After the Storm
Recent Books on Hurricane Katrina
By Joelle Biele

When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina, Interview-poems by Cynthia Hogue, Photographs by Rebecca Ross. University of New Orleans Press, 2010, 128 pp., $24.95.

Colosseum, by Katie Ford. Graywolf Press, 2008, 60 pp., $15.00

Blood Dazzler, by Patricia Smith. Coffee House Press, 2008, 90 pp., $16.00.

Hurricane Party, by Alison Pelegrin. University of Akron Press, 2012, 63 pp., $14.95.

Arlene. Bret. Cindy. Dennis. Beginning on June 1 and ending on December 30, the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season was the most active in recorded history. *Harvey. Irene. Jose. Katrina.* Of the twenty-seven named storms that moved up and down the East Coast and crisscrossed the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina is the hurricane we remember. That last week of August, we all watched Katrina cross our television screens and listened to alarm bells slowly ring. Then, on Monday, August 29, at 6:10 a.m., Katrina, a Category 4 storm with winds of 145 mph, made landfall sixty miles southeast of New Orleans, inundating Louisiana's marshy coast. Within the hour, the flooding of New Orleans began, and it continued for the next three and a half days. Before the storm, people described the sky as an awful shade of orange. After the storm, they say there was nothing but silence. They describe smashed cars, empty refrigerators, pulpy belongings, their houses covered with mold. Across the region, over 2,500 people were dead or missing, 275,000 homes were destroyed, and 400,000 jobs were lost. Six and a half years later, the Gulf Coast is still rebuilding. The books under discussion here all share similar concerns: survival, ruin, rebirth. Taken together they create a compelling portrait of New Orleans and its people and complicate our understanding of how some of the city's communities experienced Katrina and its aftermath.

I

When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina features poems by Cynthia Hogue and photographs by Rebecca Ross, revealing the rupture and grief that followed the storm. Shaped from extensive interviews with thirteen survivors who resettled in Arizona, where Hogue and Ross live, the poems and photos show great compassion for the evacuees. In condensing the lengthy interviews, Hogue chooses to preserve moments when she is directly addressed and puts her subjects' laughter in brackets, reminding readers that these New Orleanians are speaking for themselves. She retains the evacuees' use of metaphor, imagery, and repetition and uses line breaks to pull out rhetorical patterns and highlight direct speech. Not only is *When the Water Came* a book of great generosity, it also serves as a moving historical record of Katrina's survivors.

The thirteen evacuees Hogue interviews come from a cross-section of the city. They are black and white, young and old. While some left before Katrina struck, others stayed behind, attending a hurricane party, sitting in the hospital with a newborn son. Two were rescued by helicopter, while another got out of his wheelchair, swam to an overpass where he stayed for the next seven days, and saw a woman fall from a helicopter harness. The evacuees' stories counteract the ones that dominated the mainstream media's coverage of the storm. Artist James Davidson says the New Orleans portrayed on CBS's *Sixty Minutes* was a myth. The program depicted the city as:

> one big party, musicians
> on every street corner, booze
> all the time. I was so angry
> because that city never existed.
> That isn't the city we lost.

In these interviews, readers hear about pets lost and found, advice evacuees received from their friendly neighborhood looters, the militarization of the city, and the maltreatment residents received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and their insurance companies. Instead of reducing New Orleans to America's on-again/off-again murder capital where Bacchus and Zulu rule the day, *When the Water Came* concentrates on the Crescent City's shrinking middle class.

