

"Not what we ought to say": Katrina, *King Lear*, and Academic Identity

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Abstract

In this biographical narrative, Catherine Loomis recounts her experiences during and immediately after Hurricane Katrina and discusses the storm's effect on her scholarship and teaching.

American autobiographical narrative follows a familiar path: I struggled, I survived, I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. When telling this tale, we ought to be cheerful; we ought to demonstrate that hard work, inventiveness, and pluck can solve any problem; we ought to avoid looking at history as an explanation for what has gone wrong with the present; we ought to end with confidence that the future will be bright. I wish I could produce such a narrative about my experiences during Hurricane Katrina, but this essay is about what I ought not to say about the effect the storm had on me as a scholar and a Shakespearean.

Genre

The first time I noticed that Shakespeare mentions the weather was during a 1991 outdoor production of *Merchant of Venice* at the University of Birmingham. In the second act, the wind began to pick up, eventually reaching gale force and toppling the set. The actors, being British, simply kept calm and carried on, but Antonio's misfortunes, the way in which the weather is blamed for them, and the opportunities for actors to make clever use of those references during a storm provided a concrete, if damp, example of the performance history I was studying in more theoretical form at the Shakespeare Institute. The wind and the rain also opened up interpretive possibilities: Jessica and Lorenzo's fifth act rhapsody over "such a night as this" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.1 and *passim*)¹ became an ironic prediction of a tempestuous relationship. I later discovered that new historicist scholars also had an interest in Shakespeare and poor weather because of a series of cold, wet, and stormy years at the turn of the sixteenth century that caused crop failures of the sort

described by Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*² and that underlie the confrontation between Coriolanus and the starving citizens of Rome. And before there was performance history or even *old* historicism, there was critical interest in the metaphorical uses of the storm in *King Lear*.³

Thanks to Hurricane Katrina, I now have a new appreciation for Lear's position as someone who develops a sudden and urgent awareness of having taken too little care of one's fellow creatures — bare, forked, and otherwise. I also share his rage at those who fail to keep their end of the social bargain and his certainty that being abandoned in a storm can cause at least one kind of madness. Although I am not a fan of confessional memoirs, I see two reasons for making this essay autobiographical rather than theoretical. One is purely selfish: When in *Richard III* the Duchess of York demands to know "Why should calamity be full of words?" Queen Elizabeth answers, "though what they will impart / Help nothing else, yet do they ease the heart" (*Richard III*, 4.4.126; 130-31). And that's true, too. The other reason is altruistic: I hope that readers will finish this essay, back up their hard drives, and plan for the worst.

The first time I told this story before an audience of strangers was during a post-Katrina theater performance of storm narratives, and it raised an ethical dilemma for me: in the telling of it, I made people cry. So let me say from the outset that the genre is, in respect of mirth and killing, tragicomic: I am, as my youngest brother dubbed me immediately after my rescue, the luckiest woman in New Orleans. Unlike most of my University of New Orleans colleagues, I did not lose my home, my books, my research materials, or my hard drive when the levees broke. After my rescue, my family took me in, and I was able to teach my Fall 2005 classes electronically from the comfort of my mother's apartment in upstate New York. Upon returning to New Orleans, I was reunited with most of my cats. I was not among the UNO faculty members laid off during the post-Katrina re-structuring. In 2006, I found a visiting professorship that enabled me to contribute to UNO's recovery by allowing them to save my salary for two years. But owing to my own stupidity, I caused enormous pain to my friends, my family, and colleagues near and far, and I cost the American taxpayers a substantial amount of money in the process. These unalterable facts continue to embarrass me.

Before Katrina

When Katrina arrived, I was living in a second-story apartment in Bayou St. John, a Mid-City neighborhood halfway between the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain. A year before that, though, I was living in the Ninth Ward. At least once a week, and usually more often, I heard gunfire, and I developed three habits: I would note the time and the number of shots in the margin of whatever I was reading, usually *The Riverside Shakespeare*; I would look out my window to see

if there was a body on the sidewalk or in the street; and the next day I would read the paper to see if there was any information about the shooting. As a result, I learned to identify the type and caliber of weapon from the sound of the shots, a skill I never imagined I would possess. I mention this now because the most frequently asked question this narrative elicits is, "How did you know it was a sawed-off shotgun?" The answer is: because, like many New Orleanians, I'd heard one before.

