



photo by James Thieboud

Marigny Life Hurricane Season

By Katie Walenter

I find it hard to make a permanent life in a place that doesn't feel permanent. Even though New Orleans is one of the oldest cities in the South — a place defined by generations of heritage, tradition, culture and marvelous architecture — the time feels borrowed. But then again, I only lived here exactly one year before Katrina blew through on my anniversary in 2005. I learned through experience what I heard everyone spend so much time talking about: The Big One's coming and it's inevitable. But Katrina wasn't the big one, more a nasty close call, and so I've developed a neurosis in regards to decorating my apartment.

My books are my best friends and my roots. They are the stabilizing force in my impermanent life. Because the written word survives, I as a writer will too survive. The problem is I haven't been able to bring my hundreds of books down to New Orleans. For now, they live on bookshelves and in boxes at my parents' house in the northeastern part of Illinois. It isn't that I can't find a way to get them here; it's that I cannot bare the idea of losing them.

Strong winds, flood waters, water lines, FEMA X's, debris, rotting houses, lost friends, and a lost sense of security, direction, control and meaning. Hurricanes are scarier than life, and because they are a heightened experience, they feel more real too. August and September are the hardest months on the collective New Orleans' psyche. We don't like to be away in case the worst should happen to our city, our homes and our friends. It may not seem intuitive or sane to want to stay during a possible disaster but think about how you want to be near family and loved ones in times of crisis. It's the same thing. That's why I started packing up my things in San Francisco, reading myself to return as I watched Anderson Cooper being blown around by Gustav's gusts last year. I had to be with the one I loved. If New Orleans was living on borrowed time, I wanted to be with her for the time she had left. And so I came home.

But I find that even though I live in the same exact house as I did before Katrina and after I took a yearlong sabbatical in San Francisco, I cannot quite bring my full decorating touch to this house. My most beloved possessions and heirlooms are also in storage at my parents' and so part of me is not fully here. The turtle comes to mind, he who carries his house on his back, protected by his own shell. The more I move, the lighter I travel.

Many of my friends were not as fortunate. They lost everything they owned and loved in that flood because they were fully here with not even a toe out the door. They had to start from scratch. I don't know how they did it but they salvaged what — if anything — they could, bought new furniture, lived in FEMA trailers while they rebuilt their houses and continued joking and telling stories the whole while.

Four years have passed since August 29th 2005.

Four years. There are still people living in trailers. There are still people living in Houston, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin and in all the little towns between. But many have come home. Many are rebuilding. Many are making art, working, raising families, cooking meals, playing music, celebrating traditions, and just plain living.

I returned to New Orleans five and a half weeks after Katrina. I returned to my job, to the higher ground of the Marigny. But in that short time, I lost my old self. Catastrophes will do that to a person. Slowly but surely she is coming back to me now. Memory necessarily must fade and alter. We have to bounce back, be joyous and live.

The phrase "weathering the storm" has always meant surviving a harrowing experience. The initial bout of strength, hard work, resilience and pioneering spirit that we had in the six months after the storm is a hallmark of what it means to be a New Orleanian. Living in an inherently unstable place has carved this character into the people who are from here and into those who have come to call it home. After a while though the adrenalin of survival mode wears thin and all you've got left then is just plain tired. We were tired for a while. We were downright exhausted. But the energy is coming back.

So I'm thinking about bringing my books down here. Or maybe I'll start by collecting new ones. But I did put up elegant curtains in all my rooms. I purchased a heavy antique dining room table and an unwieldy new mattress — to make traveling lightly harder, and to ground myself in this lovely precarious geography. I actually have a real couch that cannot in any way be classified as a futon, and I'm hanging dinosaur artwork on the walls made for me by friends from down the street and hundreds of miles away. I'm settling down again as best I can in the place I love. I know all of its faults. I have weighed the consequences. I have lived through its intemperance. What I've learned through all of this is that nothing is permanent. Stability is an illusion no matter where you live. Everything passes, the bad and the good.

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