One of the book's reccurring subjects is race and the Black community's distrust of the white establishment, which, disaster-wise, goes back to the Great Flood of 1927 when the white city fathers dynamited the levees to protect their business interests. Owing to the explosive sounds booming through the Lower Ninth Ward in the hours after Katrina struck, some African-American residents believed that the dynamiting was happening again. There are also stories of racial violence. One of the evacuees, Catherine Loomis, a white woman, expresses her dismay over radio reports that she believed made an already difficult situation worse. The jazz trumpet player Kid Merv remarks on the federal government's slow response:

> Had it been in Nebraska or Idaho,
> everybody would have been rescued,
> given thousands of dollars to start over.
>
> *This is the land of the free.*

A number of African-Americans in the book refer specifically to the troubles at the Superdome. One woman believes the stories about rampant violence and rape, while another man muses on how people behave in extremely difficult circumstances. Richard Lyons, a Vietnam veteran, states that stories about how those in the dome were treated by the authorities will never appear in the news: "Blame the … / I'm going to leave it at that." Lyons, like others in *When the Water Came*, is hyper-aware of how Katrina has been shaped and is wary of those doing the telling.

Hogue's use of form makes the evacuees' loss palpable. Here's an example from her interview with Miriam Youngerman Miller, who lived in Gentilly, the racially diverse neighborhood next to the breached London Avenue Canal:

> When I turned up Charlotte Drive to go home,
> you know, a last time, I passed my next door neighbor,
> the one closer to Fillmore than I.
> There as a big sign in front—
> "This house sheltered a family for forty years"—
> and when I saw it I cried.

Hogue's indentations and dashes may suggest Miller's going deeper into memory. Hogue's respect for the evacuees is particularly evident in her maintenance of regular left margins when the evacuees are expressing difficult emotions. Take this passage from Hogue's interview with writer Sally Cole, who lived in Lakeview where the breach of the 17th Street Canal flooded the neighborhood in a matter of minutes:

> We weren't at the Superdome. We
>
> didn't lose family. We
> hurt ourselves because we
> didn't suffer enough.

These lines are heartbreaking, and Hogue's restraint makes them all the more so. Today Cole's Memphis Street home is simply a grassy lot.

II

In *Colosseum*, Katie Ford also writes about the psychological toll of experiencing the storm. Opening with the prelude "Beirut," the speaker reveals her belief that she was destined to live through disaster and bear witness to suffering. Ruin surrounds her: "For thirty years the people of my life lived. / Then thousands around me drowned." Like the locusts in Plato's *Phaedrus* who heard "the song of the world," she too must sing. Later the speaker says she evacuated, as Ford did, while continuing to suggest she was present. The split makes for the book's dissonance. As in *Deposition* (2002), Ford's speaker struggles with a desire to make meaning. Echoing Biblical themes throughout the book, the speaker struggles under the weight of Christian narrative, ultimately allowing it to shape her interpretation of events. The speaker, for all her questioning, cannot let go.

The first section of the book, a sequence of ten poems titled "Storm," begins with a radio report announcing the arrival of Katrina's "killing wind." It ends with the hurricane's ravaging aftershocks. The speaker's beliefs shaken, she shoots an empty gun at crows. In the section's first poem, "Flee," the speaker interprets the light as a "sign," believing there is some larger "lesson" to be learned from the storm. The light represents a powerful force that does not involve itself in human affairs. When the hurricane plows into New Orleans, people cry out for help, but the light simply shines or comes back with this rebuke:

what do you expect me to do

I am not human

I gave you each other
so save each other.

The speaker cannot decide whether or not the light is natural, and if not, what it means. By ending "Flee" with the light's reproach, the speaker seems to settle on the light as a judge who does not intervene. As roofs tear off buildings and the wind rattles the Superdome, the light admonishes humanity but does not come to its aid. Instead, it reminds the people that they are their brothers' keepers. They should not wait for rescue; they should save one another, even if saving one another is, at this moment, impossible.

The same authoritative tone marks the voice coming through the radio. It resembles the voice of a preacher standing in a pulpit, addressing a worried congregation. In "Tell Us," the radio informs listeners that after the storm something akin to judgment day will come. The radio tells them they will stand naked before the storm's eye, a moment for which they cannot prepare. In "Rarely," the voice orders the radio audience to pack its valuables and find something in which to believe.

Take your rarities.
Take your household gods.

If you have no gods:
make them.

