

# *The Floating World*



Preservation: An essay by C. Morgan Babst

Questions for Discussion





## PRESERVATION

*An essay by C. Morgan Babst*

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**D**uring the last month of my pregnancy, as my husband and I were renovating our first house, buildings kept falling down. A brownstone two blocks away collapsed in the middle of the night, an avalanche of bricks sliding into the neighboring schoolyard. Next, lightning hit the church steeple—a man was killed by a falling stone. Then, another house in the neighborhood burned down: a lamp on a timer, a scarf on the bulb. Three firemen went to the hospital; the family wasn't home.

With the baby leaning on my sciatic nerve, I hobbled down the summer sidewalk to look at the damage. A blue tarp covered the church's apse. Smoke stained ceilings. Men hung from cranes above the collapsed brownstone, dismantling it brick by brick. My neighbors and I gossiped behind the flapping plastic caution ribbon. *Thank God no one was hurt. What a miracle school wasn't in!* The night of the collapse, the kitchen—now open like a diorama—had been empty, and no children slept in the bunk beds where stuffed animals were piled, now dusted with plaster. We wondered whether to place the blame on the homeowners, for whom we had collected children's clothes, covered dishes, shampoo, shoes. They and their tenants had scattered through the neighborhood to sleep in the intact homes of others. The dismantlers had lists of things to salvage: a ballet bag, a fishbowl, passports and computers, a cigar box full of cash.

The baby thumped against my walls, absorbing through my blood my rising panic. I was writing a novel about Hurricane Katrina—not my own experience of evacuation and failure to return, but a story about what might have happened if some other version of me had not left—but in the journal I was keeping for my unborn daughter, I wrote only that it seemed like a bad omen, all these buildings falling down.

ON THE MORNING of August 28, 2005, I evacuated New Orleans with my parents, less than twenty-four hours before Katrina came ashore, driving fourteen-foot storm tides ahead of it. We spent hours on the five-mile bridge over Lake Pontchartrain, watching *Lawrence of Arabia* in the back seat while waterspouts spun beyond our windows. When I woke up the next morning in Nashville, a newscaster in a dry poncho was standing near the Superdome; she talked only of wind damage. My family sent an acquaintance to inspect our house—just a few shingles in the siding. It wasn't until that night that we learned the levees had failed and the city was underwater, and it would be ten days before we were allowed to go back in, crossing the same bridge we'd gone out on. Sections of the others floated on the lake like rafts.

At a checkpoint on St. Charles Avenue, men in fatigues checked our IDs. I can still remember the assault rifles strapped across their chests, the way the lake mud crunched under our tires, the quiet toss of oak shadow across the sunroof, the sound of latches snapping on the gun case on the floor under my father's seat. The TV had told us it was a war zone; we only saw soldiers. I remember the maggots in the refrigerator, the bright mold blossoms on the plaster walls, the FBI chaplain who walked through the front door with his pistol drawn—a high-school flame of my mother's, it turned out. After that I remember very little. In my parents' attic, there are boxes labeled with my handwriting that I don't remember packing. Emails, numbly cheerful, in my outbox that I'd swear I didn't write. That fall is only fragments: walking alone across Manhattan at 4 A.M.; trespassing for

the night at a friend's parents' empty apartment; leaving the table over and over—at restaurants and in friends' kitchens—to hunch over a toilet, my undiagnosed ulcer in flames. The first day after the storm I remember with any clarity is January 21, 2006—a benefit for New Orleans at the Museum of the City of New York. I wore a skirt with yellow flowers, a blouse cut down to here. I had come with a friend, but at some point, I left him beside a potted plant and moved to the bar, where a familiar-looking blond man stood in front of me in the line.

“You're from New Orleans, aren't you?” I asked.

He looked at me, baffled. “This is a Katrina benefit.”

A few months later, visiting home together for the first time, he and I broke into my parents' house in the middle of the night. I wanted to show him my childhood bedroom (piled high with boxes), the plaster-garlanded ceiling of the living room (now stripped down to the lath). He followed me through a darkness interrupted by shuttered bars of light, walking over the contractor paper laid down on the heart-pine floors. When he kissed me against a ruined wall, mold spores pierced my skin like tiny arrows.

