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Of Storm and Scythe

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Of Storm and Scythe

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts

by

Gina Ferrara

B.A. University of New Orleans (1983)
M. F. A. University of New Orleans (2008)

May 2008

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For Darlene Saia
(December 17, 1951-August 29, 2005)

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Of Storm and Scythe: Poetry Recalls, Poetry Continues

A native New Orleanian evacuates in August of 2005. She leaves the city with three days worth of clothes, a pair of flip-flops and a small pouch of sundries. Contemplating the idea of taking her entire computer with her, she opts instead to quickly back up all of the poems she's written on to a CD. It takes her eleven hours to drive to Jackson, Mississippi with her husband and five members of her family. Just short of midnight, the harried evacuees arrive in Jackson where they are staying in the large home of an antique shop owner. Rooms get designated and everyone settles in for the night. The New Orleanian and her husband find themselves in a spacious room that overlooks a golf course. The room has three mammoth-sized steer heads, a pool table and a sofa bed. An adjoining bath has a Jacuzzi tub. The accommodations won't be bad for a day or two, she thinks, before falling asleep.

The next morning, she learns that Hurricane Katrina hit east of New Orleans. The house in Jackson does not have a computer or cable television. The owner, a gracious and genteel widow, owns one television which only gets a fuzzy reception on the local NBC affiliate. It seems that the brunt of the storm missed New Orleans but devastated the Gulf Coast. Perhaps, the native New Orleanian thinks, we should have ventured west rather than east of New Orleans, but where else would we have stayed? Clearly no rooms were available east of Waco.

The New Orleanian thinks of her uncle and his wife who stayed in Chalmette and her father, who didn't believe in evacuating, and wouldn't leave the French Quarter.

The local NBC affiliate doesn't give much news about New Orleans. She plays a game of Scrabble with her husband. Despite his remarkable vocabulary, his slowness at forming

words annoys her. She becomes anxious. The fuzzy reception on the affiliate reports that the wind lifted the roof off the Superdome.

The hurricane moves north. During dinner, the power goes out in Jackson and the family eats by candlelight. The rain stops. Everyone gathers around a battery-operated radio. Due to a horrible reception, news arrives in broken cadences over much static. The airwaves almost visibly pop and crackle. A disjointed announcement reports that a levee breached in New Orleans. No one thinks much of this since levees protect the entire city. The breach could have happened anywhere. The New Orleanian decides to go for a walk on the golf course. The air feels wretched and hangs thickly. Toppled trees litter the grounds. The dense cloud coverage makes it impossible to see any stars.

The house in Jackson is hot and powerless. Cool water in the Jacuzzi helps though not for long. The New Orleanian wonders when she will sleep in her own bed, not realizing that she will have this thought for many months. Her mind lingers on her father and her uncle and his wife again. She sighs in the dark at the unknown and dimly makes out the antlers on the steer heads. Oppressive heat makes it impossible to sleep.

A week in Jackson passes. During the week, the New Orleanian learns that her father managed to evacuate to Houston when the police told him to leave. The CD she took with her has none of her poems on it. Eighty percent of the homes in New Orleans have suffered serious damage or worse. Her mother's house has flooded with twelve feet of water, and, her uncle has been rescued by boat from Chalmette. She also learns her uncle's wife drowned after the Mississippi River Gulf Coast Outlet overtopped the levees in St. Bernard Parish downriver from

the city. The New Orleanian buys a red notebook. Tragedy produces autobiographical poetry, and poetry documents history.

###

Yusef Komunyakaa bases his poetry on his childhood in the rural South. He believes that the biggest influence on his life and his poetry was the lush, semitropical landscape of Bogalusa, Louisiana. That Komunyakaa and I share the same landscape is strictly coincidental; however, it is nothing short of inevitable that the landscape dominates his work and mine. Things indigenous to Louisiana evoke the senses: sweet olive, crepe myrtles, jasmine and burning sugar cane. Vivid objects such as these trigger the associative powers of memory.