The light and radio work with and against the speaker's agency. She can and cannot take action. She can prepare for the storm by buying tarps and lanterns, but they will prove useless. She can solidify her belief in a larger, controlling power, but it will not come to her aid. The speaker finds herself alone.

The speaker's crisis comes to the fore in "He Said," in which a man references Christian texts to justify violence. During a brief conversation, the man tells the speaker about unreported murders he condones: "That city needed a good cleaning." Incredulous, the speaker asks him to tell her more. He says, "don't worry […] not the innocent

ones." The man's comments are similar to those that were broadcast on talk-radio and posted on blogs by Christian fundamentalists who believed Hurricane Katrina, like the AIDS crisis, had been ordained by God to punish the city for its gay population. Reverend Billy Graham's son Franklin said, "This happens when we have taken God out of our schools and out of our society," as though New Orleans needed to be purified for its sins like Old Testament cities that were flooded, burned, or otherwise wrecked; as in the end times, the innocent are spared and the wicked punished. Deborah Green in *When the Water Came* shares similar sentiments about those who drowned; those who did not die were in the Lord's grace: "I seen angels so I know." Ford's use of enjambment in "He Said" highlights the speaker's distress over the man's interpretation of events. She is haunted by the man's understanding of god's role in the storm and the subsequent violence.

"Ark" comments upon the role of power and the individual's relationship to it in the evacuation of the Gulf Coast. Showing a strong attraction to the rhetorical devices used in Christian sermons, particularly proclamations, the speaker begins, "We love the stories of the flood and the few / told to prepare in advance by their god."

The use of the royal "we" is risky. In one sense, the "we" is simply the speaker's "I." But the "we" can also be read as we-consumers-of-the-twenty-four-hour-media, we-lovers-of-apocalyptic-stories, we-readers-of-this-book. If we read the "we" that way, then the "few told to prepare in advance," could be understood as those citizens who left the coast as the eye of the storm approached and "their god" the government. The difficult thing about putting Katrina inside the story of Noah is that news about the approaching storm was conflicting. The situation was not a division of the good favored by god and the evil left to die, but one between people who had the luck to live in areas where local officials had the foresight to announce mandatory evacuations relatively early, those who did not. The poem continues, "In that story, the saved are / always us, meaning: / whoever holds the book."

When the speaker says that we-consumers are the ones holding the book, she's saying a number of things at once. We-consumers identify with the ones favored by God. She doesn't hint as to why. Because we hold the book (the Bible or this book) we have received God's grace, which gives us power. Ford relies heavily on silence and compression, as she does in so many of these elegantly-crafted poems, which may

very well come from her writing process. She says in an interview with Jesse Nathan that the book's shortest poems come from "longer, failed poems where the 'actual' poem was buried inside a long poem of dead lines." However, in this poem, silence does not bridge the gap between the Biblical story and the political reality that caused such enormous suffering. Ford's speaker knows that those who escaped the storm were no more or less virtuous than those who stayed behind, but she cannot free herself from a Biblical framing of events.

In the last two sections of the book, "Vessel" and "Colosseum," the speaker continues to be troubled by the hurricane and the destruction of New Orleans. In the wake of the storm, the speaker and her beloved spend time traveling. Her beliefs loosened, she explores what happens when the systems of order under which one has constructed a self fails. The book leaves unclear whether or not the speaker can recover. In "The Shape of Us," the speaker says:

> Something please tell me I'm wrong
> about impermanence,
> wrong there is no unbroken believable thing
> on this earth.

The speaker wants something whole and lasting, something that stays true. Like Catherine of Siena in the prose poem "Division," who "scalded herself at the baths, ran away to a cave, shoved twigs into her mouth so that when the host traveled down her raw throat she would indeed feel something, even a god breaking inside her," the speaker seeks a physical sense of completion after realizing that her old beliefs cannot sustain her. Ford's speaker continues to be vexed by her break with organized religion. At the end of *Colosseum*, she says in "Seawater, and Ours a Bed Above It" that one day she and the beloved "will be overcome by waters […] with the God I loved, I hated, and you." Tying back to the earlier poem, "Tell Us," the speaker will again face judgment day, but this time the god she abandoned will stand with her.