I moved to New Orleans in mid-August 1997, a few days before I was to begin work as an assistant professor of English at the University of New Orleans, a large public university that is part of the Louisiana State University system. That first afternoon, as I was moving boxes of books from my car to my office, I was stopped by a thunder-and-lightning storm that struck me, a native of upstate New York, as being of biblical proportions. The next afternoon, there was another storm, equally epic, and we had one the afternoon after that, and again the next day. Occasionally the storm dropped enough rain to create knee-deep streams on the main campus roads. The rain stopped quickly, usually about twenty minutes after it started, and the floodwater, no matter how much of it there was, disappeared equally quickly, a function of the city's astonishingly efficient pumping stations, engineering marvels that took in and safely re-directed the floodwater. I became so used to the floodwater disappearing that I stopped considering other possibilities.

There were other things I became used to in New Orleans: the physical proximity of its richest and poorest citizens, and the size of the gap between their incomes; the need for pageantry and the skill with which it is produced; the respect for my job title and the absolute disdain for intellectual matters; the excellence of the food and the dangers of the tap water. I eventually learned to let the good times roll, pursuing music like a local, saying "make groceries" instead of "go shopping," and acquiring a nearly fatal indifference to hurricanes.

My first big storm proved to be a dangerous precedent. This was Georges, a Category 5 hurricane scheduled to arrive on September 28, 1998. As watchers of broadcast news know, an impending hurricane generates a certain kind of media frenzy — everyone wants the money shot of a valiant CNN reporter being swept into the Gulf of Mexico by the storm surge. I blame Dan Rather, whose career at CBS was a consequence of his coverage of Hurricane Carla in 1961, but Anderson Cooper shall not escape whipping, either. As Georges approached and the media trucks filled the Quarter, I asked a few colleagues whether I should stay or go, and they all said to buy some bottled water and stay, although one cautioned me that I should be sure to have a hatchet on hand to chop my way through the roof when the storm surge confined me to the attic. I treated this as a joke, but, like the Earl of Gloucester, I have heard more since. Shortly after city officials ordered a mandatory evacuation, several of these colleagues called me to advise me to leave, but, not knowing what a Category 5 storm was, and having heard reports of the overcrowded interstate, I stayed.

As Georges approached, I emptied my freezer, filled every pot and pan with water, added my car to the hundreds parked on the Orleans Avenue neutral ground, and listened with increasing horror to radio reports from the Superdome, being used for the first time as an emergency shelter. September 28 dawned a clear and glorious day, with light breezes, although it was a different story in Biloxi. Despite the good weather in New Orleans, city officials forced the people who had taken shelter in the Dome to stay there, apparently fearing that, after leaving the Dome, people would loot the homes of those who had evacuated by car. In their anger at this assumption, some evacuees damaged the Dome, carrying away its bar stools. And it was ever thus when a storm entered the Gulf: hysteria from public officials and television broadcasters, traffic jams on I-10, the most vulnerable New Orleanians becoming villains by necessity, and then no hurricane. The only times I saw floodwater and downed trees in my neighborhood were during tropical storms, especially Lili (2002) and Cindy (2005), about which we received almost no warning.

The Night of the Storm

Katrina arrived at the end of a bad summer. I ought not to say that UNO faculty were, and continue to be, seriously underpaid, but our salaries are below the southern average, and our raises arrive about once every five years. There are compensations, interesting students and fried oysters chief among them, but at the end of the summer of 2005, I was, like many of my colleagues, low on cash, with a maxed-out credit card. Payday was August 31, and on the day the mandatory evacuation was ordered, I had \$18, four cats, and two carriers.

Katrina was predicted to move due west, so we mostly ignored it, and I still have copies of emails I sent on Friday August 26, blithely assuring my friends and family that the storm was on its way to Texas or Mexico. One aspect of this story that the national media missed is that August 26, the night Katrina changed course, was the first night of high-school football, a religious holiday in Louisiana as it is in other southern states, so many people were not home to watch the news. I was having dinner at a friend's house, and we turned on CNN at about 10:00 and heard that the storm had unexpectedly turned north. On the way home, I stopped at the nearest Winn-Dixie and bought the last of the gallon bottles of water on their shelves — seven of them — along with tuna, crackers, and a six-pack of Tropicana orange juice. There was a long line at the check-out — part of the usual pre-hurricane ritual is gossiping in that line — and for awhile I was stuck in front of a display of batteries. I reached out and picked up a package of C-cells. By doing so, I saved my life.