The poems in *Of Storm and Scythe* speak of family and memory. My time as an evacuee forced me to scrutinize my origins and to rediscover the place where I grew up with its subtle nuances and distinctly physical characteristics. My time away from New Orleans made me look at my family and their deep connection to a land where disaster has always been imminent; it allowed me to recognize other types of destruction my family faced in the past because of war or political upheaval.

Though certainly triggered by Hurricane Katrina, perhaps my preoccupation with destruction and survival is something else I share with Komunyakaa since many of his earlier poems deal with his combat experience in Vietnam as demonstrated in his poem, "Monsoon Season." One can clearly see Komunyakaa's affinity for writing both about nature and his time in Vietnam. He presents the Vietnamese jungle as a beautiful, untamed place while also recognizing the perils that come with it. "The monsoon uncovers troubled/seasons we tried to forget./Dead men slip

through bad weather.” My poems speak of war in strictly domestic terms. I am preoccupied with the home front.

In this manuscript, the home front gets repeatedly examined and presented. The opening poem, “Due North of a Native City,” speaks of displacement from home and means to serve as a threshold for recollection--remembering the way things were while bringing up issues of origin and identity. As a poem of displacement, it also helps to launch a retrospective look at my family.

Of Storm and Scythe has four parts. Each part relates to the self with consideration given to a larger view of the world. The first section, “Alluvial Burdens,” concentrates heavily on memories of childhood, both my own and other family members. The poem, “Nuclear Family Photo,” opens the section. It describes a photo taken of my mother and grandparents on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. My mother “squints at the glare,/and struggles to recognize shapes/in distant clouds.” This poem offers a personal description of a family photo while presenting an ominous day in history. I want “Nuclear Family Photo” to set up the repeated dynamic of the personal and global, as well as the immediate and the imminent. This dynamic is frequently revisited throughout the manuscript. The self and issues regarding it, such as family, neighborhood and relationships, are consistently examined within the context of larger concerns that extend beyond the personal.

The following section of the manuscript, “Nearly Afloat,” speaks about coming of age: focusing on neighborhood, growing up in the South and how the self responds to these

situations. The poem, “Dixie,” depicts a loud neighbor who calls for her dog. The memory of hearing “Dixie” yelled conjures, for the speaker of the poem, images of the old South--weighted images such as the Civil War and Rebel flag which don’t exactly bode well with the speaker and stand in contrast to the neighbor’s glorified view of the South, having thus named her beloved dog in its honor.

“Latitudes of Night,” the third section, offers descriptions of war as seen from the domestic front. The Vietnam War and the war in Iraq figure prominently in this section. The poem, “Flashback to Ursuline,” describes a soldier remembering what his home and family looked like while he was enlisted in the army. He recalls his “father’s worn leather slippers/shuffling over loose floorboards/ and his mother’s widow’s peak erupting in the softest waves.” His recollection is specific and personal. This attention to detail is what ultimately offers him a sense of salvation while he is engaged in battle. The poem, though certainly set during wartime, focuses on family, as well as place and origin rather than recounting the horrors of battle. The idea, in this section, is to show the relationship between war and the home front—people engaged in everyday activities with war never far from their minds.

The manuscript’s final section, “Aftermath,” presents a city devastated by natural disaster and the government’s failure to respond. This section depicts various stages of the disaster: evacuating, paying homage to a policewoman who stayed, revisiting a childhood home devastated by the storm, and, finally, the anticipated return home. The last poem in the manuscript, “Crowned Egret” presents a distinct Louisiana scene but means to convey the indifference nature has to tragedy while presenting nature’s necessary return. The poem offers a scene that’s peaceful, yet for me, somewhat

ominous. In the poem, the sky grows “darker than hushed indigo down.” The bird still hunts for fish in a bayou. It follows its instincts. Nature perpetuates. It is both a source of destruction, as demonstrated by Hurricane Katrina, but it is also paramount to recovery. This duality is a timeless struggle that my poems grapple with.