“That abandoned house,” my husband called it later.

And so was it abandoned.

THE URGE TO nest comes with such strength and regularity in the final weeks of pregnancy that the Mayo Clinic lists it as a sign of labor. Women have been known to throw away all their towels because they weren't sufficiently white, to clean the grout in their bathrooms with their own toothbrushes, to iron every curtain in the house. A mother's primary—primal—job is to make a home for her child. First she is that home, and then she builds one.

I had overdone it. Ripped out the kitchen, bathrooms, walls. Since marrying my husband I had dreamed of houses: sprawling kitchens where I could preside from the stove over playing children, bathtub grottos of Iznik tile. From my vantage of sublets and suitcases, it seemed that my heart

might unclench once a house was found and perfected, that happiness would flow again like blood. While we were in contract on our brownstone, I got pregnant. Outside the architect's office, I told my husband the news.

Our daughter arrived twelve days after her due date. We joked that she was waiting until the kitchen appliances were installed, but I wasn't really joking. My body or her body—or both of us, in hormonal conversation—knew that she'd be better off where she was until we were no longer living in two sweltering rooms of a house full of hammering. Unable to assemble the crib or cook a meal, I negotiated with my OB, who agreed not to evict the baby if I agreed to monitoring. Every other day, I traveled to the hospital for a sonogram that showed my daughter with her cheek squashed against the wall of my uterus, sleeping more comfortably in my womb than she'd have any chance to out of it, until the contractors were gone.

*Contractor, Contraction.* Both words stem from *contrahere*, “to draw together.” A binding. An embrace.

Claudio, the foreman, was sanding the kitchen floor when my water broke. As my husband raced to gather towels, Claudio held up cans of stain. “I can't remember,” he said. “We decided golden oak or pine?”

While we sat in stalled traffic on the FDR, the East River glassy beyond the windows, my doula held my hand and told me to imagine the contractions as waves that would flood me with pain and then subside, to observe them as one might watch a storm surge rise. Labor, she said, was a cyclone, spinning an eye wide. I wanted to believe her. I wanted to submit, to breathe and howl as my shores gave way. Instead, I was “tensed up,” the doctors said, fitting an oxygen mask over my face, and “not progressing.” There was too much blood—emergency monitoring wired me to the bed. Eventually I begged them to make me numb.

By the time we returned from the hospital, the kitchen floors were golden oak and polished to a high shine, the paper off the floors, the knobs on the drawers, the walls painted in seven shades of low-VOC gray.

I, however, had fallen apart. Evacuated and in shambles, I cried in the shower, in the garden, in bed, walking down the street: there were single

mothers in the world, the dog was suddenly afraid of thunder, I missed my husband (who was right beside me), my books were still taped in their alphabetized boxes and I couldn't find a knife. I cried for my poor baby who howled at her relocation to this unfamiliar place. I cried while I screwed cup hooks into the underside of a shelf, and I didn't stop until my mother, who had come to help, turned on our new oven and the paint-thinner fumes inside exploded, blistering her hands and face.

I ran downstairs into the smell of smoke, holding the baby's ears against the fire alarm, to find my mother at the sink looking like an electrocuted cartoon, red-faced, her hair on end. *I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay*, she repeated: every mother's lines.

WHEN OUR DAUGHTER was just a month old, Hurricane Sandy pummeled the eastern seaboard, flooding our neighbors' houses, burning towns. While the peaks of a roller coaster showed like volcanic islands above the surf, I sat on the sofa, nursing, and watched with strange glee as our windows curved inward like heavy balloons. *Your first hurricane*, I whispered into her bald head. *See, you're a New Orleanian after all.*

Nothing made sense: After a hundred and fifty years, I was the first one in my family to build a house somewhere else—to bear a child somewhere else. And why? Because of my husband's job? I could not articulate it, but the storm was no excuse. Sure, my parents' roof had come off, but many had lost so much more and still returned.

