

MY CONVERSION EXPERIENCE: HOW HURRICANE KATRINA MADE ME INTO A NEW ORLEANIAN AND A NEW MAN

I just saw the world for the first time: the light in this room is a light I have never taken in before: luminous and piercing, it holds each table and chair in an individual nimbus but encases the whole space in peripheries of expansion as I watch.

I will stop there. The above paragraph is an attempt in prose to describe what happened to me after Katrina. I was, quite seriously, changed forever. But first I have to give a short narrative account.

August 30, 2005. The hurricane has passed over New Orleans and, safe in the Episcopal church house on Carrollton Avenue, my wife and I think we have escaped any major effects of the storm although we are without electricity and running water. What we don't know, as the days pass, while we listen to our battery-operated radio and venture out to explore the city, is the extent of the devastation everywhere around us.

When several days have passed and we are aware that no one is left in the city but those who could not or cannot get out—in the Carrollton area some few of us—we hear on the radio George Bush telling us he will do something for the city even as we learn that people have been herded into the Superdome and that the ninth ward is entirely overcome with floodwaters. When Mayor Nagin breaks down in tears on the radio, I sit down one morning and write this poem, a sudden “gift.”

I SEE A CITY IN TEARS

And he said unto me: What do you see?
Then I answered: I see a city in darkness.
And he said: that will not do. Answer me.
Then I said: I see a city in tears,
abomination of desolation,
bodies of the drowned afloat in back streets,
graves of the dead buried above ground sprung
open and skeletons whole and in pieces
set out to decimate the morning light.
And he said: that is better. But what else?
Then I answered: my words are little, poor.
Why do you persecute me to write this,
I, who lost so little, I who was spared,
who drove home to find his house starting back
with eyes none of which had a single crack
nor its head to suffer but black rain
which rose before him in the blazing noon
unscathed, therefore why should I try to speak?
And the voice, which will not let me go,
voice standing beside me in my torment,
my jubilations, all my days before,
spoke again, merely repeating, what else? (appeared in in *Night Bus to the Afterlife*)

We are eating food left behind by the ECW, the Episcopal Church Women, crawfish etouffe, crab gumbo, red beans and rice, bread pudding, assorted canapés, but since there is no electricity the food quickly begins to spoil and we must find food elsewhere. I take our undamaged car out to chase behind Salvation Army trucks which give us bologna and peanut butter sandwiches. After a week, since we are located near that drugstore with a stolen forklift which is subject to constant looting and featured later on TV, we return to our own house. When I walk in the door, I encounter this new reality:

THIRD HEAVEN

Because the spirit, too, knows loneliness
disasters happen in the universe
and someone like myself, smallest of men,
finds grace, a nimbus on the wall at noon.

After the hurricane, I drove back home
from hiding out safely inside a church.
I saw downed oaks squashed across roof on roof
or telephone wires; coming down my street

I saw abandoned dogs joined in a pack

scrounging the garbage cans, I saw my house.
Nothing looked different but some scattered leaves
across the front walk: purple, blue and gold.

I knew I never had seen leaves before.
I picked up one the color of the sky.
I held it while I opened the front door.
But I was blinded. I had second sight.

Inside, no lights, no water but just sun.
Everything just as God imagined it
for me to understand my human need
of the material: nothing, everything

was essential where I was standing now.
Only one thing was clear: someone was in the room,
someone larger than rooms and hurricanes,
someone who shone brighter than any sun.

There was no word for this except the one
familiar to us all: deliverance.
What I was standing in I would call sight
but it was brighter. I had my third sight.

Now, five years later, I still have changing sight. (appeared in *Callaloo* and will appear in *Night Bus to the Afterlife*)

We return home to live for seventeen days with no electricity. Some New Orleans citizens, meanwhile, were making do in their own way:

SURVIVORS

Gagging, bent double from the dumpster's stench,
where I've come to add my small donation,
I catch these two I haven't seen in weeks,
not since the hurricane swept through and left
these, the survivors of life on the street,
slumming sometimes in my poor neighborhood.

The guy lifts a flask as if in salute;
his girlfriend, stoned already, just looks down.
They've found a home, abandoned gas station
where they can sleep inside its looted store,
forage a dinner from overlooked stuff,
the junk food only junkies can keep down.