In a short essay that touches on the writing of *Colosseum,* "Writing About the City: New Orleans, Destruction, and the Duty of the Poet," which appeared in *West Branch* 67 (Fall/Winter 2010), Ford addresses attendees of an international writing symposium. With an authoritative tone not unlike her speaker's, Ford expresses anxiety about having written about the storm, apprehensive of "cliché, sentimentality, and

horrifyingly easy conclusions, all of which reduce and even strip the disaster down from what it was, as an event, unspeakably terrible." She outlines what she believes to be the best way to write about such difficult material. The poet cannot simply catalog detail but must reach "towards some other revelation," the portrayal of the mind. "If cities appear in our writing, fine, but the true subject must be the destruction of our lies, our falsehoods, and our shallows. That destruction is, for me, *subject matter.*" The destruction of belief is her subject. Ford claims there is no other way to approach writing about Katrina. Anything else would be "a trespass against the poem, and does not have the poem's welfare in mind." Endowing poets with a godlike power, she closes with this final command: "If you find there is no world of ideas or discoveries for you beneath that topsoil or crust, you will have to abandon that city or village. You will have to begin the world again."

III

As much as *Colosseum* is an extended exploration of an individual's complex interior response to Katrina, Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler* is a powerhouse rendering of the Black community's experience of the catastrophic storm and its devastating aftermath. A collection of persona poems linked by narrative lyrics, the book reads like a play. The cast of characters includes ordinary citizens fleeing the hurricane, the dog Luther B and his owner M'Dear, and displaced children attending new schools. Michael Brown, the soon to be disgraced head of FEMA, makes a couple of appearances, as do George W. and Barbara Bush. Some of *Blood Dazzler*'s most powerful poems focus on the widely reported drowning of thirty-four nursing home residents in St. Bernard Parish and the death of Ethel Freeman, whose story was included in Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). With a dexterous handling of form and fine control of language, Smith's poems range from the humorous to the bleak.

The star of *Blood Dazzler* is Katrina herself, not a god-like force embodied in light but a freight-train of a woman who will stop at nothing to be the center of attention. Smith tracks each stage of the hurricane's development, from her formation as a tropical depression over the Bahamas to a category one hurricane making landfall in Florida. Smith portrays Katrina as the diva to end all divas. Acutely

aware of her own sexuality, the storm announces in "5 p.m., Tuesday, August 23, 2005," the book's second poem:

> I will require praise,
> unbridled winds to define my body,
> a crime behind my teeth
> because
>
> every woman begins as weather,
> sips slow thunder, knows her hips. Every woman
> harbors a chaos, can
>
> wait for it, straddling fever.

She rages across the gulf and makes landfall, and her appetite only grows larger. The drama builds; we all know what is going to happen next. Katrina will weaken temporarily before becoming a category five storm and drive ashore on the twenty-ninth. The levees will breach, and the rushing water will submerge eighty percent of the city under a mixture of toxic muck. Katrina relishes the fact that she is "now officially a bitch," that everyone knows her "given name, the full of it." In no way contrite, she portrays herself as a victim of her own desires. After she breaks up, Katrina offers an assessment of her behavior. Her narcissism is front and center.

> I was a rudderless woman in full tantrum,
> throwing my body against worlds I wanted.
> I never saw harm in lending that ache.
> All I ever wanted to be
> was a wet gorgeous mistake.

Separating herself from her actions, Katrina sees herself as a character in a story. She's not offering an apology, only a self-absolving explanation.