We visited, of course. We fed the ducks and ibises, climbed the oaks whose limbs bowed like elephants getting down on their knees. We taught our daughter how to roll down a levee, throw a line. At night, we danced in the crush at the Blue Nile where ten years ago, a girl sang through a blackout while I spun in an orange dress, falling fast in love. On holidays, I set my grandmother's table with oranges and palmettos and a long starched cloth, let the crabmeat-man in through the side door. *When are you coming back to me?* my grandmother said, at ninety-two, then ninety-three. My father held my daughter to his chest and sang the songs he once sang to

me, and my mother sat with her on top of a tall black horse. I turned on WWOZ, and my daughter shrieked, *That's jazz!*, and her mouth was green with spearmint snowball; she smelled of earth and dogs and sweat.

SOMETIME DURING THE first year of my daughter's life, I began to speak of myself in the third person: *Mommy's here. Mommy's here*, I said as I held my child against my body, wondering whose body it was—not hers, not mine; who was this third person who had come between?

“Motherhood,” Sarah Manguso writes, is “a shattering, a disintegration of the self,” but I began to worry that becoming a mother was not a cataclysm I could survive. Even before her birth I was holding myself together with duct tape and bits of string; now love looked like a chainsaw revved, a wrecking ball, a twenty-foot wall of water. Love was a great mass of clouds swirling on the horizon, and I was in its path.

The demolition of my old self would have opened me to my daughter, but I was afraid that, like a house with a collapsed façade, I would be stared at, looted, not to mention the danger my structural instability posed to trespassers. So, I hired a nanny, put on my headphones to drown out the baby's crying, locked the door. On two separate occasions I stood by the same swing set, explaining to two different poets that no, I hadn't made any “mommy friends.” Motherhood, I said, was not an identity I was interested in.

Yet, I had still become someone I was not. I screamed at the dog, pushed the stroller for miles as my colicky baby wailed, wishing nothing for her but sleep. While driving the thirteen hundred miles from Brooklyn to New Orleans during our daughter's second winter, I contemplated driving on into the swamp, where, hidden in some houseboat, I might find myself again.

AT A BAR in SoHo, a friend who suffers from PTSD asked me if I did, too. We were eating chicken parm and chatting with the bartender, who had just moved to Brooklyn from the Upper Ninth Ward. We talked about gentrification, charter schools, the way the most precious things salvaged

from our flooded city—brass bands and Indian masking, seafood gumbo and St. Roch—are still at risk of ruin. The bartender asked, suspicious of me, *You like it? How much it's changed?* There were tears in his voice as I tried to assure him that I did not.

Anyway, I looked at my friend (her mother murdered), looked at the bartender (his neighborhood in ruins), shook my head. My trauma was not immediate, I said, not bodily. I experienced no flood, no Superdome. I did not wait in the heat in a folding chair for buses that did not come. The trauma experienced by so many in New Orleans—abandoned, sabotaged, betrayed—was infinitely worse than anything I—traveling out of town as fast as my father could drive—could have known. In that period, I knew only distance, delay, and fear, a repeated and profound stripping away of illusions about the city, the government, the kindness of neighbors—all the things that were supposed to keep us safe. Maybe this was trauma, I said (my friend looked at me and nodded, called me *Sister*); maybe what I called waiting to return was only running away. But still, I did not dream of rooftops. When I closed my eyes, I did not see my front door buckle under the weight of water. When snow inundated the streets of Brooklyn, I was only desperate to go home.

It snowed for two years, it seemed. On the curbs, banks of dirty ice rose like levees, and I was afraid to carry my child across the street. Whenever we were alone together, I barricaded us inside—she watched *Winnie the Pooh* from the rug while I immersed myself in Euripides and interior design. Then, from New Orleans, an enormous box arrived. In it was a framed photograph by Frank Relle. Titled “Preservation,” it showed the golden façade of a French Quarter house, its upper windows open to let music waft from the sparsely furnished rooms.

For days, I stared at my reflection swimming in the glass.

