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Liturgy: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

Where you came from is gone. Where you thought you were going to never was there. And where you are is no good unless you can get away from it.
—Flannery O'Connor

When I think of the landscape of my home, Gulfport, Mississippi, what comes to mind first is the small tugboat anchored on land just across from the beach. In 1969, during Hurricane *Camille*, it washed ashore, crossing the highway and landing in an open lot. Not long after, someone renamed it the *USS Hurricane Camille* and turned it into a souvenir shop—a reminder of the storm, and a place to buy trinkets, the kitschy talismans of memory. It was still standing, in the same place, after *Katrina*—all around it destruction, the name of one storm emblazoned on its side in the midst of another. An ironic marker of an event in history, it stands as monument to my earliest recollections of the place to which I am native. Setting out to contemplate the idea of home and my relationship to my homeland, I am struck by how both are underscored by feelings of longing and nostalgia, as well as a kind of psychological exile rooted in historical erasure, and the ever-present possibility of disaster, like the two storms—Hurricanes *Camille* (1969) and *Katrina* (2005)—book-ending my past and my present.

Alongside the *USS Hurricane Camille*—the morning after Hurricane *Katrina*—hundreds of live oaks also stood among the rubble along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. They held in their branches a car, a boat, pages torn from books, furniture. A few people who managed to climb out of windows had clung to them for survival as the waters rose. These ancient trees, some as many as 500 years old, remain as monuments not only to the storm but to something beyond *Katrina* as well: stripped of leaves, haggard, twisted and leaning, the trees suggest a narrative of survival and resilience. In the past two and a half years, as the leaves have begun to return, the trees seem a monument to the very idea of recovery.

Such natural monuments remind us of the presence of the past, our connection to it. Their ongoing presence suggests continuity, a vision into a future still anchored by a would-be neutral object of the past. Man-made monuments tell a different story. Never neutral, they tend to represent the narratives and memories of those citizens with the political power and money to construct them. Everywhere such monuments serve to inscribe a particular narrative onto the landscape while—often—at the same time subjugating or erasing others, telling only part of the story. On the wall of a Civil War fort on the barrier island just off the coast of my hometown, for example, a plaque lists the names of the Confederate soldiers imprisoned there, yet no mention is made of the Louisiana Native Guards—the first officially-sanctioned regiment of African American Union soldiers who manned the fort and guarded those prisoners. According to Historian Eric Foner, “Of the hundreds of Civil War monuments North and South, only a handful depict the 200,000 African-Americans who fought for the Union.” This is only one example of our nation’s collective forgetting, and it

Home/Lands.

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serves to fill me with a sense of psychological exile as this proud story of my people goes nearly unacknowledged in so many places around the country and in my homeland. With such erasures commonplace on the landscape, it is no wonder that citizens of the Mississippi Gulf Coast are concerned with historical memory. And it is no wonder that the struggle for the national memory of the events in New Orleans—particularly the government’s response in the days after the levees broke—is a contentious one. Political contests over the public memory of historical events undergird the dedication of particular sites, the objects constructed, funds allocated, and the story that is to be told. These contests, rooted in power and money, undergird the direction of rebuilding efforts as well—how the past will be remembered, what narrative will be inscribed by the rebuilding.

All along the coast evidence of rebuilding marks the wild, devastated landscape. A little over a year ago much debris still littered the ground: crumbled buildings, great piles of concrete and rebar twisted into strange shapes, bridges lifting a path to nowhere. At the rusted shell of the former public library a lone light fixture hung above what was the entry to the stacks, a stairway spiraled up to the sagging roof. Vacant lots broadcast one message—AVAILABLE—on sign after sign. Even now there are houses still bearing the markings of the officials who checked each dwelling for victims. It’s an odd hieroglyphics—an X with symbols in each of the four planes, the number at the bottom a crude marker for dead. Not far away, new condominium developments rise above the shoreline, next to the remains of a gas station, its single overhang, the concrete stripped or gouged, revealing the steel frame, like bones, underneath. Here and there a sign of what’s still to come: “South Beach” and “Beachfront living only better.”

