

Rage and Order: A Meditation on Hurricanes and the Literary Imagination

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In *Lancelot*, Walker Percy's fourth and darkest novel, a movie crew has descended on Belle Isle, Lance Lamar's ancestral River Road estate, surrounded now by refineries and chemical plants, to film an improbable script about a group of disparate and desperate people seeking refuge from a hurricane in an antebellum plantation house, a plot that may owe more than a little to the old Bogart-Bacall classic *Key Largo* (later alluded to in the text). They have brought from Hollywood a machine to simulate the wind, driving rain, and thunder of the storm only to be caught up in a "real" hurricane, Marie, that overtakes all the principals in a climactic scene that remains notably shocking for its surreal violence and horror, even in this age of Cormac McCarthy.

In the previous sentence, I placed qualifying quotation marks around the word *real* because the novel's Hurricane Marie is, upon reflection, no less an artifice, a piece of stage machinery, than the wind-and-rain machine the film folks imported from California. Indeed, discerning readers have recognized that Percy is employing one of the creakiest devices in gothic fiction; Marie provides him with the ultimate "dark and stormy night." For all his penchant for melodrama, Percy is no jackleg novelist; he is fully aware of what he is doing. Indeed, he calls our attention to his imposition on our all-too-willing *suspension of disbelief* when he has his narrator-protagonist Lance, a homicidal arsonist, note that the time-present of the novel is the

shank of yet another hurricane season and a destructive tempest would provide a perfect backdrop for the horrendous tale he is about to rehearse for the priest-psychologist Fr. John, the closest friend of his boyhood and youth: “. . . it would be appropriate, would it not? A hurricane coming now while I tell you about Hurricane Marie a year ago which came while an artificial movie hurricane was blowing down Belle Isle!” Lance proceeds to free-associate about the things hurricanes do to us. Feel free in turn to consider the source. Lance *is* under intensive psychiatric observation, but what he says is not easily dismissed:

I used to enjoy hurricanes. Most people do, though they won't admit it, everybody does in fact, except a few sane people, for after all hurricanes are by any sane standard very unpleasant affairs. But what does that prove except that most people today are crazy? I am supposed to be crazy but one sign of my returning sanity is that I don't in the least look forward to hurricanes. . . . Why should people be miserable in good weather and happy in bad? . . . True, people help each other in catastrophes. But they don't feel good because they help each other. They help each other because they feel good.

In the light of Percy's other writings, we can see what Lance is getting at when he says, “Hurricanes, which are very bad things, somehow neutralize the other bad thing that has no name. . . .” For a time, it seems, they set us free from that debilitating *everydayness* Kierkegaard warned us of, a gradual but relentless deadening of the Self that culminates in a mute despair that cannot voice its name.

By contrast, we do have a name for the tropical cyclonic events we call hurricanes, though the Spanish and Portuguese sailors who first encountered them in the West Indies did not.

Here was an unspeakable something their probings along the African coast and tentative forays beyond the Canaries had not prepared them for. To name it adequately, and thus exercise a measure of comprehension over it, they were ultimately forced to devise a neologism, *huracán*, derived from an indigenous Carib or Taino or Arawak phrase roughly equivalent to “terrible wind” and (some etymologists speculate) derived in turn from the name of a malignant Mayan god of the wind and sea given to launching amphibious assaults against dry land. The mariners knew about terrible winds to be sure, but this was a terrible wind of a wholly other kind, clearly no gale or tempest, however protracted and violent, and from the first, hurricanes and El Nuevo Mundo were closely associated in the Iberian mind. By Samuel Eliot Morison’s reckoning, Columbus encountered a hurricane on three of his four voyages. In 1502, the Admiral’s modest fleet took a beating but survived a June hurricane that struck the island of Hispaniola, while a larger company of caravels, failing to heed the signs Columbus had already learned to read, confronted the storm in its full force. Twenty ships went down with a loss of all hands. The notion of the New World as a terrestrial paradise was to die hard, but the presence of hurricanes inarguably confirmed the universality of the primal Fall. New geography and new weather called for new words, and by the mid-sixteenth century the nouns “hurricane” and “huricano” had entered the English lexicon. There was now a name for this mysterious and monstrous evil.