Smith shows off her technical muscle with characters whose voices counter Katrina's. Smith, a four-time National Poetry Slam champion who has been featured in the documentary film *SlamNation* and HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, mixes the percussive techniques of spoken word with a wide-range of traditional forms, including the ghazal, sestina, sonnet, and tanka. Scattered throughout are light internal- and end-rhymes and different forms of repetition that give the collection its formal

coherence. The mix of voices and forms recalls the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, particularly book-length sequences such as *The Bean Eaters* and *In the Mecca* that depict life on Chicago's South Side. Smith's book stands in a long line of African American book-length sequences that concentrate on civil rights. Dealing with current events instead of historical ones as many recent book-length sequences have done, *Blood Dazzler* is part of a tradition that goes back to the mid-nineteenth century with Sarah Louise Forten's and Sarah Mapps Douglass's slave persona poems and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), on up to Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination* (2001) about the Susan Smith murder case. A staging of the book with dancers, music, and text projections was held at Harlem Stage in 2007.

While Smith did not experience Katrina herself, she did watch the disaster unfold on TV and researched the book by using newspaper articles and speaking with *Times-Picayune* columnist Jarvis DeBerry, a fellow alumnus of Cave Canem. When asked by that newspaper about not having witnessed Katrina but writing about it nonetheless, Smith replied that had she been in New Orleans during Katrina she might not have been able to write the poems. She said her experience as an African American enabled her to write the story, cautiosly probing the racism that informed aspects of the government's inept response:

> I think when you're African-American, you were placed there in another way. There is always the chance, no matter what you're going through, you will be abandoned to deal with it on your own. There's another level in which black people were involved—and you didn't have to be there—and you realized that that kind of abandonment was highly possible no matter what you were.

Smith speaks about how issues of race cut across differences of class and geography; one did not have to be a poor resident of New Orleans to understand what was taking place. Smith was haunted by the death of thirty-four elderly residents at St. Rita's nursing home who drowned inside the building. In her author's statement she says she wrote about them "in a kind of fever, as if I were being urged forward by strangers. I was driven by a restless and agonizing visual, the sight of bodies floating in the darkness, bumping lazily against doors, bed, wheelchairs, and walls—a languid and lumbering dance." This poem became "34," a poem in thirty-four parts, each part the voice of a different victim.

Poems derived from media coverage run throughout the collection, sometimes commenting on that coverage and sometimes not. In "Don't Drink the Water," Smith concentrates on how the media objectifies and diminishes suffering:

> Some mama's body, gaseous, a dimming star splayed
> and so gently spinning, threatens its own soft seams,
> collides sloppily with mattresses, power lines,

A pretty, quiet thing, the woman's body floats past doors and trees, "H-E-L-*p*" carved into an oak.

> Networks deftly edit and craft this sexy glint
> of sudden ocean, wait for mama's bobbing bulk
> to sweetly swirl into view, framed—*now!*—by the word.

Her humanity erased, the woman's body is merely a picture to be momentarily arranged on the screen. Smith's criticism of the mainstream media also comes out in her use of the offensive word "Negroes" in "Loot," a poem that lists everything people steal, from infant formula to Magnavox televisions. The media continuously replayed images of looting during the disaster, as if to confirm the larger white audience's fears about urban America. Although newscasters did not use the word "Negroes" in their reporting, Smith suggests that was the loaded word they meant by repeatedly showing people exiting stores instead of digging into looting's causes. In his nonfiction account *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster,* Michael Eric Dyson explains the looting of food as coming out of desperate need and the looting of material goods as a way to barter for food or a ride out of town.