Still other evidence abounds of how slow rebuilding can be. Even now there are whole communities of FEMA trailers all along the beach road, the highway, the neighborhoods farther inland—nearly 10,000 of them still, many of them laden with formaldehyde. From a distance they seem, instead, the above-ground tombs of New Orleans’ famed cemeteries: white, orderly rows bearing the weight of remembrance each time we see them.

People carry with them the blueprints of memory for a place. It is not uncommon to hear directions given in terms of landmarks that are no longer there: “turn right at the corner where the fruit stand used to be,” or “across the street from the lot where Miss Mary used to live.” There are no recognizable landmarks along the coast anymore, no way to get my bearings, no way to feel at home, familiar with the landscape. In time, the landmarks of destruction and rebuilding will overlap and intersect the memory of what was there—narrative and meta-narrative—the pintemento of the former landscape shown only through the shifting memories of the people who carry it with them.

Some time ago—before the storm—my grandmother and I were shopping in Gulfport and we met a friend of hers, shopping with her granddaughter, too. The woman introduced the girl to us, saying her nickname, then quickly adding the child’s given name. My grandmother, a proud woman—not to be outdone—replied, “Well, Tasha’s name is really *Nostalgia*,” drawing the syllables out to make the name seem more exotic. I was embarrassed and immediately corrected her—not anticipating that the guilt I’d feel later could be worse than my initial chagrin. Perhaps she was trying to say Natalya, the formal version, in Russian, to which Natasha is the diminutive. At both names’ Latin root: the idea of nativity, of the birthday of Christ. They share a prefix with words like natal, national, and native. *I write what I have been given to write*, Phil Levine has said. I’ve been given to thinking

that it's my national duty, my native duty, to keep the memory of my Gulf Coast as talisman against the uncertain future. But my grandmother's misnomer is compelling too; she was onto something when she called me out with it.

I think of Hegel: "When we turn to survey the past, the first thing we see is nothing but ruins." The *first* thing we see. The fears for the future, expressed by the people I talk to on the Coast, are driven by the very real landscape of ruin, and by environmental and economic realities associated with development, but they are driven by nostalgia too. When we begin to imagine a future in which the places of our past no longer exist, we see *ruin*. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in my own relationship to the memory of my home.

Everywhere I go during my journey back home, I feel the urge to weep not only for the residents of the Coast, but also for my former self: the destroyed public library is my past—is *me*, as a girl, sitting on the floor, reading between the stacks. Empty, debris-strewn downtown Gulfport is *me* at the Woolworth's lunch counter—early 1970s—with my grandmother; is *me* listening to the sounds of shoes striking the polished tile floor of Hancock Bank, holding my grandmother's hand, waiting for candy from the teller behind her wicket; *me* riding the elevator of the J.M. Salloum Building—the same elevator my grandmother operated in the thirties; *me* waiting in line at the Rialto movie theatre—gone for more years now than I can remember—where my mother also stood in line, at the back door, for the *peanut gallery*, the black section; where my grandmother, still a girl, went on days designated *colored only*, clutching the coins she earned selling crabs; is *me* staring at my reflection in the glass at J.C. Penney's as my mother calls, again and again, my name. I hear it distantly, as through water or buffeted by wind: *Nostalgia*.

Names are talismans of memory too—*Katrina*, *Camille*. Perhaps this is why we name our storms.

When *Camille* hit in 1969, I was three years old. Across the street from my grandmother's house, the storm tore the roof off the Mount Olive Baptist Church. A religious woman, she believed the Lord had spared her home—damaging, instead, the large red-brick building and many of the things inside—and thus compelling her to more devotion. During renovation, the church got a new interior: deep red carpet and red velvet draperies for the baptismal font—made by my grandmother, her liturgy to God's House. In went a new organ, and a marble altar bearing the words *Do This In Remembrance Of Me*. As a child, I was frightened by these words, the object—a long rectangle, like a casket—upon which they were inscribed; I believed quite literally that the marble box held a body. Such is the power of monumental objects to hold within them the weight of remembrance.