On Saturday, I dithered. My landlady, also a UNO academic, left, and so did most of my friends and colleagues. But I felt safe on the second floor, and safe in my relatively high-ground neighborhood — Bayou St. John sits on the Gentilly Ridge, which places it slightly above sea-

level. In the past eight years, the storms had *always* turned, I reminded myself. The media was over-hyping the storm, as usual. I couldn't afford to evacuate. No motel would welcome a bookish spinster with four cats. I had water, tuna, two Cadbury Dairy Milk bars, batteries for my flashlight, and a hatchet my cousin had given me as a housewarming present. How bad could it get? I also ought not to say this: like Toni Morrison's *Sula*, who chooses to stand on the porch and watch her mother burn, I stayed not because I was paralyzed, but because I was interested.⁴

On Sunday, things got more interesting by the minute. While the power was on, I watched the local and national news, refusing to believe their predictions because they had never been right before. I made restless tours around the outside of the house, making sure nothing was loose, wishing I had paid more attention in geometry class so I could predict where trees might fall and park my car in a safe place. I fielded calls from friends and family begging me to leave and continued to assure them that the storm would, as always, turn. I listened to city officials trying to make up their minds about a mandatory evacuation, a decision they delayed in part because of the liability it creates for the city's hotels and hospitals. I rounded up the cats, all of them feral native New Orleanians whose bodies were telling them to head for higher ground. I filled every container I had in the house with water. I heard the wind grow stronger and made myself a nest against an inside wall, just in case.

Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds do sorely rustle. Actually, a hurricane really does sound like a freight train. During the worst moments, the house shook, but the windows did not break and the roof remained in place. The trees bent but did not fall. The news reports, now coming in by radio, were alarming, but not terrifying. By dawn, I knew I had been lucky, and the radio confirmed that the eye of the storm had passed to our east. The reports from the Mississippi coast were horrific. I still had phone service, so I made early morning calls to all and sundry to report that I was alive and well. At about seven o'clock Monday morning, I went outside to see how bad things were. There was water up to the curbstone on my street, some limbs were down, and there was scattered but minor damage to a few houses on my block. My car had pieces of the garage roof on it, but looked otherwise unperturbed. Everything was covered with green confetti: the leaves had been blown off most of the trees and the shreds were stuck to every surface. I made a plan to spend the day walking or possibly even driving to friends' houses, because I knew they would call and ask me to check for damage to windows and roofs. As I smugly mapped out a route, I decided to try to get some sleep first, figuring that when I woke up, the power crews would be out working on downed lines and it would be safe to walk around.

As I found out many days later, the levees had already broken. When I woke up after a few hours' sleep, the house was surrounded by three and a half feet of water. The houses I had meant to check on that morning, houses I could easily walk to, were under eleven feet of water, although I did not know that yet. By now the power was off, but I still had phone service, so I called family and friends with more blithe assurances: yes, there was a lot of water, but the cats and I were fine, and the pumps would be on soon. To keep myself busy, I decided to sweep the front porch: I knew the shredded leaves would stick tight if they had a chance to dry. The cats came out with me. As I swept, I heard a tiny splash. One of the cats, the smallest, a wild-hearted one named Lily, had fallen or had jumped into the water. There was absolutely no sign of her — no body, swimming or drowned, no roiled water, no sound. After a frantic search and a good long cry, I turned my attention to trying to protect the rest of us until the pumps kicked in. It couldn't be long.

The Six Days after the Storm

The silence, and later the dark, were thick and complete, and as the hours turned into days, so was the smell. First benzene, from the gas tanks of cars and from a terrible accident on the Mississippi River, then raw sewage, then rotting flesh. I saw a few living things in the bare trees — bright green parrots, portending good luck in New Orleans, a hawk that had been badly blown off course, and, unaccountably, a number of hummingbirds. A few more critters were in or on the tea-colored water: a bass, swimming in my front yard; dragonflies; and a very determined Rotweiler. Gradually, I became aware of neighbors who had stayed: Miss Suzie and Mr. Benny directly across the street, a family down the block, an elderly woman on the corner, people in canoes and rowboats. I asked everyone the same two questions: Do you need something to drink? — My landlady's pantry was well-supplied with Gator-Ade and soda — and do you have a cell phone? I was desperate to let my family know I was alright.