As earlier mentioned, I share William Carlos Williams’ fascination for the ordinary. Common people decidedly define these poems. On an artistic level, I feel that presenting ordinary people who are often involved in difficult situations makes my work more accessible. Hopefully, readers can identify with shared experiences of war and devastation. As a poet, accessibility also enables me to focus on the function of language. In the poem, “The Tapering,” I write about a high school friend who suffered from anorexia before the disease had any kind of media attention. I can now expect readers to be familiar with this illness. When describing how the girl’s willpower was maintained, I write about “red discs, melting cinnamon lozenges/I saw as stigmata on her tongue.” The image is described alliteratively by my frequent use of “s” to perhaps create the susurous effect of a whisper. Why the whisper? The poem recollects high school at an all-girls’ Catholic high school where whispers run rampant. The image of the stigmata is exclusive to Catholicism, so, the visual impact of the image as well as the sound of the language work together to define place and time.

Williams wanted language to carry the swiftness and movements of the day. He also seemed to merge the pastoral with squalor as seen in his poem “Spring and All” where he describes a place “By the road to the contagious hospital/under the surge of the blue/mottled clouds.” Williams’ desire for juxtaposing the pastoral and urban squalor certainly rings true for what I wanted to accomplish with *Of Storm and Scythe*.

Unquestionably, the Louisiana landscape, as mentioned earlier, dominates my work. I felt that this particular landscape, semitropical and fecund, could aptly demonstrate the devastating effects of war and Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps the poem that best exemplifies this is “Athis Street, Six Months After,” with its image of my childhood home. All of the live oaks are dead, “splintered canopies, limbs fractured./Each house marked by orange crosses/with zeros, ones or twos, those found dead.” My intention is to meld together a sense of place and the gravity of what happened. One couldn’t call Hurricane Katrina or involvement in a war ordinary, yet the landscape that I present in this particular poem with its damaged live oaks, abandoned homes, and dead azalea bushes certainly makes it easy to see the ordinariness of family and place.

###

Hurricane Katrina and the levee failure destroyed all of my family photos. No visual proof survives to prove that we existed. What of our history? A storm causes destruction and a scythe cuts what’s been damaged. Poetry recalls and poetry continues, sometimes accepting the damage and other times combating it.

Due North of a Native City

We share the look of storm and scythe.
Time defined beneath watermarks seen in our eyes.
The lush and tropical, between us, remembered like language.

The long lineage we hold, the knotted helixes,
the inexplicable allegiance to a city
where ships passed at eye level.

Gardenias, no bigger than grenades,
brought us the scent of Eden.

Caught in the aftermath,
we have no place among the hills and bluffs.
I etch the New Orleans skyline in your hand.

One hundred thirty-eight stars glimmer
without solitude, a constellated conspiracy.
Orion's belt barely cinches heaven.

Pillars of charcoal rise from burning sugar fields.
Half a day north from home brings us to
the variegated pitch of cicadas and cows

oblivious to the question
a fervent vesper repeated through the night,
How long before we can return?

I. Alluvial Burdens

Nuclear Family Photo
(August 6, 1945)

The sixty thousand foot
pillar and mushroom rising,
the eventual arrival of black rain,
on the day, my mother, photographed
with her family, squints at the glare,
and struggles to recognize shapes
in distant clouds.
She is far from Hiroshima.

Beside her, my grandmother's
tumultuous black waves burst
from her prominent widow's peak.
The gingham skirt she wears has a slight flare.
Her hand over her eyes shields the light.

My grandfather stands stolid,
the flat-footed man of the family,
ineligible for service or combat.
Is he imagining the blue Pacific,
the three thousand islands that comprise Japan?
He stares ahead yet reaches
toward his wife and child.

The Paper Fan

Among countless flowers, kumquats,
entangled vines, and honeysuckle offerings,
a hummingbird searched for nectar.
Crinkled orchids marked each panel
while allegories and branches stayed
hand-painted to parchment.

Camellias swallowed the black bee,
autonomous, in the endless, red ruffle
reminiscent of a gypsy's skirt,
like nothing my grandmother said she wore,
her spotless white cotton and crinoline as a child.