And yet, I spent so little time in the church when I was growing up that it surprises me now that so much of my thinking comes to me in the language of religious ceremony. But then, when I look up the word liturgy, I find that in the original Greek it meant, simply, *one's public duty, service to the state undertaken by a citizen*.

I am not a religious woman. This is my liturgy:

Liturgy to the Mississippi Gulf Coast

To the security guard staring at the Gulf
 thinking of bodies washed away from the coast, plugging her ears
 against the bells and sirens—sound of alarm—the gaming floor
 on the Coast;

To Billy Scarpetta, waiting tables on the Coast, staring at the Gulf
 thinking of water rising, thinking of New Orleans, thinking of cleansing
 the Coast;

To the woman dreaming of returning to the Coast, thinking of water rising,
 her daughter's grave, my mother's grave—underwater—on the Coast;

To Miss Mary, somewhere;

To the displaced, living in trailers along the coast, beside the highway,
 in vacant lots and open fields; to everyone who stayed on the Coast,
 who came back—or cannot—to the Coast;

To those who died on the Coast.

This is a memory of the Coast: to each his own
 recollections, her reclamations, their
 restorations, the return of the Coast.

This is a time capsule for the Coast: words of the people
 —*don't forget us*—
 the sound of wind, waves, the silence of graves,
 the muffled voice of history, bull-dozed and buried
 under sand poured on the eroding coast,
 the concrete slabs of rebuilding the Coast.

This is a love letter to the Gulf Coast, a praise song, a dirge,
 invocation and benediction, a requiem for the Gulf Coast.

This cannot rebuild the Coast; it is an indictment, a complaint,
 my logos—argument and discourse—with the Coast.

This is my *nostos*—my pilgrimage to the Coast, my memory, my reckoning—
 native daughter: I am the Gulf Coast.

Nine months after *Katrina*, I went home for the first time. Driving down Highway 49, after passing my grandmother's house, I went straight to the cemetery where my mother is buried. It was more ragged than usual—the sandy plots overgrown with weeds. The fence around it was still up, so I counted the entrances until I reached the fourth one that opened onto the gravel road where I knew I'd find her. I searched first for the large, misshapen shrub that had always showed me to her grave, and found it gone. My own negligence had revisited me, and I stood there foolishly, a woman who'd never erected a monument on her mother's grave. I walked in circles, stooping to push back grass and weeds until I found the concrete border that marked the plots of my ancestors. It was nearly overtaken, nearly sunken beneath the dirt and grass. How foolish of me to think of monuments and memory, of the politics of inscribing the landscape with narratives of remembrance, as I stood looking at my mother's near-vanished grave in the post-*Katrina* landscape to which I'd brought my heavy bag of nostalgia. I see now that remembrance is an individual duty as well—a duty native to us as citizens, as daughters and sons. Private liturgy: I vow to put a stone here, emblazoned with her name.

Not far from the cemetery, I wandered the vacant lot where a church had been. Debris still littered the grass. Everywhere there were pages torn from hymnals, Bibles, psalms pressed into the grass as if they were cemented there. I bent close, trying to read one; to someone driving by along the beach, I must have looked like a woman praying.

Coda

When I sat down—after several months—to rethink my ideas about home/lands in the wake of our marvelous conversations, I opened the journal I'd kept while on Paros and found on the last page these words:

I realize now that as a writer I crave and need my exile in order to have anything about which to write—a place that is a non-place, a liminal space from which to make art in the way that James Baldwin has suggested: “This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate from the disorder of life that order which is art.”

Still, even that non-place is rooted in an actual geography—my Mississippi, my South—locations I can point to on a map. Also, it is a place which has existed in the language of law, of custom—the language stamped, inscribed, scrawled, even slurred to define me and circumscribe my experience of the world. In my work, home/land is a place I claim and reclaim in my own language, the home I make and re-make in poetry, the language of metaphor.

Robert Frost has said “unless you are at home in the metaphor...you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.”

What I have learned here is that I am ultimately at home in the longing for home, the journey, my ongoing nostos.