Storm and Constant Motion

We were nine Midwestern kids who had traveled from the chilled Minnesota prairie to the humid Louisiana bayou. Days of manual labor had exhausted our bodies and the gravity of the destruction had affected our spirits. We were spurred by manic exhaustion, marijuana and youthful invincibility. Night after night found us returned to Louis Armstrong Park.

It was silent in our park, across Rampart Street, through the French Quarter and inside the city. Even our Ninth Ward, Methodist church bunk room was nearly deserted but for a few other volunteers as we readied for the rush of spring breakers due over the next three weeks.

It was three weeks since the hurricane. It was a time when FEMA failures, military ignorance and human pillages were dawning on the national consciousness. These Minnesotans found the greenest, calmest space in what was once urban bustle, then brackish flood water and we planted ourselves there.

Daniel had located the park, as we wound through reverberations of natural violence in the man made jungle, upon our first inspection of the city. We returned like pilgrims every night to unwind and recount.

Our group drove from, like thousands of others, as disaster-tourists and volunteer-laborers. The volume of this university subsidized mobilization is mind numbingly grand. Our miniscule liberal arts university provided three separate groups of workers to the Gulf Coast within a month and a half of the hurricane. If the freedom riders had been so numerous and well equipped, a black president would have been in office by1973.

The workers who traipsed to New Orleans over the next half decade are evidence of both the insidious ubiquity of insurance companies (who required houses be stripped "to the studs" to settle) and the selfless ethic of American community (who used this disaster cleanup to explore, aid and grow-up).

We had found reprieve from an immediate and trying mission. Rampart Street was originally used as a fortification for the French colonial city. During this period, slaves were released for mass on Sundays and they proceeded across Rampart to Congo Square. Instead of participating in state religion, they left the city to practice familiar ecstatic spirituality. They congregated in the space which would become Armstrong Park.

The spirits of eighteenth century black outsiders in a white colony mingled with nine white outsiders in the twenty-first century Creole Bastille. We communed with Sachmo.

We began the day, along with a hundred other volunteers, picking plywood slivers from our skin. First Street United Methodist Church was waterlogged but stood singular, straight among the dilapidated neighborhood. The bunks were hasty but straight.

We woke to a converted gymnasium which had recently housed terrified, homeless masses as they waited for the floods and looters to recede. Sometimes, parishioners would come to the gymnasium during our communal meals for therapy: to tell their story and express their gratitude." In the lawless city, we were persona grata, adopted citizens.

We were still outsiders, ignorant to the poverty and destruction which New Orleanais had faced and the enduring struggle which confronted the Gulf Coast. We slept each night irrevocably exhausted from constant motion. We discharged from six A.M. rouse to midnight rustle. We spent ever conscious moment observing and coping with the destruction which we had encountered.

We were in constant motion from a mad dash for breakfast, coffee and a cigarette, and then to the van to a worksite. Few lost their sleepy glaze until the van encountered the ancient undulating city streets. A house to gut, park to decontaminate or public building to empty.

Everywhere was rotten, water laden, molding debris and broken remnants of a former time. We spent every day pulling up tile, plucking out nails and tearing down insulation. Nature was slowly reclaiming the city with roaches and fungus. We were trying to stave it off with a controlled burn.

We would then return *en masse* to bunks with broken backs and sore hearts. Then our dignified troupe of Minnesotans would wander off toward toward Armstrong Park where we would lay on our backs in the grass, staring at the blackness of the sky within the desolate city.

As more houses were gutted, the streets turned into a disturbing yard sale. The sanitation system was overburdened so stacks of newspapers, old records, appliances, and furniture joined

insulation, timber and sheered-off electrical wires in a surreal amalgamation. In a strange twist, the streets appeared habitable as the houses were vacant.

Three of us explored the neighborhood upon our arrival, very late on our first night there. We came upon Horace and Roscoe, two contractor profiteers straddling the side of an apartment building. They had traveled from Memphis as experienced labor looking for work. Roscoe explained how easy it was to find a job that paid many times what he could earn anywhere in Tennessee. His destiny was one of responsibility and profit.

We watched them balance on the side of the building with nail guns for a few minutes, in the dark, quiet night. They called it a day and brought us around a corner, into an alley way and into a tavern with a low ceiling, mahogany bar and a few rows of empty plywood folding tables running parallel to a pool table. We sat at the bar and were introduced the four who remained: Catherine the bartender, the 'Prince of Nigeria,' and two Quadroons whose accents were spicy and blackened that I could not understand a single word.

They knew Horace and Roscoe well and the five of us (even those who were underage) were treated to beer and stories, all of which predated the storm. Three pale Minnesotans stumbled back through the Ninth Ward after bar close to their bunks with no fear of violence or profiling for the first time in many years.

Hours later, we were roused awake by Iron Maiden on a boombox and flashing flourescent lights. Nine Minnesotans joined some thirty other workers in cleaning a park on Third Avenue, nearby the church.

I laughed to hear some fellow workers from Upstate New York explain the futility of our actions. My public service seemed more valuable when I could personify the public as Catherine and the Prince of Nigeria.