At first, it was an awfully big adventure. Mr. Benny, a retired firefighter, taught me, by shouting instructions across the street, how to flush a toilet when there's no running water. It's all in the wrist. All by myself, I figured out how to shower using a saucepan full of water. The art of our necessities *is* strange. The remaining cats were, unusually for them, content to stay inside, and they led me to the coolest places in the house. On the first day, I kept myself busy organizing supplies and moving my landlady's books, papers, and rugs to higher, drier spots. Although the water had stopped about half an inch from the downstairs floorboards, I was afraid it might start to rise again. I patrolled the house for leaks. I looked for things to read, settling on *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, a collection that, I discovered, contains an inordinate number of narratives featuring

floods. One of the local television stations broadcast on a radio channel for just such occasions, and I listened with increasing alarm until, like the telephone, the signal went dead.

By the second day, I was beginning to have moments of genuine panic. I could smell gas in the house. This is because the mains were being shut off, and without pressure, the gas that remained in the pipes was escaping, which Mr. Benny was kind enough to explain after slogging through the floodwater in his high rubber shrimp boots to look for a broken pipe outside my house. I tried to find responsible ways to dispose of trash; Mr. Benny was carefully tying his to a tree to avoid adding to the mess. I kept going out to the porch to see if Lily's drowned body would rise, to see if the water level would fall, to see who was out and about. I read, but I could not write. Without any leaves on the trees, the heat became exceptionally intense.

On the third day, the fires started. From my apartment's balcony, I could see the top of the downtown skyline, and because of the location of the early fires on the west bank of the Mississippi, it looked as though the whole city were burning. When the fires reached chemical storage plants in the Ninth Ward, there were explosions, as well. The relatively calm local news broadcast had been replaced by what remains for me one of the most disgraceful elements of this whole story: rather than an emergency broadcast system, which would have been a useful means to tell people where to go or what to do to help themselves, a group of local drive-time disc jockeys and talk show hosts were broadcasting, saying whatever they pleased and letting anyone who could get through to them on a cell phone speak on the air. Rumors of massive looting and roving gangs of marauders were delivered as fact, and we all got to hear people calling in who were trapped in their homes and in some cases near death, a terrible thing to have to listen to when there is no way to help. We were also treated to diatribes on New Orleans as Sodom and Gomorrah, deservedly destroyed by God's wrath. There was Mayor Nagin's weeping, the police chief's hysteria, and, very early one morning, when a Mississippi public radio station temporarily came in clearly, an appalling report from the Convention Center by a National Public Radio reporter.

The helicopters had begun flying by this point, and I decided that I should try to make myself photogenic, hoping that someone I knew would be watching CNN. I put the porch rockers out and sat in them, although I do not make a convincing Scarlett O'Hara. I made a huge "Hi Mom I'm Fine" sign to spread across my balcony on the day President Bush flew over the city. I wrote postcards to a friend who worked for the *Times-Picayune*, hoping to give them to any reporter who floated by, or to anyone who might later see a reporter. As I made a list of things I wanted to remember about these days, I wrote the words "Where is FEMA?" over and over and over again.

On the fourth day, I saw my first, and only, National Guardsmen. They were walking down my street, through the water that was now beyond filthy. As I did with every passer by, I asked

if they needed something to drink. They came over to the porch to tell me to leave. I was to put on a pair of sneakers and follow them through the water. I explained that I was not about to step into that water — in addition to having a morbid fear of snakes, I also have breast cancer, and my immune system is not what it ought to be. I assumed that within a day or two, there might be boats. Or the pumps would kick in. One of the Guardsman, a physician, announced that if I stayed, I'd die. "They'll be here after dark to kill you," he said. Then he paused. "First they're going to rape you," he said, "and then kill you." The Guardsmen persuaded some of my neighbors to leave, but most of us stayed, sure that the water would be gone soon.

Later that day, we all emptied our refrigerators. Mr. Benny had placed his rotting food in bright yellow trash bags with some sort of printing on the side, and he very reluctantly let them go. The flood water was now flowing slowly from the lake to the river, although its level had dropped only by a few inches. Just as the bags floated away, a helicopter hovered two blocks away and began dropping cases of water and boxes of the "meals ready to eat" or MRE's usually used to feed members of the military. Suddenly about a dozen people appeared, slogging up the street, heading for the food. One man snagged one of Mr. Benny's official-looking trash bags, opened it, and began a bitter litany: "MRE's??? This ain't nothin' but rotten meat! Goddamn government! Sending us meat too rotten to eat." "No!" we shouted from our porches. "That's Mr. Benny's trash!" But there was no convincing him.