I don't want intimacy but I smile.
Today they won't ask: What can you give me?
My food comes from the Salvation Army.
Theirs could, too, if they got in line.
I think they won't. It's for the families
along our street without electricity.
This pair knows survival tactics I can't use. (appeared in THE HUDSON REVIEW and to appear in

Night Bus to the Afterlife)

So far, I have left out of this account my relationship during the hurricane and its aftermath with my three grown children, Nicole in New Jersey, Alissa in St. Louis and Josh, then a Junior at Rice in Houston. When our landline phones went dead and our cell phone went dead with no way to charge it, we lost communication with all three children. Our last conversation with Nicole, now Director of the Creative Writing Program at Queens College and here at this conference, ended with her yelling at me as I told her we were

not evacuating, “Dad, you are mentally ill.” Suppose we had tried to leave? Later, reports from friends and acquaintances revealed terrible stories of highways backed up for days as people made their way, without food, lodging or bathrooms, to safety elsewhere.

It is not that I suffered any great personal loss: I was surrounded by loss. Coming back to live in the house I had been in twenty-seven years without electricity made me appreciate the bare bones of the place in a new way. There were no food stores or gas stations open anywhere in the city. We were completely dependent on the “kindness of strangers,” as Blanche DuBois says in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. A remarkable moment was the one in which I was given a cup of hot coffee by an elderly neighbor, now white-haired but apparently nick-named in his youth and still referred to as “Mr. Red,” who had a generator in his house. I felt I had never had coffee before.

Another was a new friendship with an eccentric neighbor, Tommy, who assured us we were safe since he carries a handgun with him twenty-four hours a day and had fifteen thousand dollars worth of guns in his bedroom. Still another was the sometime-boyfriend of a neighbor who gave us twenty MRI’s, saying that he was an irredeemable alcoholic and drug addict and this charity was one of the only decent acts of his adult life. I realized that MRI’s were only given out—as we began to live on them ourselves—on a person-by-person basis. He must have stolen them.

But as Marlow says in *Heart of Darkness* “the real changes were internal.” The isolation I experienced after Katrina made me appreciate New Orleans as a world apart, a place unaided by the outside world but also unfettered by it. The incredible slowness of the place, so different from the Midwest I came from, so European, so South American, had been allowing me to see the world in a new way ever since I arrived in 1975. I just didn’t want to admit it! When we isolatos were left behind after Katrina we had to bond together to survive; we had to pull together. I saw myself now as a citizen of this polis, this city state. For a short time after, I had to live in the moment as many of the poor and dispossessed live in New Orleans on a daily basis. The Sprit of the Place had entered me.

Now I am the city’s first defender when someone complains about it’s being dirty or lazy or remaining a banana republic at the bottom of the United States. It’s home! I would like to think I have my own sense of humorous participation in New Orleans behavior: I don’t just go out on Fat Tuesday as I have for thirty years. I insist on masking. I have even gone as FEMA and, in his second term, as Mayor Nagin himself, each time wearing my clown costume.

The time is now: I am on one of my early morning walks around the neighborhood, walks which punctuate the lines of my poems in my early morning writing ritual. I said when I began that I have come to see the world anew. When I say it in prose, I sound idiotic and simplistic to myself. When I say it in poetry, I believe it. I hope you do, too. You remember that Emmaus is where Christ appeared—as an unknown person--to the disciples on the road.

EMMAUS MORNINGS

Sometimes, in autumn, there comes that perfect day
midway to winter, when the world stands still,
every leaf as I approach it, turned to me.
I am going nowhere in particular,
just down the street to walk with the miraculous,
neither of us in the blue dark exactly awake yet.
These leaves: here in the gulf south they are not
the luscious palette I would have them, but no matter.
Green has its permutations, too, in radiance
seen through the vision of the one who walks beside me,
my eyes His, these morning of Emmaus on my street.
Lord, you are here most when I seek least.
How calm I am, now after years of prayer,
nights my lifelines were lifted to You, my desperate hours. (appeared in *Hotel Amerika* and *Divine Margins*)

—Peter Cooley, Tulane University