A canopy of crepe myrtles
filled her room with shadows.
Netting swathed her bed as
jasmine crept and permeated the night.

Locks of hair were plastered to her forehead and nape.
Beside an empty carafe, on the night stand,
she reached for the fan, unfolded creases, tassel brushed,
from segments inlaid with silver filaments,
the air moved as a gift.

Hot, past equinox,
in patterns seen by tarnished moonlight,
autumn couldn't be coaxed
or beguiled for an early arrival.

Red-Headed Child in a Casket

My grandmother recalls
the girl in a casket
but didn't know

when her father, the sugar farmer,
cleared fields

to plant the cane
which would grow
taller than the casket, unearthed.

His shovel clumped with rust and mud
hit roots and cypress stumps,

wood splitting, the pried lid,
the stiff scent of cedar in spring,

glimpses of a young girl, tresses
falling in blazing torrents,
a biblical, burnt-copper flame
extending to her waist,

eyelets and crinoline,
her skin untouched by the sun,
smooth, moonlit talons
curled and covered
by the fury of her hair.

She clasped a white leather missal

split in the middle,
Proverbs separated
by a ribbon with a current

searching for the basin
to empty the alluvial burdens
she carried.

Gulfport, 1956

Near a beach without emeralds
at a resort without chapels
nor any hint of stained glass,
my parents chose platinum on a whim

the night they eloped after waiting
hours for Ray Charles to sing in the fog.
The lights on his glasses
gleamed like gems for the wedded.

In the remote corner of her dresser drawer
filled with penchants, inclinations,
and notions: red seam binding,
omniscient mother-of-pearl buttons,

zippers, locked eyehooks and snaps, pressed shut,
my mother hid her ring from her parents.
There, the diamond and band remained among
the pinking shears, rippers, and needles, for weeks.

My mother's collection of spools unraveled
to a melee of loose ends
until her secret, gleaming in platinum,
could become sacramental.

Sweet Olive Dream

I look for the source of the scent, carry fists of soil.
The dirt spills into an impossible path
of ampersands...and, and, and...

the sweet olive saunters then assails.
Venus appears beneath a shaven moon.

Pin pricks emerge on my fingertips.
Ten beads of blood are bigger than blossoms.
The sweetness is too much to bear.

I begin to weep.

The smell of broken curfews calls me home.
I am late for my mother's fried chicken,
wings, drumsticks, breasts on a platter.
Remnants of flour and paprika--
the powdery patina dusts the floor and countertops
while the yellow-green splash
of succotash appears on blue willow plates.

The black skillet still sizzles on the stove.
I look for my mother.

Some doors stick, others swing wild and widely.

Sweet olive penetrates the windows
my mother has nailed shut.

Stuck on the Same Hour

Despite the threat of missiles arriving
or submarines spying close to the coast,
the stove clock stayed stuck on the same hour
every afternoon when we came home
to the perfect symmetry of blue willow dishes
draining in the red wire rack.

The mixer and percolator gleamed,
then held our distorted reflections, shiny frescoes
wavering while my grandmother spread the pale glibness
of oleo from a tub.

She sprinkled sugar granules
atop white bread slices, the size of small
storybook pages as my sister and I
waited for the taste of happy endings,
and not a word was mentioned about Cuba,
Communists, or the Cold War.

II. Nearly Afloat

Dixie

In never-silent
vowels, our neighbor
yells unabashedly for her dog,
a fitful Terrier, one-eyed,
named after Rebel flags, crinoline
and Senatobia's cotton fields.
Rousing us from dreams,
her voice crosses centuries, amputates
legs at makeshift infirmaries
no sedatives used,
only decibels rising
above transoms and roof beams.
Her voice does not belong
with us on Saturdays,
when the sun inches languidly
above slate rooftops
and brings with it
promises of skinned peaches,
sliced, nearly afloat in cream.