That afternoon, one of my neighbors, Tim, decided to try to drive out. He had introduced himself several days earlier when, rowing by, he had shouted a cheerful "I'm going out looting! Anything you need?" When his children got sick, I'd given him all my remaining Gator-Ade, and on the day when all refrigerated food had to be cooked, he had sent his nephew over with a plate of barbecued chicken for me. As he got ready to leave, he stopped by Mr. Benny's house to see if he could borrow a bicycle pump — one of the great hazards of driving in flood water is puncturing your tires — or having them eaten by alligators. Mr. Benny was saving his pump for his own trip, however. I had a pump, though, which I gladly handed over, my Camry having already drowned because the floodwater at the end of the driveway was deep enough to cover its engine block. On the box containing the pump, I wrote my mother's phone number, and I gave Tim five dollars, begging him to call her as soon as he got a cell phone signal. He promised he would, and later had his wife make the call. She told my mother I was fine, then added a long and fabricated story of how Tim had been injured while trying to help me, and how they had given me the last of their food. Then she asked for money. Many months later, Tim would stop me on the street and ask for help with his cell phone bill. Not all of the looting happened at Wal-Mart.

The fifth day — longer, hotter, and more boring than all the rest — brought one unexpected development. At about 5:00, the emergency broadcasters made their first practical announcement: if we wanted to leave, we were to hang a sheet out a window. I taped one to the balcony, and a few hours later, a helicopter hovered overhead. A serviceman stood in its doorway with a case of water, gesturing. I had plenty of water, but I did not know the proper signal for "get me the hell out of here." After much useless gesturing on my part, the helicopter flew off.

On the sixth day, Mr. Benny and Miss Suzie announced that they'd gotten their van started, and that they were leaving the next morning. They demanded that I walk out behind them, donating a pair of Mr. Benny's shrimp boots to encourage my cooperation. I agreed that it would not be safe to stay there all alone, so I began to get ready to leave. I packed a small suitcase, filling it with my remaining food and bottles of water because I assumed I would wind up in the Superdome or an equally ill-equipped shelter. I made a little boat out of a large plastic box and speaker wire so I could float the suitcase behind me; we had heard from people going by in canoes and rowboats that it was possible to be evacuated from the parking lot of the nearest post office, but another passing boater told us the water there was almost six feet deep. I put containers of cat food all over the apartment, filled the bathtub with litter, put the rest of the fresh water in bowls, opened all the windows to prevent mold, wrote notes to looters and animal rescue groups, took my last saucepan shower, and went to bed.

I Am Rescued

We very rarely have the luxury of total darkness in American cities, but that week in New Orleans, we did. By 9:00, when I collapsed, I might as well have been the Earl of Gloucester. I wasn't expecting to get much sleep, but I knew the next day would be a difficult one, so I tried. But at 9:30, I heard three shots from a sawed-off shotgun, quite close to the house. There was a pause, then three more shots, closer to the house. A pause and three more. A pause and three more, followed by two muffled shots, apparently from inside a house. As I found out much later, the police in my district had abandoned their headquarters earlier that day, and the looters had rolled in immediately.

I was certain that I was about to die. The cats had scattered, so I locked the door between the house and the apartment, thinking it would give me a few extra seconds. I considered my options: I could try to hide outside, but it was so completely quiet, aside from the gun shots, that I would have given myself away with each sloshing step, and the street, yard, and driveway were full of underwater hazards. I could hide in the house, but the looters had all the time in the world to search it. I could try to negotiate, but I had little to offer besides a bottle of vodka and the Vicodin left

over from my last mastectomy. I could hear helicopters, so, hoping that the looters couldn't see me, I stood in my bedroom window and used my flashlight to signal SOS. Three dots. Three dashes. Three dots. Three more gunshots.