This business of finding and affixing names is, of course, of crucial importance to human beings. Hurricanes are finally subject to the laws of physics, but our consciousness, whether individual or collective, follows imperatives of its own. Adam confirmed his primacy and stewardship over his fellow creatures when he conferred names upon them, and it is all the more important to give a name to those things that present an otherwise unintelligible – therefore indefensible – threat. Ask any exorcist. Thus our modern, relatively recent practice of personifying hurricanes, assigning them given names. In dealing with chthonic forces, natural no

less than supernatural, to have a *handle* to grasp is an advantage, however ineffectual against the immediate onslaught of wind and wave. To fix upon a name is to at least have something to conjure with. How did we do without the personification of hurricanes for so long? Terrible as they are and inadequate as language and tropes may be, there is something oddly empowering about the ability to speak of a Carla, Betsy, Camille, Andrew, or – to invoke more recent unhappy memories – a Katrina, Rita, and Ike. Somehow we are able to deal with these monsters in ways I do not think were possible when we were confined to speaking about a thing so alien and impersonal as The Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900. Thanks to Erik Larson’s bestseller by the same name, that horror is a bit more comprehensible as “Isaac’s Storm.” Exploring and extending the possibilities of “creative nonfiction” and taking as his protagonist the legendary meteorologist Isaac Cline, Larson succeeds in conveying something of the human significance of the 1900 storm in a powerful and haunting way, and his finely wrought book nicely illustrates the dialectic at the heart of this essay.

Hurricanes do things *to* us and the multiple worlds we inhabit. I daresay virtually everyone who lives along the Gulf Coast has learned that fact from dreadful experience, quite likely more than once. But we in turn do things *with* hurricanes and with the raw wreckage they present us. Remarkably, perhaps inevitably, the human imagination turns them toward aesthetic ends. The raging elements strew disorder on a colossal scale and in doing so effectively disassemble (I refuse to say “deconstruct”) what formerly passed for reality, but once the wind ceases and the waters recede and minimal creature comforts are restored that peculiarly human quirk Wallace Stevens called our “blessed rage for order” kicks in. One might almost consider it a psychological early-responder of sorts. It may in fact be crucial to our survival, or at least the survival of our offended sanity. If I may be permitted a personal observation: During Memorial Day weekend 2009, when my younger daughter was married in Galveston, I walked along the

seawall for the first time since Hurricane Ike made landfall and noticed how the twisted, corkscrewed railings leading down to the newly restored beach (the storm had left only rip rap in place of sand) resembled pieces of fantastic sculpture. Was I finding some hidden beauty in random detritus? Or would it be more accurate to say I was imposing a specious beauty on an ugly reality? In any case, our “blessed rage for order” manifests itself most significantly through story, narratives in which concrete situations and images, rather like T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative,” often take on something like a totemic significance.

We see this principle at work in the remarkable collection of testimony *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project*, compiled by students and faculty at the University of New Orleans and edited by Rebeca Antoine. Post-Katrina, everyone has a story, but not every tale finds a willing teller. An unnamed New Orleans police officer dismisses one would-be interviewer in no uncertain terms: “I’m not interested in talking about what I saw, or about what I’ve had to do, to anyone. Ever.” Here is a case where silence clearly speaks volumes with a grim eloquence all its own, but many Katrina survivors would seem to share something in common with Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, button-holing the first available listener out of a driving need to be heard, to bear witness. The UNO Katrina Project, unlike Chris Rose’s prize-winning memoir *I Dead in Attic*, the work of a professional journalist (however *ad hoc* and harried), presents largely unpolished, unmediated accounts of the storm and its aftermath that by their very unselfconsciousness and spontaneity lend a measure of support to my theory about the function of narrative in the wake of disaster. They are on the surface wholly artless, but nevertheless here and there we can detect the aesthetic impulse at work. It reveals itself clearly in often unanticipated ways.