Blue-Pink Portrait
(for Rita Mae Smith)

I never asked Rita about the traffic
light that washed her walls in colors
of stop, caution and go, nor the kinetic
sculpture she made from milk jugs.

She lived down the winding street.
So when she wanted to paint a portrait
of me at fourteen I posed
as a thunderclap, outlined head to foot
in pink, then filled with azure and aquamarine.

My body became water marked
by damselfish, flecks swimming
around archipelagos of pink limbs
without bones or the necessity of tendons,
a blending of blue-pink contrasts
to fusions of dusk and flesh.

The light quavered like my moods,
she said, the same shades I'd find
in oceans and skies.

The Tapering

The year she and I studied church history
her mother wanted her thin. The boys

liked her in the svelte image
she never saw reflected back.

Her face possessed the acute angles we learned
in geometry, cheekbones and jaw lines defined,

the hard edges of a diamond that could cut mirrors.
I watched her body become parts: fingers no longer filling rings,

below superlative wrists, mere knots on a rope,
hip bones with time to protrude.

Her plaid uniform skirt, looser, slipped like an echo
from a well, the waist taken in weekly with pins and darts.

I witnessed her refusals of potatoes and meat,
adamant convictions, a willpower maintained

by red discs, melting cinnamon lozenges
I saw as stigmata on her tongue.

A girl who looked like the persecuted
St. Eulalia, we saw in pictures, our age:

thin, brown, thrown into a pyre
in Barcelona, who dissipated in the fire.

The Ongoing Conversation

The Everclear numbed my
lips, tongue and teeth. Two fan blades
spun over our heads, you on one side
of the bar, I on the other, the night
the plane crashed. No one survived.
One hundred fifty seven passengers dead
I told you and you said, *It could have been
you on that plane, finally leaving this city
where you were born and I was not.*

+++++++

Those nights, I sipped Everclear, I didn't know your
name. The fan blades spun full circles over
our heads. Whenever I arrived with a date,
a different boy, you'd secretly add
more Everclear. Clarity had no taste. I was
an opened mango, sipping one hundred
and twenty proof, my teeth, tongue and lips
turning numb, their endings, nerveless
in this city of my birth, the dates I knew
disappeared between stone walls.

+++++++

In August, after I returned,
I brought you chocolates filled with liquor
from other continents, liquor I wanted you to recognize,
Frangelico, Grand Marnier, your favorite chocolate
filled with Chambord, a field of raspberries
we shared in the bar.
Two fan blades spun overhead.
You said, *Your red shoes look worthy of the papacy*
I said, *Communism is all but dead
in Poland*, not knowing how soon
the wall would come down
in the city where Hitler had lived,
four towns west from your birthplace.

+++++++

On my birthday, decades, decades

before I was born, Hitler invaded Poland.
His army marched into Warsaw and put up
walls, wire, wood and brick
around your mother's home.
Heirlooms afire, the piano smashed, wood
sundered, its strings frantically dangled, the bottles of Chambord,
Grand Marnier and Frangelico atop the cabinet
rattled like three tenses of time.

+++++++

Tell me
tell me about your mother
the name your name
kept secret in your brain
the precious part, soft as a peach it's been years I can only surmise
why should I surmise I can't see your reflection in the mirror
in the pond three ice cubes melt, all the right angles
the three tenses dissolve this comet will never pass again in this life,
in this lifetime where there are walls and cities of birth
why does your name shame you the doves haven't stopped
all day two blades on the fan
is it ever clear ever clear full circle
my teeth, lips and tongue numb, red shoes, Communism
Poland my birthday four towns west before I was born
sometimes no one survives
bottles rattle Chambord, Grand
Marnier and Frangelico
spilling...

+++++++

Maison Hospitaliere, New Orleans, 2002

The smell of bleach and urine leads me through
the titanium glow of florescent lights
and halls numerous as capillaries.
The dining area is the last possible room.
White-haired ladies sit around tin-top tables.
The residents eat meatballs and green peas.