And then the house began to shake. A Coast Guard helicopter arrived, and a rescue diver named Dave Foreman jumped from it onto my balcony. The balcony sits at the top of an 18-foot spiral staircase and is the size of a modest desk top. Not far from it is a thirty-foot live oak tree, next to which was a tangled mass of electrical and telephone wires, and not far from any of that was whoever was wielding the shotgun. I tried to explain all this, but Mr. Foreman was unfazed. He let me grab my suitcase, and got me to the bottom of the stairs. As I stood in the floodwater, he told me to put my hands over my head, and slipped a rescue ring around me and strapped me into it. He handed me a glow stick, told me to hold onto the suitcase, told me that he'd hold on to me, and up we went. If this is what apotheosis feels like, then I intend to engage in saintly behavior for the rest of my life. It was absolutely thrilling for me, but probably less so for the Coastguardsmen: I was their eighth rescue of the night. We were not shot, nor, I found out months later, was anyone else in the neighborhood, the presence of the helicopter having sent the looters elsewhere.

I was taken first to the Coast Guard headquarters at Belle Chasse so that they could refuel the helicopter, and then I was flown to the New Orleans airport, giving me a chance to see the entire city. There were dozens of fires, and I remain amazed that from that height the rescue crew had been able to see my little flashlight. In the interest of full disclosure, they did not read my SOS as Morse code: the spotter told me they were instructed to look for any regularly blinking light.

Once I was at the airport, I was allowed to use a telephone and was able to tell my family that, despite what they might have seen on CNN, I was alive and well. The army was running the airport, and they were putting people on the next flight out, sending evacuees to cities where emergency shelters were open and withholding the destination until a few minutes before boarding to prevent panic or protests. My flight went to Charlotte, North Carolina. I was one of the few people on the plane who had not been at the Superdome and wound up sitting between a fifteen-year-old whose family had been flown to San Antonio, and a looter who enthusiastically explained that my brilliant plan of leaving the Vicodin and all the liquor in the house on my kitchen counter was *beaucoup* stupid: "They just gonna tear your place apart, baby," he assured me. "They thinking, 'She left this here for us to see, so what she hiding?'" Nothing but my research on Queen Elizabeth, but I didn't want that to be used as kindling. It wasn't: the only things missing from the house when I returned were the prescription painkillers, the vodka, and *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.

In Charlotte, we were bused to a Red Cross shelter at the basketball arena, and I was given medical attention and a cot. My mother had occupied herself with finding out where the army was taking people and had arranged for someone to pick me up in each of the possible destinations, so by noon the next day I was with friends, and shortly after that I was with my family and in contact with friends and colleagues. Although UNO has done little to publicize this fact, the university was up and running by October, offering classes online, and at our satellite campuses in Jefferson Parish and on the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain. From New York, with a dial-up connection, I taught my first, and I hope last, online courses that fall to students who were living in motels, in relatives' houses, in tents in their backyards. Their attitude was that, having shown up at all, they deserved an A, and they taught me that there are an astonishing number of ways to cheat in online classes. But they were also models of endurance — there was a heartbreaking story every time I looked at my email, but most of the students carried on and finished the course. Their needs were legion, and I am not sure what consolation they got from reading *King Lear* under those conditions. Several of them did notice that Shakespeare seems to have anticipated the moral outrage generated by the horrific image of an elderly woman dead in a wheelchair in front of the Convention Center when he has Cordelia ask, "Was this a face / To be oppos'd against the warring winds?" (*King Lear*, 4.7.30-31).

UNO's campus had very little storm damage, but when people were evacuated from their rooftops in New Orleans East and the Ninth Ward, many of them were dropped off on the campus, a former naval air station with plenty of flat but unflooded land. These folks, with their houseless heads and unfed sides, were told to wait patiently, and that someone would be there soon to pick them up. But no one came. People panicked, and began breaking into campus buildings to try to find food and drink. Then someone broke into the campus police station and took weapons. And then we became a symbol of all that had gone wrong in their lives. As a result, the campus could not be used until the spring semester. When it re-opened, faculty were required to be their own maintenance crew, and a recently retired colleague, a woman possessing all the dignity that the word "emerita" implies, had to get down on her hands and knees and clean up piles of human waste from her office floor so that she could start working again.