I would point to one informant in particular: Wayne Wilson, a “leak man” with the Entergy utilities company charged with tracing and repairing breaks in gas lines. As he worked

to restore service after the storm and subsequent breach of the levees, Wilson and several of his colleagues began to take photographs of New Orleans and its stricken neighborhoods. A sensitive and scrupulous man with a commendable sense of propriety (or artistic conscience, a form of self-censorship), Wilson “didn’t . . . want no pictures of any dead bodies” and refused to photograph them (though some of his companions did), but as one reads through his story there is no mistaking the pride he takes in sharing several of his favorite images with his interlocutor: a boat “on top of somebody’s car”; a “whole house” washed into the middle of a street; an area near the London Avenue canal that “looked like a desert” because helicopters had dropped massive bags of sand off target and it had piled up against cars and houses. Toward the end of his account we get this: “Sure it looks a lot better here [in the photos] than it did when you were actually right there. I’m just sorry I didn’t get a black and white camera, had everything in black and white. That would have been really good.” So it seems that Wayne Wilson is an artist after all, intent upon capturing and conveying a somber, literally awesome human experience only to find that his medium has compromised his message. Black and white would indeed have been more faithful to Wilson’s stark vision. Viewers of Spike Lee’s sprawling documentary inspired by Katrina, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, may have noticed the same principle at work. At times, the vibrant color of the cinematography seems strangely enhanced, like something out of the *National Geographic* or a less pretentious travel magazine, and this, in combination with a soundtrack that is frequently a distraction, calling too much attention to itself, represents a failure to deal adequately with the tragic materials at hand, at least from my perspective.

I will have something to say about the literary response to Katrina and Rita a bit later, but first I want to revisit a text that stands as the *locus classicus* in the literature of Gulf Coast hurricanes, Lafcadio Hearn’s 1889 novella *Chita: A Memory of Last Island*. An Irish rover

whose life began on a Greek island and ended half-a-world away on another island in Japan, Hearn was a complicated and often vexing man, but all his commentators, whether given to hagiography or exposé, agree on one consuming passion – a Flaubertian dedication to the possibilities of literary craft. As Jefferson Humphries notes in his fine introduction to a 2003 edition of *Chita* issued by the University Press of Mississippi and edited by Delia LaBarre, Hearn shared Flaubert’s disciplined quest for *le mot juste*. That passion and the skills he had honed as a sensationalistic reporter in Cincinnati prior to his decade-long sojourn in New Orleans placed him in good stead when he came to write about the fabled storm that all but obliterated L’Île Dernière – Last Island – on August 10, 1856, and proceeded to do incalculable damage as it hurled itself far into the interior.

An enthusiastic vacationer on Grand Isle with a lively appreciation of the oral tradition and a researcher who obviously lived long and well with his documentary sources, Hearn has earned high marks from contemporary critics for his sensitivity to the precarious ecology of the Louisiana coast, where the trees “all bend away from the sea; and even of bright, hot days when the wind sleeps, there is something grotesquely pathetic in their look of agonized terror.” Even as “the yellow Mississippi strives to build [islands] . . . the sea struggles to destroy,” and unceasing tidal erosion, accelerated exponentially by storm surge, results in nightmare scenes that undercut any benign romantic illusions:

[One finds] a multitude of blackened, snaggy shapes protruding above the water, -- some high enough to resemble ruined chimneys, others bearing a startling likeness to enormous skeleton-feet and skeleton-hands, with crustaceous white growths clinging to them here and there like remnants of integument. These are the bodies and limbs of drowned oaks Farther in upon the beach immense trunks lie overthrown.

Some look like vast broken columns; some suggest colossal torsos imbedded, and seem to reach out mutilated stumps in despair from their deepening graves

These drowned oaks foreshadow in their nightmarish way the contorted drowned bodies – the “vast wan drift of corpses” – his readers will encounter a dozen-or-so pages on, but first Hearn treats us to a lesson in atmospheric and climatology in which empirical observation and poetic imagination, facts and fancy, take an equal hand.