On seeing me in the doorway, the aide grins.
Her elastic reflection catches
on steel rims and spokes,
still and stainless as a scrubbed pot.
The television is perched like a crow
in the upper corner of the room.
No one notices a family feuding.

Visitors rarely arrive on Tuesdays.

I enter the room carrying peanuts
and pears just starting to speckle.
All eyes are on me in a red skirt.
My heels are hard and quick against tiled floors.

Random whispers spread the news: *Etta's niece is here.*

The lady to my left pestles crackers
to crumbs and powder,
looks both ways,
then says to me, "I have a voice
sweeter than Edith Piaf's."

III. Latitudes of Night

Flashback to Ursuline

His parents cried when he left for boot camp.
He wrote letters about being face down in the mud,
doing two hundred push-ups in the rain, and how,
after he did the daily dirge of squats and lunges,
he felt hooves trampling inside his groin.

The army shaved his dark, wavy hair.

He said his tour of duty was made
bearable by his frequent flashbacks to Ursuline:
that street of childhood where clouds
drifted to an idyllic dead heat
against a crescent moon, latitudes of night-
blooming jasmine wrapped
around pointed pickets and
five rooms lined like dominoes in his shotgun house.

His father's worn leather
slippers shuffled against pine boards
while his mother's widow's peak erupted
into the softest waves.

A Postwar Portrait

His skid marks stretched as all-
or-nothing dares in the city
he no longer called home.
After two years, he returned with sideburns
and hair curling wayward below his collar,
his fingers wrapped around the chrome,
skin extended taut over each knuckle.
An orange fuel tank held the gasoline,
marked by a painted flame,
its infernal exhaust clouded hillsides
from his motorcycle,
the one I was too young to ride.
The front wheel jutted out:
an act of aggression, a loud expletive,
a box cutter blade.
His arrival could be heard
against black asphalt and salient skies,
after the war, frayed
denim hems grazing accelerators,
footrests and his heels
mere millimeters above the earth.
My uncle left his fatigues, medals and camouflage
on another continent--
in jungles, verdant and tangled.
He spoke frequently of Death Valley,
lumbering cactuses, sunsets in the west,
the Grand Canyon's edge.

Of Small Comfort to My Sister

Don't feel bad about his piercings.
He chose to be vogue.

The faint ellipsis of holes in his left lobe
will soon be replaced by pewter hoops, a bead,
a cross, perhaps, or an ankh.

The future inevitably fills with skin
constantly regenerating, with the reliability of many layers.

History will only make you grateful for his tiny apertures.

Think of roadsides in Fallujah or Darfur,
rice paddies, jungles, stormed beaches,

where safety is found only in holes.

Seven Layers of Armageddon

He dreams of skin at night,
the hot sand collecting
beneath his collar, finding its way
to the underside of his tongue.
He picks imagined grains from beneath his nails
and remembers a wrong journey in the desert.
If only that turn could be taken back.

His memories of the desert are seen
in the neck's nape, nipples,
white undersides of forearms,
taut stomach, the strong thigh
flexed well above the knee.

The sanctity of skin, the delight in its pigment,
no longer remains with him because of a man,
a civilian, whose skin
hit him from the roadside,
that surprise assault
made from flesh,
a horrific carpet
struck quick like a slap
when that bomb outside Baghdad
left only the bones.

Amber Porch Light

The amber porch light tinged our skin
sanguine orange when my mother and I
stood on the steps ringing our small bells
the night the Vietnam War ended.

The termites swarmed our white wooden house--
frantic, pink-yellow wings nearly translucent
thin as paper, circumventing above us
ruthless vermin, menacing cloud, silent little enemies.

We kept ringing for peace in the amber light
at my mother's insistence, though it seemed the delicate peals
were attracting hundreds and hundreds of bugs
with the vast capacity to devour.

IV. Aftermath

Senatobia

After the ravage and fear,
we sought the relief
of steep ravines
with their reliable red dirt
and colossal pines.

We traveled through the delta,
where burnt-out motel signs
and fallow churches remained
like pages folded to mark a place.