Some of the media poems are disquieting in the way they embrace stereotypes in order to, presumably, undo them. Unfortunately, they often don't succeed. *Blood Dazzler* opens with a prologue, "And Then She Owns You," soon followed by "Why New Orleans Is," poems that play uncritically with the clichéd image of the city that New Orleanians like Davidson resent. How these poems relate to the rest of the book is unclear. Smith begins "Dream Lover," a poem in the voice of a serial rapist making his way through the Superdome, with quotes from New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass, who later recanted his initial

reports about rapes. Compass, who is Black, relates his story in depth in Lee's documentary, revealing how class stereotypes led him to believe the rumors and announce them to reporters as truth before he had them investigated, but his reflection on the incident does not inform the poem. Class stereotypes are also behind "Up on the Roof," which features an assumedly conservative, middle-class speaker chastising people for not considering how they look on national TV as they await rescue. "Cameras obsess with your chaos. Now think how America sees you: / Gold in your molars and earlobes. Your naps knotted and craving a brushing." It's a complex moment. The speaker sees them as representatives of their race, however unintentionally, and warns them in the midst of their distress to consider how white, middle-class viewers might interpret their image.

Smith's outrage at the treatment of the elderly and children is palpable in her portrayals of Michael Brown and George W. and Barbara Bush. In her author's statement, she says that a close look at the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina reveal "not only a shocking devaluation of human life, but a studied ignorance that borders on sin." It was a profound example of "the social and racial injustice, governmental ineptitude and the human toll exacted when we lose sight of what really matters." In these poems Brown writes clueless emails and President Bush plays air guitar with country singer Mark Wills. Smith's strongest rebuke is saved for Bush's mother, who snickers at hurricane victims housed in a Houston relief center. (In *When the Water Came,* Miller gives President and Mrs. Bush a similar dressing-down.) Addressing the former first lady directly, the speaker says in "Thankful":

> Our mamas daily squawked hallelujahs
> toward scarred walls, conjured stout suppers
> of sweet fried bread and fat, longed for missing men,
> cursed crafty rodents snickering duets behind the stove.
> What fools they were to think it golden.
> Thank you for the ice eye, the impish giggle
> for reminding all our mothers to be damned.

Smith's response to Bush could be paired with Brooks's "Lovers of the Poor," Brooks acid portrayal of racism under the guise of help from the Ladies' Betterment League. Smith celebrates urban black women while exposing Bush for what she is.

IV

Alison Pelegrin's book *Hurricane Party* picks up where her last volume, *Big Muddy River of Stars* (2007), left off with life in southeastern Louisiana after the storm. These are exuberant poems—sassy, formally attuned narratives that are as funny as they are sad. Like Ford, Pelegrin's subject is the difficulty of rebirth, the speaker forced to re-imagine her relationship not only with the people and places around her but also with herself. As much as *Colosseum* is a book that dives inward, *Hurricane Party* is one that pushes out into the world. Pelegrin's speaker has been marked not only by the epic physical destruction of Katrina but also by the cultural losses and the environmental degradation that followed. With grief underlying the quick-wittedness of many of its poems, *Hurricane Party* is a celebration and defense of the many cadences of home.

"I have this inarticulate theory of being wronged," the speaker begins in "River of Voices," *Hurricane Party*'s first poem. It's a poem that lays out Pelegrin's technical mastery, range of tones, and set of themes: Katrina, family, memory, and renewal. After jokes about twelve-step groups, FEMA, sheetrock, and a funny bit about "Post-Katrina etiquette," she concludes:

> A bystander would think
> we took this on for fun, this reunion
> of family at the table long after the meal
> is cleared, telling our stories, which are one
> store, the same story over and again,
> only sometimes a few words added or missing,
> story which, despite its heart break and body count
> has always been about rebirth.

Pelegrin's previous books are populated with people living along the bayou, Cajuns and poor whites she affectionately and defiantly refers to as "coon-ass" (a Louisiana version of the French word for vagina—not nice). Hers is a world with its own language and customs, a special pocket that in the years since Katrina has suffered from continued flooding and the B. P. disaster. The people in Pelegrin's poems are leery of outsiders and tired of being dismissed by richer folks, city folks, and Northerners, otherwise known as "*Jahnkes*." Pelegrin's poetry doesn't so much call up the work of other young Southern poets who write

about change in isolated areas, like the wonderful Martha Serpas who also writes about Louisiana, as it does the work of Philip Levine and his mythological portrayal of working-class Detroit. As with Levine's poetry, Pelegrin's reader is going to be schooled in the ways of the bayou by a speaker who pretends not to give a hoot.