THE FIRST TIME I really looked at Frank Relle’s work was in a derelict building near Bayou St. John. Outside it thundered—rain seeped through the walls where he’d hung glowing images of houses and trees, empty lots

and lampposts swallowed by kudzu. As I circled the room, I began to feel as though I'd been lured inside my own subconscious. At the benefit where I had met my husband, Frank's work had hung on the mezzanine, up for auction, but I had been unable to look—his photographs captured everything I was trying not to see.

As the storm's tenth anniversary approached, however, I began to look at them almost obsessively, flipping through the images on his website. Then, one spring night, Frank took me on a drive. We were friends by then, contemplating collaborating on a retrospective, and we went out into New Orleans to find again the houses he'd photographed in the aftermath of the flood.

As we drove the path of a tornado that had ripped down Prytania Street, Frank pointed out several buildings that had been "dollhoused" by the wind, their façades torn away. Ten years later, all were closed up again, safe behind new clapboards and paint, the only sign of life an occasional TV flickering behind energy-efficient double panes. Outside one of those once-faceless houses, Frank pulled out a print of its portrait, "Choctaw," from a box on the dash. I didn't bother to look; I'd stared often at the photograph, in which a barricade of plywood and sheetrock pasted with GOD BLESS AMERICA signs is all that stands between the sidewalk and the residents' private things. As we got out of the van under the streetlights, I almost expected the house's face to hinge open, expected to see the Christmas wreath hung over an upstairs mantel, the painting of the Mardi Gras Indian propped beneath a canted lampshade, the teddy bear left in a BarcaLounger—but even the windows now were curtained. A porch light went on—*click*—sensing our motion.

As Frank and I drove off the natural levee and down into the bowl, the years began to drain away. For a while, the houses we looked for were still there—still abandoned, weed-grown—and then they were gone. In Treme, the lot where the Calvary Spiritual Church had stood in the photograph "Hampson" was now mown and delimited by a piece of white tape. The

house with a single door and a single window in “Tupelo”—simple as a drawing by a child—had been erased. In the Lower Ninth, our headlights rustled in the midnight grasses of the empty lots. With our windows down, we could hear the sounds of seabirds, a freight train’s triple horn. A brackish wind came off the water, and Frank shivered. Navigating the blackout city by headlight, he remembered, had felt like bushwhacking through a night forest with nothing but a torch in your hand—your sphere of protection went no farther than the throw of the light.

He gestured toward an intersection near the Industrial Canal. “There was a house there,” he said, holding up a print of “Lizardi”: at the end of a head-lit stretch of rutted mud, a tilted telephone pole marks an X in the nauseous sky. Below, someone’s home—its siding askew, windows hooded—slumps at a crossroads, bewildered by the flash.

“When I came up on it, it felt like something out of a dream,” Frank said. “—finding your house in the wrong place as you move through the darkness. I left the stretch of road in the foreground—as though the people who lived there came back, expecting to find their house over there.” He looked toward the lot to our right, where a handwritten FOR SALE sign was posted on a bare foundation. “But instead it jumped out to meet them.”

Now, the empty pavement was lit up by high-pressure sodium, shaded by a nine-year-old tree—an ordinary street, wires strung from cruciform poles.

Frank put his arm around me as I tried to see what he’d never stopped seeing.

BACK IN BROOKLYN, I broke down in the kitchen while doing the dishes. Having put my daughter to bed, my husband came to find me. *What’s wrong? What’s wrong? You have to tell me what’s wrong.* I made him ask six times before I said it.

Earlier, a rare thunderstorm had rolled in while I was working in the garden. The climbing rose I was pruning whipped free of my hands, and

the pear tree, heavy with young fruit, strained against the ropes we'd used to tie it to the fence during Sandy. (The tree's roots gnarl in its narrow bed—only a matter of time before it falls.) As I looked up through the sheets of rain that fell from the roof, I saw my daughter standing at the glass, making faces at me in my wet gardening outfit. I figured our neighbors could see me from their upper windows, but still I stood there. I didn't care what they saw: a crazy lady weeping in the rain, a breakdown, a breakthrough. I was a woman separated from her life by a high and grassy wall. I'd leveed my grief for so long to keep myself from drowning, I hadn't realized what damage that could do: that eventually the river would rise and overtop anything I put in front of it, that water was already seeping through.