Out of sight of any oceans,
under the hint of hills,
the quiet rise of crops,
of what had and hadn't passed,
suddenly, white as light from the fields,
the cotton loomed,
an untouched apparition.

Athena in the City
(For Elizabeth)

You stayed, rescuing mothers and children,
the infirmed, and those with belongings
crammed into ice chests. Cries of help
came from attics and rooftops. Corpses
floated on one way streets, down avenues
with no left turns.

Your hair became a hindrance.
Beyond your waist, the braid
unraveled into a dense jungle,
especially on those nights following the storm.
Near the nape, tangled ringlets and waves
stuck to your neck where you felt birds
struggling to escape, trapped like denizens
who couldn't leave.
You removed your helmet.

A flooded city could dry out faster than your tresses,
slaked, impulsively scissored
then tossed into the Mississippi near Algiers,
where your fallen strands drifted
with the aegis of Aegean seaweed
and brushed against the rocks.
You stood on the shore defending
the city behind you left in darkness.

Art of the Aftermath

In Gentilly,
everything manicured is gone:
fingernails, chipped, peeling,
lined with dirt and grit.

Even the clusters of narcissus bulbs,
burgeoning with family secrets,
have been swept away,
not by the brush, nor the quick swish
of a straw broom,
but by the brackish water which
breached the levees, leaving
a sullen brown stain.

On one front lawn, littered
with splitting green shelled pecans
and shingles missing corners,
three women like Millet's gleaners, gather,
heads bent toward each
other as they speak of what's lost
and what's left
to be done.

Athis Street, Six Months After

Is it Cerberus who greets me tonight?
Months after the floods came and gutted
Athis Street of addresses
that could never be divided.
Shades of buttermints, single dwellings,
a once-upon-a-time span of twelve houses,
tidy two-bedrooms built after the war
by the men who returned,
houses--wood, stucco and brick--
paths lined by box hedges, azaleas
and legions of live oaks.

Three dogs run past, as tenses of time,
their heads not joined
though worthy of the underworld,
eyes glassy, harrowing,
collarless, hackles raised,
barbed to prick the poignant
on the long block
where I lived, with all its live oaks dead,
splintered canopies, limbs fractured.
Each house marked by orange crosses
with zeros, ones, or twos, those found dead.
The three dogs trample through weeds,
rampant, abundant briars,
past houses dark as that side
of the moon I thought I'd never see.

Southbound

Ten hours on the iconic train
we shared a canteen of water,
before we discovered the four of hearts missing.

The lady across the aisle snored,
her lungs rattling with a frightening hostility,
and phlegmatic unrest. Somewhere,
south of Kalamazoo, I parted the curtain,
peered and saw the blood-brushed moon.
Silhouettes of cows hovered
like low ground fog above fields with crops.
I could not recite lines from Sandberg.

The whistle kept blowing shallow breaths,
and someone, perhaps an insomniac,
near the tracks, ruminated and relived,
threaded the needle's eye with regret,
as we passed, headed back to our home
anticipating the burst of night-blooming jasmine,
aromatic, small white stars
permeating the dark with the potency of dreams.

Crowned Egret

By untarnished starlight,
the egret waits through winter
in marshes, as a monarch,
and searches for comets and bass
beneath trees with brittle brown heart leaves,
their edges petrified, upturned.
Shards or thin sheaths of ice do not appear.
The egret's neck rises above splintering reeds,
and curves like an Old Testament staff,
as the sky grows darker
than the bird's hushed indigo down.

Gina Ferrara works as an educator and lives in New Orleans near Bayou St. John with her husband, Jonathan Kline. New Orleans continues to inspire her. Her chapbook, *The Size of Sparrows*, was published by Finishing Line Press in December, 2006. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals throughout the country including *Poetry East*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, and *The Coe Review*. Her poetry was translated into Arabic in *Meena*, a collaborative journal between Egyptian and American poets. She was recently awarded a grant from The Elizabeth George Foundation and has work forthcoming in *Muse and Stone*.