Delta Landscape

Metissa Roberts

When we drove off the highway exit, life was different. We were talking, laughing, and full of youth, energy, and hope. As we began to drive through the dark city, however, we were abruptly silenced. It was eerie; there were no cars, no people, and no light. The forms of the houses were intact in the near darkness. They seemed like normal structures. But as we drove by, the glinting of the headlights revealed them for what they really were: shells of humanity. Bombed-out remnants of the abandoned War on Poverty, the war that we declared, but never really fought. The doors and windows gaped, holding nothing in and keeping nothing out. A single car was parked by the side of the road, but when our headlights flickered across it, we noticed that it wasn't actually parked-it was tempest-tossed there by a force much stronger than the gravity that usually governs us. Then the light faded and it was parked again.

But we drove on.

The Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans has a distinguished history of renewal; one could say it's the phoenix neighborhood of New Orleans. It continually rises from marginalized ashes to new vitality. Originally a swamp and part of plantations, the Lower Ninth was first populated by poor immigrants and African-Americans around the turn of the century, and the neighborhood development lasted well into the 1950s. When Hurricane Betsy struck in 1965, the Ninth Ward was flooded and rebuilt-a testament to the potential for rejuvenation over the coming months (Lower Ninth).

Before Katrina, the empty streets already bore the battle scars of that war against the marginalized; essentially, the war against ourselves. But then it came with infamous force and cold brutality, and the winds. The levees broke, and at one point, the water was at ceiling level. It

stood for a while at about five feet. In the pictures, you can see the yellowed lines on the aluminum siding. Spray painted on the fronts of houses were the letters “TFW” (Toxic Flood Water), the date it was inspected, and by whom; on the bottom, the number of casualties. All of these identifications were written in the same impersonal script on the front of every building. At first it's morbidly fascinating. You look at each one, watching and waiting. Then you stop noticing; there is a bright red “0” painted on the front of each structure. And then when you see “1 DOA” or “Possible Body” it hits you with unimaginable force. The number morphs from a statistic into a human life, a devastated family, and you mourn even though you never knew them.

Then there was the gutting. The organized destruction of someone's entire life. Each morning we got our gear, zipped our Tyvek suits, strapped on our respirators, grabbed our tools, and went on our way. One day, walking down the street, we were stopped by a man in a white pickup.

“This is the first time I've seen white folks walkin' down this street in 30 years,” he said. And then we continued, content to be an odd change in the landscape, ready to do good deeds. We got to the house, and the homeowners were standing outside.

Our crew leader introduced himself to them, and naively asked, “So, is this your house?” The lady looked at all of us with a deep sadness that radiated from her eyes and answered, “This was my house ... it belongs to Miss Katrina now.”

We suited up and walked inside, and the smell hit you like a wall. The entire floor was littered with belongings now black with mold. It is visually painful, but what can you do? Start the backbreaking physical labor of destroying someone's entire life. So we started shoveling, got into a rhythm. When the wheelbarrow was full, I leaned against my shovel, resting, and looked

down.

The mold-ridden belongings that littered the floor were books. Feeling like I was in a perverse inversion of *Fahrenheit 451*, I looked closer, and realized that they were Bibles. The floor was littered with moldy, blackened Bibles. When I asked the woman who owned the house about it later that day, I found that she had led a Bible study. I still can't get over that dark symbolism, and I left a part of me there in that wet, dark, basement room, now destroyed.

It seemed to me that the issue of the day was survival. Survival of what? Survival of the fittest, of a way of life, of a city, of each individual. Being in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans not only makes the frailty of human life completely apparent, it threatens you. It threatens your own life. Yes, the levees are being rebuilt; yes, the floodwaters have abated. And yet, walking among these livelihoods now reduced to debris, one feels a sense of immediacy, a sense of panic, a sense of pure terror.

The sheer volume of the debris is striking in itself. Piles of gutted drywall and termite-weakened two-by-fours litter the streets in piles two times as tall as me. But those houses are the lucky ones. Many houses have collapsed in the last six months under their own weight. Abandoned belongings lay strewn across front laws. A treadmill rests akimbo, a pair of sneakers, a closet-full of clothing spills across the sidewalk. I wish I could have seen it before. I wish I could have seen the children playing in the streets. I wish I could have smelled the aroma of fried chicken and Cajun fries drifting out into the sticky evening air. I wish I could have heard the thumping bass from a low rider driving three blocks over.

One could say that I know what it means to miss New Orleans. It's odd that I can miss a place so badly that is so ridden with destruction. But while I was there, I felt like I was fighting the good fight, maybe even winning. I was living in a place defined by its character of renewal.

Being in New Orleans brought a new meaning to the phrase “The south shall rise again.” In fact, this statement, often invoked by the oppressive forces that kept this community down, is perhaps the statement that best characterizes the attitude in the humid air. Green, lush grass is beginning to grow and flowers are beginning to bloom, albeit amidst the wreckage. It's an attitude of hope, of rebuilding, of triumph over nature, and in an environment such as this, it's hard not to be optimistic.

Works Cited

“Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Snapshot.” *Greater New Orleans Community Data Center*. 10 October 2002. Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. 23 March 2006 <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/8/22/snapshot.html>.