His lyrical account of the enchanting days of perfect summer, days of languorous “witchery,” that precede (and to knowing eyes presage) the coming storm confirms Hearn’s reputation as one of the most deft and evocative literary “colorists” of the nineteenth century, as generations of readers have noted. No summary can do it justice, and that is true of his subsequent depiction of the hurricane and its devastation as well. Still, in the interest of space, I am compelled to try. In July of 1856, Hearn tells us, “Last Island lay steeped in the light of . . . magical days” where “for weeks no fleck of cloud had broken the heaven’s blue dream of eternity; winds held their breath; slow wavelets caressed the bland brown beach with a sound . . . of kisses and whispers”:

. . . Then one great noon, when the blue abyss of day seemed to yawn over the world more deeply than ever before, a sudden change touched the quicksilver smoothness of the water – the swaying shadow of a vast motion. First the whole sea-circle appeared to rise up bodily at the sky; the horizon-curve lifted to a straight line; the line darkened and approached, -- a monstrous wrinkle, an immeasurable fold of green water, moving swift as a cloud-shadow pursued by sunlight.

The waves take on a new, and to the initiate, sinister rhythm: “Then, just at sundown, a beautiful cloud-bridge grew up and arched the sky with a single span of cottony pink vapor, that changed and deepened color with the dying of the iridescent day.” This “cloud-bridge” swings “round at last to make way for the coming of the gale.” The wind starts up from the northeast, blowing “in enormous sighs, dying away at regular intervals, as if pausing to draw breath. All night it blew; and in each pause could be heard the answering moan of the rising surf” As July gives way to August, the waves run “at a sharp angle to the shore” and in a matter of days the surf is “one wild agony of foam.” The storm takes its time in coming; today we know what that means, that it is deriving more and more destructive power from the overheated Gulf. But eventually the wind grows “weird,” a “Voice moaning across the world,” and wind and sea commence their pounding of Last Island:

Cottages began to rock. Some slid away from the solid props upon which they rested. A chimney tumbled. Shutters were wrenched off; verandas demolished. Light roofs lifted, dropped again, and flapped into ruin. Trees bent their heads to the earth. And still the storm grew louder and blacker with every passing hour.

Seeking more secure shelter, four hundred people gather at the island’s grand hotel for a nineteenth-century prototype of the present-day “hurricane party.”

Hearn recounts the horrors of the storm in a steadily accelerating prose that seems to anticipate cinematic effects. One sequence of “frames” is particularly striking: A young dancer in the hotel ballroom shrieks when she looks down to find “her pretty slippers wet” and the “level planking” of the “polished floor” flooded. Panic ensues, only to be suddenly arrested:

“For a moment there was a ghastly hush of voices. And through that hush there burst upon the ears of all a fearful and unfamiliar sound, as of a colossal cannonade – rolling up from the south Vastly and swiftly, nearer and nearer it came, -- a ponderous and unbroken thunder-roll, terrible as the long muttering of an earthquake.” Catching the full force of the surge, the hotel, the last hope of refuge, “rocks like a cradle, seesaws, crackles . . . [and] dissolves,” along with a “hundred” overturned cottages, “melt[ing]” into the “seething” waters of the invading Gulf.

Hearn’s rhetoric here and elsewhere is admittedly highly-charged. Admirers and detractors alike have characterized it as “baroque” (or, in modern parlance, “over the top”). But he is forever the conscious craftsman who contrives to make style work for him and his larger purposes. Note how he details the inland progress of the hurricane through a combination of straight reportage and metaphor that conveys its awesome force in an understated and all-the-more arresting way: “Before New Orleans the flood of the mile-broad Mississippi rose six feet above [the] highest watermark. One hundred and ten miles away, Donaldsonville trembled at the towering tide of the Lafourche.”

Given its irresistible force, the hurricane restructures the landscape and redefines the coastline, but it is the human cost of the 1856 storm Hearn most wishes to record and, more to the point, *memorialize*, for *Chita* is, as its subtitle insists, an act of “Memory,” an expression of recreated solidarity with the dead and aggrieved survivors some thirty years after the fact, and this “colorist” paints with a grim brush. “From the shell-reefs of Pointe-au-Fer to the shallows of Pelto Bay the dead lie mingled with the high-heaped drift; -- from their cypress groves the vultures rise to dispute a share of the feast with the shrieking frigate-birds and squeaking gull,” and human looters arrive soon after, stripping corpses, severing fingers to claim a ring and jerking “diamond ear-drops” out by force. Well beyond Last Island, the withdrawing tide is “heavy with human dead – passing out, processionally, to the great open.”

