. The previous standard of a killer storm, Camille of '69 (whose reach extended even into central Virginia, where 113 people died in mud-slides from the torrential rains) destroyed or substantially damaged some 22,000 homes and killed 335 people and left \$6 billion in damages along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

## DOUGLAS B. CHAMBERS

Hurricane Andrew of '92 wrecked some 80,000 homes, left \$33 billion in damages and yet, fortunately, resulted in relatively few deaths (61 people). By contrast to both, Katrina (by official FEMA statistics, and y'all know what we think of FEMA down here) in Mississippi alone directly destroyed or damaged 65,000 homes, leaving some 33,000 households living in flimsy FEMA travel-trailers (with the new hurricane season now impending), and tens of billions of dollars in damages. Overall, the estimates for Hurricane Katrina (including New Orleans) are: 300,000 homes destroyed; 1,330 people dead (with more bodies still being recovered) and some 2,000 still officially unaccounted-for or "missing"; 1.4 million people displaced; and some \$96 billion in damages. In Mississippi six months after the storm, over a dozen counties in the Pine Belt have seen their populations increase by 40,000 to 50,000 each as people rely on friends and family to survive and as workers flood into the region. In New Orleans the population has dropped from the 463,000 before the storm to about 189,000. After Katrina the American people donated \$3.27 billion to relief, largely through the Red Cross; to date the federal government has supposedly spent about \$50 billion.

In the end, however, it was (and perhaps still is) religious groups that made the most difference throughout the entire region. Thank God for the churches, the synagogues, the mosques and temples and all and sundry prayer-circles. And the National Guard too for all that free water and ice when it was 100 degrees in the shade, and for the MRE's that I (like many others I suspect) have stashed away in the garage just in case, just in case, just in case.

Everybody has a story to tell. As I write this, six months later on a warm March day of clear blue sky and everything in riotous bloom, I remember a colleague of mine at The University of Southern Mississippi, and a story of his that he won't tell: at the height of the storm when everything was horizontal, he and his wife and their two young children were hunkered down in their home outside of Hattiesburg – when the fourth tree came crashing through the neighbor waded out to their door, and Brad yelled "you grab one kid – I'll grab the other" and they all made it to safety. But last week, on the flip-side of March in southern Mississippi, when the clouds were dark and low and the wind whipping up, tornado sirens sounded on campus and we huddled on the ground floor, trying not to fear the worst; and I remembered how, in those hot-as-hell days after The Storm, one man in Hattiesburg brandished a gun and shot his own sister *over a bag of ice*. I remembered how the next day I took out grandpa's twelve-gauge and

## ***INTRODUCTION***

put it in the hall, and gave my neighbor extra .410 shells for his own little shotgun. Then I thought of where I was on my birthday, September 3rd, the Saturday after Katrina. Having driven down to Bay St. Louis for the second time, now with a car (somehow refueled) crammed full of donated fresh fruit, and mouthwash, blankets, tampons all from the local Salvation Army, everything that the people languishing there did not have at the time, which was everything but the potato soup they were cooking communally, I delivered it all to them a full five hours before the National Guard ever showed up; then helped to rescue another colleague's house from the toxic flood-mud. I watched as he and his partner sifted through their life, like ship-wrecked sailors on a sinking raft, piling the stuff to keep on one side, jettisoning the rest, and surrendering as unsalvageable a room-sized eighteenth-century woolen rug one had inherited from his ancestors, a goner, goddam. Months later, having stayed to gut and slowly reconstruct their house out of their own savings, and with the endemic "Katrina cough" they took the free Cipro antibiotic (the standard drug for say, anthrax) handed out at the emergency clinic. Everyone has a story to tell.

No matter how bad someone had it, there is always someone who had it worse. For those who lost little, there was someone who lost everything; and for those there is always someone who lost their life. As late as last week, in the middle of March, they were still finding an occasional body in New Orleans – rumors abound about many more. And for every one who accepted some kind of help, there were those who in their own extremity helped others. I know people who lost so much but coped by focusing on helping others who lost even more. In the calm of six months later, many of these stories bring strong emotions. The fact is, people are quick to cry, and they should. In this volume, these strong emotions sometimes bring strong language, but at least the words like the feelings are honestly so.

