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KATRINA AND HER POETS

by John Gery

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that to succeed at being an artist requires the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in the mind simultaneously. Surely this prescription holds for the poets of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast who are living and working in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, in at least four ways I can think of:

1. For a poet to write of her or his immediate experience of the hurricane and its aftermath in prose is inevitable, by the sheer trauma of the experience. On the other hand, to write of it in poetry is, by one line of thought, to be coerced. That is, Katrina (whether referring to the natural disaster or the political morass that has followed) has clearly infringed upon the poet's freedom, much in the same way, for instance, that a totalitarian regime can oppress the artists living under it. Yet to refuse to write about Katrina, for those of us so greatly impacted by the storm, is equally a false option, a mistake, a lie.
2. One bizarre dimension of this powerful imposition of Katrina on her victims, and all she has come to mean in her domination of the city and the coastal region, concerns how the event has created an opportunity for poets—in a distorted, almost grotesque manner—a chance for, if not fame, exactly, a degree of notoriety: Suddenly, without anticipation, as it is for demolition teams and electricians, animal rescue workers and psychotherapists, people around the country, around the world, have turned to the poets, wanting to know what we are thinking and doing. These same people before Katrina may have had hardly a passing interest in our cries as poets against injustice, our wry exposure of hypocrisies, our sheer reverence for beauty, but now, it seems, they are paying attention. And yet. And yet this unexpected new publicity is, as poets should know well, ephemeral at best and, in that sense, anomalous to our real project. So we poets must negotiate both sides of our reception at once, being listened to and not being heard.

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3. Whether or not directly affected by the terrible wrath of the storm and the ubiquity of the flood, all those who live where she passed have been displaced—and this condition, this displacement, has grave consequences for all those who have survived. It may take anywhere from five to twenty-five years before the cultural watermarks that have stained our community fade enough for us to be free to think about life outside and inside. As I understand it, for the time being, we have to choose either to live a somewhat familiar life in a newly strange environment, if we decide to stay home, or to live a newly strange life in a somewhat familiar environment, if we decide to move elsewhere to escape the debris Katrina has left behind. In either case, psychically, we survivors have all become displaced persons (not evacuees, refugees, nor even victims, really).

Yet in fact, most poets are richly familiar with the experience of displacement itself as a way of life. Indeed, poetry itself is a displaced art, or at least a vocation for the displaced, in the U.S. So in that sense, our physical, material, and cultural displacement has abruptly become an outward manifestation of our longtime inner experience of the world in general. Who would have thought it? Who could have thought it? Our new displacement has the odd feeling of a homecoming.

4. History makes it clear that—as painful and difficult as the experience of Katrina continues to be for all who have survived, including those with loved ones now gone and those trying to recover from it—this disaster is finally a minor star in the constellation of catastrophes that arches over both the distant and the near past, from the Great Plague in Europe to the AIDS epidemic decimating the African continent, from the systematic massacre of the Native American peoples to the Nazi Holocaust responsible for the deaths of millions, from the ancient tragedy of Pompei to the tsunami of 2004 that killed a hundred times as many people as Katrina did. But for that very reason, if nothing else, Katrina paradoxically invokes not the atypical but the archetypal nature of our age, the sometimes intolerable struggle involved for a single person, a close family, a small group of neighbors, and a vigorous city just to be human. It is left now to the poets to take up this serious business: not to overstate the event, but to accurately express what Katrina has wrought in us, not to misrepresent her grandeur, but neither to belittle the profound echo of this one frightening moment not only through our individual lives and communities, but into the very hearts of our kind.

Munich, 4 June 2006