Those whose knowledge of *Chita* is second-hand, based on an abstracted plot summary, may be forgiven the impression that the tale gradually descends into a lachrymose sentimentality from this point on and that the remaining two-thirds of the book represent a lapse of nerve or meretricious concession to the popular taste of the period. The truth is quite the opposite. Hearn does tease and tinker with the reader's feelings, flirting with maudlin clichés, yet in the end he is unflinchingly tough-minded. Had father and daughter, torn apart by the storm that killed the mother, been finally reunited and gone on to live happily ever after, we would indeed have cause to accuse the author of bad faith, but that tender satisfaction is denied us. Hearn seems to be saying that hurricanes, even in the long run, are never "over" once and for all. They admit of no tidy solutions, and neither does life, a constant (losing) struggle with mortality. Like the admirable young physician Julien, you can survive the storm and even the bloody battle of Chancellorsville only to be carried off by yellow fever while on a mission of mercy, the victim of a random mosquito bite. For Hearn, we occupy a world of radical contingency and death has many avenues, ranging from a monster hurricane to a micro-organism. No one leaves here alive.

Chita continues to draw a responsive audience because Hearn treats his *donnée*, the catastrophe at Last Island (and its long aftermath), with the aesthetic *and* intellectual integrity it deserves, and he affords the victims a dignity that is rooted at once in the mundane and the numinous. Much the same might be said of an equally distinguished piece of hurricane fiction, Shirley Anne Grau's *The Hard Blue Sky*, first published in 1958 and now available from the LSU Press in its Voices of the South series. In terms of length, style, and substance, Grau's novel, set on Isle aux Chiens, is a very different kind of book, though one could argue that a subtle intertextual commerce exists between the two. I won't presume to explore that line of inquiry here, though Grau's spare, precise descriptions of the Louisiana wetlands (the "prairie tremblant") and its attendant flora, fauna, and weather, correspond in certain suggestive ways to

Hearn's lush, impressionistic treatment of the same material in roughly parallel passages and her character Annie Landry might well be the golden-haired Chita in another avatar. What I find most striking about *The Hard Blue Sky* is that it is a hurricane novel without a hurricane. I confess that is not quite accurate. What I should say is that the novel ends before the storm arrives in full force. The islanders, whose ancestors, we are told, have lived and died with hurricanes for two centuries, follow a time-honored ritual. While able-bodied men struggle to take the all-important fishing boats out of harm's way, women, children, and the old batten down as best they can, some turning to prayer, some to drink. But these preparations take up a mere dozen or so pages out of a novel of nearly five-hundred. The book concludes with these lines: "The clouds shifted and swirled and darkened to a kind of dull greenish color. Under them the winds were very much higher." Out of context, the tone is flat, matter-of-fact, but the effect could not be more tense and sinister. H. P. Lovecraft once observed that it is what we don't see that most frightens us, and that is part of it, but there is more at work here. Grau has prepared her reader for this culminating moment, not simply through flashbacks to earlier storms, but by managing to make the reader care about a sweeping array of characters who are for the most part unlovely, if not wholly unlovable. Her islanders are given over to ignorance, violence, lust, hatred, and the general abuse of themselves and others, but they are capable at their best of intellectual curiosity, compassion, self-sacrifice, love, and communion. In short, they are no more nor less human than we are, and thus we shudder at what confronts them, offstage as it were. The final power of Grau's book is in its very open-endedness, its capacity to capitalize artistically on what is left unsaid.

I know of at least two post-Katrina novels that will likely find a permanent place in the canon of hurricane literature. They are radically difference productions, but they share with *Chita* and *The Hard Blue Sky* a sense of the awesome power of nature and a corresponding