The next hurricane season is fast approaching. An unusually warm winter in this region, plus the cyclical La Niña phenomenon in the Pacific which tends to produce very warm waters in the Atlantic, portend another dangerous hurricane season for America's "third coast." If we did not realize it before, we all better know now that the Gulf Coast is a littoral of the Caribbean. There have always been devastating hurricanes. One of the earliest recorded for the American gulf coast was in 1758. It hit the Apalachee Bay of gulf-coast Florida and utterly destroyed the old Spanish Fort of San Marcos, at the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla rivers; the entire garrison of 40 soldiers drowned.

## DOUGLAS B. CHAMBERS

But they rebuilt the fort, in stone. We too will rebuild, in metaphorical stone (and perhaps in actual concrete, as in the West Indies generally).

While we have this moment of calm, we recollect the stories of Hurricane Katrina. Through the generosity and help of many people, we have gathered a variety of voices in a range of media. From articles to memoirs to photo portfolios and a “graphic novella” (high-concept comic-book), to poems and lyrical essays. For an Afterword, we chose lyrics of a country-rock song about coastal Highway 90 which links New Orleans to Mobile, by a Hattiesburg songwriter, and if you, dear reader, wish to hear the song itself, then point your Internet browser to <http://www.suzyelkins.com/commandos.html>, or go to our own website and follow the links. In helping to gather and sift through all these materials, thanks are due to a number of colleagues, including Kenneth Watson (English, USM), Cindy Brown (Journalism, USM), Betty Press (Art, USM); and to Jackie Strange (English, Southeastern Louisiana University) for sending us some of her students’ work, three of which we have included – the voices of youthful optimism. There are many voices of this storm, and we bring them to you hoping to jog your own memory. We humbly dedicate this special issue to all of Katrina’s victims – named and un-named – and to all the survivors of 8/29, and its many aftermaths.

In this volume we present a medley of voices of the storm hailing from throughout the South. From Texas through Louisiana, coastal and inland Mississippi, and on to Georgia and beyond. But before you read them, quiet the clutter. Turn off your TV, silence your stereo, hush the kids. Sit with someone, or all together in a silent room, or on the front porch in the spring breeze, and read aloud the following excerpt from Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poem, *Shar* (1990). Barbadian by birth, this accomplished historian and poet and litterateur survived a catastrophic hurricane in Jamaica in 1989. He was in his house, which was utterly destroyed by the storm. Read this poem out loud for each other. Find the stresses, the intonations buried in the seemingly peculiar syntax; tease out the sounds of this, the closest approximation, the pitch-perfect evocation, of the pure terror of a real monster hurricane bearing down on you and yours:

And what. what. what . what more. what more can I tell you  
on this afternoon of electric bronze

## **INTRODUCTION**

but that the winds . winds . winds . winds came straight on  
& that there was no step . no stop . there was no stopp.  
ing them & they began to reel . in circles . scream. ing like Ezekiel's wheel

&

that the valley of destruction filled with buzz. with kite tails wild.  
ing  
tug & tear & rip & tatter up & like old women laugh.

ing . warn. ing. child.  
ren scream.  
& they were really scream. ing let me tell you

as if the lumber in the trees was runn. ing runn. ing runn. ing &  
you could hear them com. ing com. ing crash.  
ing leaves & glass & like the sky was peal. ing off &

there was this like this knock. ing on the roof . this knock.  
ing on the roof & like some one was runn. ing on it. stamp. ing ground &  
bat  
foot knuckles over

it & there was like this rip & roar & tattoo tear. ing out of elephants  
as if the lumbering prehensile thunders of the holocaust were trump.  
eting the roof right off & so they were &

there was light &  
crazy colour of the leaves out. side  
like when the whole house rise to flash & plunder as it floated down the  
wind

with all aboard & shingles.

And that more wind. rip . gust . scissors-howl

copper kettle boiling . boiling . boiling  
over into your ears  
would wait. wait. wait like a snap or a flat rat trap in the streets  
to freeze freeze frizzle out of your head . where you are hoarding its sound  
like a thimble of thunder .  
such limitless size in the so little a room . that you own