The title poem of the book is no hurricane party at all, no up-late drinking with friends, riding out the storm. The speaker remembers parties from the past:

> chanting the alphabet of named storms
> that never harmed besides a muck mosaic
> in the streets,
>
> the waterline's footprint
> a jagged hem of leaves on the lawn

For this party, the speaker is packing in the middle of the night, following the slow flow of traffic north, staying in a hotel, praying with strangers, and watching her sons play rescue-helicopter in the room. She is not returning to "a feast of outage-thawed seafood, / the easy work of peeling tape / from crossed-off windows," but to the wet stench of a moldy home. Many of the images of ruined belongings and garbage bags on the curb originally appeared on Pelegrin's blog, "Cochon de Lait" (a slow-roasted whole young pig—a Cajun specialty). Pelegrin posted regular updates about problems with contractors and the back-breaking task of reconstructing her life. "Ode to Things" is simply a list of every possible belonging that can wind up in a landfill—not just the photos and family heirlooms destroyed by the flood, but also banana phones, goggles, and pink pearl erasers, the silly, insignificant things of every day.

The storm's wreckage provides the impulse for many of the poems that want to preserve and praise. "Bestiary of the Bayou State" begins with armadillos, moves on to gators and killer bees, and concludes with a "zillion devil crickets." "Louisiana" plays off Elizabeth Bishop's "Florida," asserting that the state with the prettiest name is not Bishop's land of dredges and mangroves but the "Sportsman's Paradise" of Louisiana. "Where Y'at" kicks off with a run on Christopher Smart's "My Cat Jeoffrey," extolling the particularities of Pelegrin's native tongue.

> Now I will sing the Louisiana drawl.
> For to me it is a joyful noise, more better than the blues or funk or Dixieland jazz.
> For this is the language of kings, like my grandfather Royal, and it holds more music than newscaster-speak.
> For my mama-n-them, when they angry they drawl it best.
> To find out, just laugh when they say "shrimps."

In list after list, the speaker stockpiles images, trying to recoup what has been lost or what one day may be.

Pelegrin's speaker is the prodigal daughter, returning home after a period of disdain for the place she's from. Calling herself "little miss too-good-for-this," she begins "Cumpleaños" with a question:

> When was it born in me—little itch of scorn
> for my people with unexpected pride mixed in?
> We weren't white trash, but on the backslide down
> from working class to unemployed to drunk.

The disdain she feels is mixed with affection, and the swagger is also a defense that beats any judging reader to the punch. "I don't hate the South," she says in "The Family Jewels," "or maybe I do." She fears the reader who sees her people as she once did. When writing about the uglier aspects of home, as in "The N-Word" and "Daughter of the Confederacy," Pelegrin clearly hasn't fully made peace with her history. Like Levine, she tends to romanticize difficult material instead of confront some harder truths. Still somewhat self-conscious about what divides her from those she loves, she makes the desire to bridge that space the force behind many of these poems.

The wound from Katrina is lasting. What does one do when one's identity is tied so tight to a place and then that place and so many of the people who make it are gone? Pelegrin's speaker shows contempt for those who skim Louisiana's surface: tourists getting their photos snapped in Jackson Square, or taking Gray Line disaster tours through the Ninth Ward; rubber-necking poets; and editors who reject her work with "*Alison, it's hard to get excited / about Katrina poems as there are so many.*" Like Levine and his mistrust of the well-to-do, Pelegrin is suspicious of those who claim to know Katrina without having lived

through it themselves. Take this passage from Levine's "What Work Is" and compare it to "Katrina Scribendi":

> You know what work is—if you're
> old enough to read this you know what
> work is, although you may not do it.
> Forget you.

Pelegrin:

> The endless nerve,
> a crown of sonnets promising, "This too shall pass."
> I got one for you: Buzz off. Blow it out your ass.