awareness of the fragility of human life and human aspirations. The first of these, Frederick Barthelme's *Waveland*, takes us back in certain ways to Walker Percy, with whom this essay began. As Barthelme knows, the physical disaster that struck the Mississippi Gulf Coast at the end of August 2005 followed upon a previous metaphysical disaster of longstanding duration, the slow but steady ascendancy of what Thoreau famously termed "quiet desperation" (a phrase Kierkegaard himself might have envied). Long before Katrina reduced their homes and businesses to rubble and shattered their lives and dreams (such as they were), the denizens of Waveland (a microcosm of the postmodern western world) had lapsed into a diminished state of soul characterized by a loss of self and self-direction and an incapacity for even the most basic intersubjective relationships. They go about their quotidian rounds pursuing a compulsive consumerism that leaves them dispossessed, their only reality the virtual reality of wide-screen cable television, the PC, and iPod. Whatever pleasures they experience along the way – sexual, gastronomic, or otherwise – are passionless, a momentary stay against tedium. But the storm provides a catalyst of sorts for Barthelme's protagonist Vaughan Williams and his lover Greta Del Mar, who eventually occupy, acquire, and restore a ruined beach house, putting considerable sweat-equity into it (which is to say they *invest themselves*). In Percyean terms, Vaughan and Greta are – without quite knowing it – coming to life anew, pursuing what amounts to love in the psychic ruins of a post-apocalyptic landscape in which the surreal is mundane and the mundane surreal, and the novel concludes on a surprisingly hopeful note, with old family curses dispelled and the glory of the created world made manifest once again. I have no notion what Barthelme's formal relationship with the Church may be at present and would never presume to guess, but *Waveland* is unmistakably a novel of Augustinian yearning in which the possibility of grace is never withdrawn and confession and absolution are more than metaphors. The sensibility here is profoundly Catholic, and the same can be said for a second post-Katrina, post-Rita novel of

genuine distinction, James Lee Burke's *The Tin Roof Blowdown*.

Burke, a literary favorite son of South Louisiana, is of course best known for his series of hard-boiled detective novels featuring the battered New Iberia crime-fighter Dave Robicheaux, a recovering alcoholic, traumatized Vietnam vet, and antinomian Catholic who craves nothing more than peace and order but who is perhaps only too ready to lend himself to violence and chaos, and *The Tin Roof Blowdown* is a continuation of the Robicheaux saga. Katherine Anne Porter, that writer's writer, once disparaged mystery fiction by observing that it is a "perfect way to kill time for those who prefer their time dead." That hardly applies in the case of James Lee Burke, whose crime novels entertain to be sure, but simultaneously induce the reader to meditate seriously on first and last things. Burke may indeed work within a frame of generic conventions, but he is no more constricted by them than Gerard Manley Hopkins was by the sonnet form. In keeping with its religious subtext and reflecting its author's mystical intimations, the explicit "centerpiece" of *Tin Roof* is a character who is in fact killed off early on, the "junkie-priest" Jude LeBlanc, Burke's cajun equivalent to the whiskey-priest in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. Fr. Jude dies as he tries to save his congregants from rising water in the Lower Ninth Ward, and his martyrdom becomes a *leit motif* knitting together the novel's ultimately convergent strands of plot. In the past, Burke has often fashioned his detective fiction with an eye on the headlines, but Katrina and Rita furnish him with material that transcends topicality, and *Tin Roof* may well prove to be his masterpiece. In sustained passages of factual description, a kind of heightened reportage, Burke presents the immense damage, disorder, and suffering in the wake of those storms in a way that makes the "instant history" of Douglas Brinkley's *The Great Deluge* and Jed Horne's *Breach of Faith* – books that have their value – seem oddly dated. A brief case in point:

Charity and Baptist Memorial hospitals had become necropolises.

The bottom floors were flooded, and gangbangers turned over rescue boats that were trying to evacuate the patients. Without electricity or ice or unspoiled food or running water, hospital personnel were left to care for the most helpless of their wards – trauma victims with fresh gunshot wounds, those whose bodily functions depended entirely upon machines, patients who had just had organs surgically removed, and the most vulnerable, the aged and terrified, all of it inside a building that was cooking in its own stink.

Burke's depiction of squalid conditions at the Convention Center, the ubiquity of drowned bodies, and instances of looting and arson haunt the reader's imagination long after the book is closed. There is simply nothing to compare with it in Brinkley or Horne – or Spike Lee.