WE ARE HOME now, in New Orleans, in a house on the natural levee, with high ceilings and deep verandas, tall windows that let in all that green. We have already replaced the knob and tube with insulated wiring, fixed some plumbing. Next we will repair the roof, then tackle the foundation, which is crumbling, the mortar only dust between the centuries-old brick.

Sometimes, before we turn out the lights, my daughter and I knock on the walls to test their sturdiness—her small fist rapping the old plaster—and sometimes something between the joists dislodges, rattles down. I keep my face blank, turn off the light, whisper, "Just a mouse, lovey, going to bed," trying not to think: or termites at work, maybe a screw falling.

The fact is, most disasters look at first like nothing—a flicker at the corner of the mouth, a flick of the wrist, an intake of breath. A rumble: just subway work, a couple of blocks down. A puddle of water appears at the base of the levee: maybe we slept through the rain.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel begins with two epigraphs: one from the spiritual “When the Saints Go Marching In” and one from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. How did these lines inform your reading of the book? In what ways is the book like a spiritual? An epic poem?
2. Hurricane Katrina touches off the action in this story. Why, then, does the novel begin “Forty-Seven Days after Landfall,” and then dip back to narrate the storm itself 175 pages later? How does the novel’s temporal structure reflect the psychological state of the Boisdorés?
3. Cora is absent, in different ways, throughout the novel. How does her absence affect the lives of the other characters? How does it pull the story along?
4. The hurricane opens up fissures not only in the levees but in the lives of all the characters in the novel. What cracks already existed in Joe and Tess’s marriage? In Troy and Reyna’s sibling bond? In Cora’s relationship with her parents? How do disasters unearth preexisting flaws in our ordinary lives?
5. Which character do you think loses the most in the aftermath of the storm? Why?

6. How have Tess's coping strategies backfired? Does her behavior make her a bad mother? A bad therapist?
7. Tess believes Joe is passive and weak. Is he? In what ways does he live up to her expectations? In what ways is he forceful and brave?
8. How are self-preservation and compassion at odds in the novel? In a disaster of such magnitude, is it possible to reconcile survival with morality?
9. Del's relationship with Zack is both more and less intimate than she would like it to be. Why is this? Do you think Del's fantasy at the end of the book—"their teenaged children [coming] back from the parades . . . carrying glittered coconuts in their arms"—has a chance of coming true?
10. Ultimately Del returns to New Orleans while Cora leaves it. What differences in their personalities account for their different trajectories? How have their divergent experiences of the storm caused their paths to diverge?
11. Vincent's dementia prevents him from fully engaging with the storm and its aftermath. How do his voyages into the more distant past—to get a pocket pie, to see his wife—interact with the primary action of the novel? How is his memory loss similar to the losses caused by the hurricane?
12. What is the significance of Vincent's hope chest in the novel? How is Del's dedication to cabinetmaking significant in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans?
13. Vincent and Cora both wander through the city. What motivates their wandering? In what ways are these voyages similar or different?

14. Like the hurricane, Reyna's mental illness and death drive much of the action of the book. What really happened to her? Is Cora in any way correct in thinking that she is responsible for her death? What underlying societal problems triggered this state of affairs?

15. At one point, Reyna says, "Help gets you fucked." Is this just the raving of a madwoman, or do you agree with her? In what ways do the characters' attempts to help one another wind up hurting? In a disaster like Katrina, what can be expected of the rescuers and the rescued?

16. The chapter titles come from Dante's *Inferno*, Mrs. Randsell is reading a book about the Greco-Roman afterlife, and Cora is often described as a ghost or a corpse. In what way is Cora's experience of the flood like a descent into hell? How is her resurrection accomplished?

17. Evacuation catalyzes many of the novel's events. Is it braver to hold your ground in the face of a disaster, or to flee? As coastal cities are increasingly threatened by storms and rising tides, when is the right time to leave?

18. Trauma—whether caused by natural or man-made disasters—can trap us in a dangerous spiral in which we can fail to truly escape the past. What are some strategies for moving on from tragedy? How can we begin to rebuild in the aftermath of a disaster?