In the next poem, "Stupid Praise," she says she will not write another poem about the hurricane. She'll stop dragging her "doom and gloom down happy streets." There's no need to apologize. She's not raining on anybody's parade. The physical and psychological devastation along the Gulf Coast is not something from which one can simply move on. The speaker's reflections on such difficult losses are what make this book so moving.

Underneath Pelegrin's humor is a grief that can't help breaking through. In the book's penultimate poem, "Invitation to the Gretna Royals," the speaker asks her family to come visit. "Y'all can't stay mad… I'm still your daughter." She's returned home, even if it's to a new home with "no real Bubbas other than attorneys who drive / fancy trucks." There's still Goodwill, Kracklin' Skillet, and pantyhose embroidered with praying hands.

> Just get in the car. So what if you don't know
> the name of every beat cop and Winn Dixie cashier.
> Take a break from the murders and windows with bars
> and sit on my back porch instead. Quiet for miles.
> Give a call when y'all get close. I'll shine my brights
> on Lowe Davis Drive. I'll park there waiting for you
> and then we'll caravan. It's not much farther.

The speaker is going to cook white beans and shrimp for them, probably offer them a beer. It's through the presence of her loved ones, even those who are no longer there, that the speaker finds peace.

What I find striking about all of these books is that they do not treat Katrina and its aftermath as a text to be manipulated on the page or break it down into a check-list of requisite parts. They do not shy away from exploring Katrina's difficult emotional core. Despite my admiration for these books, particularly *Hurricane Party* for its broad range of tones, dazzling rhythms, and affecting depiction of the evacuation and recovery, what I found missing from my reading was a larger historical framework that somehow took into account the decades of mismanagement, ineptitude, and prejudice that contributed to this singular disaster. I was looking for a book that somehow grappled with the storm beyond the individual. *When the Water Came* and *Blood Dazzler* both concentrate on communities, but in Hogue's book the interviewees, understandably so overwhelmed by their suffering, concentrate on the present and immediate past, while *Blood Dazzler*'s unexamined poems about New Orleans muddy the book as a whole.

The single most powerful poem I've read about Katrina is Yusef Komunyakaa's "Requiem," a sprawling 40-line sentence that goes back to New Orleans' earliest beginnings. The poem, which Komunyakaa says is still in process, originally appeared in a special section on Katrina in *Oxford American* (Fall 2005) and has been reprinted a number of times. I'm eager to see what he finally does with it. In 2009 "Requiem" was paired with a light-work instillation by Kristen Struebing-Beazley at New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center, and as Hogue's book shows, the devastation of Katrina comes across particularly well in multi-media, multi-artist work. A book that deserves special mention is Brad Richard's beautiful *Motion Studies* (The Word Works, 2011). Writing primarily about the nineteenth-century painter Thomas Eakins, Richard interweaves poems about Katrina, his family's roots in Texas and Louisiana, and earlier floods. I highly recommend it.

The many books of poems about Katrina are particularly interesting considering the other major event of the last decade, 9/11, and the general absence of book-length collections, though not individual poems, dealing with that horrific day. I do not know what accounts for the disparity but think it says something significant about the current state of American poetry, the continuing influence of the romantic tradition and the limits it can place on the imagination. With its tropes about ruin and the weather and its emphasis on portraying the self, romanticism lends itself easily to the storm. By concentrating on

Katrina as an act of nature, or God, and not as a manifestation of our country's failure, poets can write about it without ever questioning American culture or its institutions. Larger views of Katrina or 9/11 might require the rejection of the romantic thinking around which so much American poetry is based. We're starting to see that change in books such as Timothy Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation,* Kathleen Ossip's *The Cold War,* and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, all books that make the contemporary condition their subject and whose roots can be found in French symbolist and surrealist poetry. Were there to be a more widespread movement away from the transcendent self in writing about these events, it would signal a major shift in our literature. It's a change that's exciting to contemplate.