If you've read the American Association of University Professors' report on the response to Katrina by local universities, you will know that there's a lot that I ought not to say about the treatment of Gulf Coast faculty.⁵ Readers who don't already know the definitions of the terms "financial exigency" and "chair's choice" might want to take some time to learn that tenure is not necessarily permanent employment. I was glad to have teaching to do — I couldn't go back to New Orleans until various bans were lifted and until I had access to clean-ish water, and I could fool

myself that I was bringing a tiny bit of order to my students' lives. But my colleagues who had lost their houses, books, and papers, who had children or parents to care for, who had arrived at their first Red Cross shelter barefoot, were in no position to be putting together a syllabus and typing up two lectures twice a week. The University offered them two choices: teach two courses in the fall, or agree to teach for free the following summer. Other organizations were more generous. The Modern Language Association contacted me with a list of offers of help a full two weeks before I heard from FEMA. My alma mater, the University of Rochester, offered me office space and adjunct work, as did SUNY Geneseo, with which I had no affiliation except the accident of geography. The Folger Shakespeare Library arranged a fellowship that enabled me to have a blissful three months in Washington in the summer of 2006. At the Shakespeare Association of America's 2006 annual meeting, scholars and students affected by the storm were given hotel rooms and replacements for their lost books. Colleagues from all over the world offered help and encouragement.

Coming Back

I returned to New Orleans on January 4, 2006 in my shiny used truck. I was fine from New York to Mississippi, but as the storm damage became more visible, I became more tearful. By the time I got home, I was weeping, which is why it took me a while to realize that Lily the cat was sitting in the bedroom window, un-drowned. How she did this remains a mystery — she apparently taught herself to swim, avoided the packs of dogs and tangle of snakes, ate what the animal rescue crews left her, and used a dead sweet olive tree in front of the house to let herself in and out of the apartment. One of the other cats had met me in the driveway, and a third one showed up six months to the day after the storm; he may have been trapped and then released by one of the animal rescue groups, one of many volunteer organizations that reached the city before FEMA did. The fourth cat, the friendliest, had been spotted by a friend who visited my apartment after the neighborhood re-opened, but he was gone by January. I began teaching at UNO a few days after my return and found I had to lift my draconian ban on cell phones in the classroom because all of us were at the disposal of insurance adjustors, FEMA representatives, lawyers, and contractors. UNO's enrollment levels were, and remain down; the neighborhood surrounding the campus has not been rebuilt as quickly as more prosperous parts of the city, and despite the hard work of many University employees, the amenities many academics take for granted — everything from travel and research funds to hot water in the restrooms— are still not available to us.

Après le deluge, qui?

As a scholar, my response to the storm is to look for its sources, not just in weather patterns, but also in the history of the community, specifically in its history of educating or refusing to educate its citizens. The tax structure in Louisiana is Byzantine, and the state has America's highest homestead exemption. In New Orleans, this exemption, coupled with dubious assessment practices, frees many homeowners from paying property taxes. As a consequence, the city's schools, which in 2005 were 99% minority, are shockingly under-funded. This is fine for those who benefit from a tourism-based economy that depends on a steady supply of people whose education leaves them with employment options like making beds, washing dishes, and cooking food, but this is not so fine when there is an emergency in which people are expected to respect property they have been denied the chance to acquire legitimately. The appropriateness of the Convention Center and the Superdome, and for that matter, UNO, as places to be stripped and destroyed by those who were more sinned against than sinning might have been lost on the national media, but the locals certainly knew what it meant. The diaspora of New Orleans's poorest citizens will surely benefit the cities that took people in, especially in musical and culinary ways, and many of those displaced people are finding that they are receiving far better social and educational services at their new addresses. But many, and probably most of them, still want to come home.

For academics, Katrina was especially perverse because of what flood water does to books. At Delgado Community College, the contents of the library were piled into a soggy mountain that stood untouched for an entire semester; a friend and colleague described this Mount Rotmore as the most depressing sight in a city full of the unspeakable. The damage to the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane, housed in the library's basement, robs this country's indigenous musical art form of a large chunk of its history. UNO's library, whose annual acquisition budget falls below the federal poverty line for a family of four, could not allow borrowers to return books because of the risk of introducing even more mold spores into an already green and growing mass. Among colleagues, lifetime collections, including some rarities, including the things carefully placed on the very top shelf, were gone, books having the regrettable habit of swelling when drowned, causing bookcases to collapse. Virtual books — scholarly monographs, collections of poems, novels, and short stories in progress and not yet published — have also vanished, washed away with the hard drive. Many of New Orleans's abundant and largely unexplored research materials are gone, along with property deeds, public records, and a great deal of police evidence.