Katrina and Rita have occasioned an unprecedented outpouring of hurricane poetry – some of it quite good, much of it very bad, the bulk of it indifferent. For the most part, it comes to us in pre-packaged form through special issues of journals like the Fall 2006 *Callaloo* or anthologies like *Hurricane Blues*, co-edited by Philip C. Kolin and Susan Swartwout, a volume that may be regarded as representative of the genre. *Hurricane Blues* is a decidedly mixed bag, with poems ranging from devout to blasphemous, from lyrical celebration to bitter rage. The work of Catharine Savage Brosman, Janet McCann, and Stella Nesanovich is verse of a high order, but too many of the poems are compromised by a reliance on a ready-made ideology. While anger *per se* may be an altogether appropriate response to the maddening synthesis of natural catastrophe and human malfeasance that was Katrina, many of these poets seem more eager to flash their progressive *bona fides* than to engage with the material on its own complex and problematic terms. As a consequence, their poems are stillborn. Indeed, Fred Chappell,

arguably the most distinguished contributor to Kolin and Swartwout's anthology, has written one of the weakest poems in the lot. "The Grateful Gratitude Blues" aims at satire, but drops far short of the mark.

David Middleton is not included in *Hurricane Blues*, but he too is a poet of distinction. Many regard him as Louisiana's *ex officio* laureate. His formative years in the Anglo-Protestant north of the state and over three decades of living, teaching, and writing in the French-Catholic south enable him to explore the defining polarities of Louisiana culture, history, and topography in a virtually unique way. Middleton is an uncompromising formalist whose sane, balanced craftsmanship sets his hurricane poetry apart from the sound and fury that generally prevails. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that he is also my brother-in-law, but to his credit Middleton has not allowed that liability to keep him back, a sign of courage in the presence of adversity.) Two of his poems are worthy of note here. "Hurricane," included in Middleton's 1999 collection *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (and revised and reissued under the title "Katrina's Song"), is something of a *tour de force*, cast in forceful blank verse punctuated at strategic points with couplets, but I am particularly struck by his less ambitious "Hurricane Baby," published in the May 2009 number of POEM magazine. In a mere twelve lines (six couplets), Middleton describes a man and woman who have weathered a storm and now lie abed "in the golden afterglow" of its passing. Deprived of electrical power – its comforts *and* distractions – they, as so many have done and will do, turn from disaster to one another in an act of love (a "storm" of a different kind) and conceive a child, a life-affirming rejoinder to the death and destruction around them, living testimony to humankind's resilience and refusal to settle for defeat and despair.

One final case in point: Down the Bayou from David Middleton's headquarters at Nicholls State University is the settlement of Galliano, Louisiana, a scant three feet above sea

level at its driest point and the birthplace of Martha Serpas, a poet Harold Bloom, the Dr. Johnson of our time, values highly. An elegist of the doomed wetlands, Serpas has made the watery world of the lower Lafourche country the undisputed demesne of her imagination. It is a place defined and dominated by the Gulf, “That old Adversary” and “succoring Mother” who, in the fullness of time, “will carry the whole of us away” (“*Fais Do-Do*”). Her poem “Ghost Trees: *Pointe Aux Chênes, LA*” is as fine a piece of evocation as anything in *Chita* or *The Hard Blue Sky*, and “Reburial at Sea” – set in the dissolving cemetery at Leeville – is a minor masterpiece. The title poem of her collection *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (2007) will surely find a permanent place in the literature of Gulf Coast hurricanes. It is a striking reminder of how technology breeds complacency while nature will work its will, scornful of all expectations.

I wish to conclude this mediation on hurricanes and the literary imagination on a personal note. On a shelf in my home in Texas stands a *well-turned* wooden bowl, the gift of yet another of my brothers-in-law, Burton Cestia, who practices law in New Iberia with a kinsman of James Lee Burke. The bowl seems patterned along the lines of a light and delicate piece of Acoma pottery. There is a quality about it not unlike the “stillness” of the Chinese jar in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, but it has its origins in elemental violence. Years ago, Hurricane Andrew shattered the living tree that had been its first home, but then a master artisan named Meyers took a chunk of the debris and literally *turned* it into a beautiful thing. I regard the bowl and this little anecdote as emblematic. Writers like Hearn, Grau, Barthelme, Burke, Middleton, and Serpas turn the malevolent power of hurricanes toward aesthetic ends. To be sure, whatever beauty such storms may yield is a “terrible beauty,” but it catches us up nonetheless. Our “blessed rage for order” can, on rare occasions and for a moment or two, still the wind and waves.