Who is it who can tell me who I am? For months I was an evacuee, a refugee, the hearty youngster in my mother's senior center apartment, a FEMA claimant, a charity case, a local media freak, but at least I had been able to escape with a tin box of papers to prove that I was who I claimed to be. My academic identity is still bound up with Katrina, and I have UNO colleagues

who are envious that, thanks to the symposium where I delivered the talk that became this essay, "Shakespeareans in the Tempest," organized by the University of Alabama's Sharon O'Dair,⁶ I can now put Katrina on my vita in a non-whiny way. One way Lear attempts to answer the "Who am I?" question is by saying what he is not: "[W]e are not ourselves / When nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind / To suffer with the body" (2.4.107-109). Nearly three years later, even though news from New Orleans arrives carefully filtered through the *Times-Picayune* and the thoughtful emails of friends and colleagues, I am not myself. I am paralyzed. I am not interested. I ought not to say how hard it is to concentrate on research or to be a visiting professor teaching students whose idea of a catastrophe is not being the first to own an iPhone. I ought not to tell you that I am terrified to return to New Orleans, although I did return, unarmed, in June 2008. I ought not to tell you about the ways in which my rage at federal, state, and local government ineptitude and indifference occupies too much of my day. I ought not to remind you that the city, and the rest of the Gulf Coast, is still in desperate need of federal and state funding for repair and restoration, and of careful oversight of the distribution of those funds. I want desperately for this story to have a cheerful ending where the cast members from the windy *Merchant of Venice* take their bows among the broken pieces of the set and we all applaud their courage and tenacity, but that is not what life is like in New Orleans. The city and its universities remain in need of repair. Trying to teach literature under these conditions makes exceptional demands on the values of the works we teach, and there is not a day that goes by that I am not glad I chose Shakespeare. But Shakespeare and I have changed.

At the end of *King Lear*, Albany (in the 1608 Quarto) or Edgar (in the 1623 Folio) says, "The weight of this sad time we must obey / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.324-25). Having been chased out of my home by armed men, I no longer have the luxury of responding with glib assurances of sympathy when I hear of colleagues who are faced with disasters, natural or man-made. Instead, when I read or see accounts of violence or natural disasters, most of it much worse than what I have faced, I feel a painful and sometimes disabling empathy. But I feel little else. This makes reading and teaching literature a struggle. I have tried hard to mend this, but this sense of being broken and disconnected, a sense many colleagues seem to share, is difficult to shed. Like a lawyer who is convinced that Shakespeare practiced law or a sailor convinced that the poet went to sea, I am certain that Shakespeare knew how I do not feel, and that his late plays are the result of his efforts to give shape to a world whose once-familiar order was deeply undermined, or gone. As I wrote to my students in November 2005 when we began studying *King Lear*, "Shakespeare knew a lot about suffering, and he offers several models for coping with it: bearing it with and

without complaint; giving up; turning to evil; maintaining your values in spite of it; sharing it; helping those whose suffering exceeds yours; and when all else fails, turning it into poetry." At the moment, I'm still working my way through that list. Doing so ought to allow me to give my story structure, sense, and a proper ending. But so far, it hasn't.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition (Shakespeare 1997).
2. Titania blames her "debate" and "dissension" with Oberon (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.1.116) for the meteorological disasters she describes in 2.1.87-114.
3. See, for example, Edmond Malone's notes to *Lear* 3.1; other early comments on the storm as an outward and visible sign of Lear's madness are collected in the notes and appendices of Horace Howard Furness's *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear* (1880); among the commentators Furness includes are Lewis Theobald, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and several nineteenth-century physicians and actors.
- 4.

She remembered something else too, and try as she might to deny it, she knew that as she lay on the ground trying to drag herself through the sweet peas and clover to get to Hannah, she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking. When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested. (Morrison 1982, 78)

5. See *Report of an AAUP Special Committee: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Universities* (2007).
6. "Shakespeareans in the Tempest: Lives and Afterlives of Katrina"; Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies Symposium, Tuscaloosa, AL, September, 2007. My gratitude to Sharon O'Dair, her kind and helpful students and colleagues, and my fellow panelists is deep and abiding. I'd also like to thank Cynthia Hogue for interviewing me for her collection of Katrina poems, *When the Waters Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2010).

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