The New Yorkers were convinced that the park was destroyed by the locals before the storm had finished the job. I thought they were lazy, jaded and ignorant. We were both seeing shades of the truth. Their stance became more visible to me with every empty dime baggie and fifth bottle I picked up. The final realization came from a stretched out prophylactic that I picked off of the platform above a tall metal slide with a tine of my rake.

Our university had an atypically early spring break that allowed the nine Minnesotans free reign over streets that had only been cleared of bio-hazards a few days before we arrived. Various smells of decay were fresh in the air. Some of us returned to the church to ready for the next wave of volunteers.

Alice set to scraping the walls where seepage had caused mold to form. Samuel tore down and reassembled tens of computers with serviceable parts. I turned the churches minimal, roach infested kitchen into a serviceable commercial setup capable of handling the throngs that were to come. Daniel came later to inspect and repair the electrical wires which had been exposed by years of neglect that both predated and were exacerbated by the storm.

Sometime during this day, nine sedentary Minnesota college kids shook free from their lifestyles of privilege, theory and escapism to become fellow workers engaged in common (and glorious) toil. The quicker we completed tasks, the more would appear. Every task was dire, monumental and completely dwarfed by the magnitude of the overarching goal.

Little of what we did in New Orleans was actually for the city. We could not bridge racial or class divides. We could not or move homeless citizens into FEMA trailers. We could not or feed the starving multitudes who had returned to their houses to find their lifetime of possessions had surged out to sea. A pressing humanist desire fueled our bodies. Popular gratitude allayed our fatalism.

I am comfortable with constant motion and daily labor but these days in Louisiana argued with my muscles and overloaded my glands. Every physical part of my person disagreed with me. My progressive mind prodded my body towards charity. I felt like a Hull House janitor.

Nine prairie Minnesotans were assailed by natural urban decay in New Orleans. If I had ever seen a black man before, he was surely not drinking a forty and staring blankly at a building from atop a boggy car. It was Horace who explained to me that elementary students wore uniforms to eliminate gang colors. The tap water was contaminated by oil-refinery particulates, lead paint washed away in the storm and the bacteria of decay that we had come to fight.

Late at night as we lay in the park passing a joint, two locals named Curtis and Darrell appeared from the shadows and offered to sell us some Budweisers from a misshapen, half full case. I pointed toward our half full case of Hamms and motioned for them to sit. These two were the first corporeal humans we had seen in the park.

Curtis sat at the edge of our circle and began a druggy monologue. Neither the Minnesotans, nor Darrell paid him much attention. He filled his lungs with cool air and breathed his story into the nighttime hot as a piston.

When the storm came, he was only a few blocks from the park. Everything was quickly submerged. They were waiting for trailers along with thousands of other displaced residents.

I asked if he was disappointed in the government in the aftermath and his face turned downward and became darker than the shadows. He lowered his voice as any expert showman does to gather the attention of his crowd. He had hooked the Minnesotan who stared at the outline of a shadow that spoke:

"The storm was mother nature's way of telling her children in the city that enough was enough," his preface was familiar and practiced. The rest was disturbing.

"The murder, the stealing, the anarchy…the senseless evil magic. We had no food, no water for five days after the storm. We tried to flag down the military choppers but the soldiers ignored us. Pointed their guns at us and kept flying. The women were being raped. The men were being beaten. We were eating dogs and cats. It was hell but we created it. The dead were payment for so much voodoo and santaria and disrespect to God."

Curtis' voice began to tremble like a chickadee in winter. He flicked a lighter and twisted a crack pipe above the flame until a chemically smell formed. He placed the pipe to his lips and inhaled deeply. He passed the pipe and I refused graciously.

He exhaled a sour exhaust.

When he opened his eyelids to a thick glaze that glowed like a devilish feline in the moonlight.

Humor came from the gallows. One blistering afternoon, Derrick and I came upon a seventies era Coke machine underneath pillows of debris in the rec room of a Catholic church. Derrick found a dolly and the two of us started to tilt and rock the machine. When we loaded the machine the front swung open and a putrid green sludge cascaded out the front. After we finished vomiting our precious bodily fluids, Derrick deadpan channeled Colonel "Bat" Guano, "You're going to have to answer to the Coca-Cola company."

I countered in my best Peter Sellers Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, "That's what the bullets are for." We giggled in slap-happy exhaustion. This was the first conversation Derrick and I had outside of work grumblings. It was humanizing, liberating and absolutely absurd.

That night we sprawled on the park grass and grappled with tumultuous minds. The nighttime stillness was resentful and disordered. Being stationary was disconcerting after the daily trials.

Once inside the walled and gated park we were surrounded first by trees and then by buildings. The sidewalks had remained level, large stone bridges still stood and a statue of Armstrong clutched his trumpet by his side. Sachmo escaped this horrible childhood home only to return with fanfare to the segregated city after he had made it big. The statue, park and eponymous airport are the city's attempt to cleanse history and reconcile with one native son. But as the storm proves, it is impossible to wash away one layer of filth without exposing a deeper layer beneath.

Our park, like most of the city, lay between the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi Delta. It was flushed under after the levees gave up and Big Muddy tried to reassert its natural course. The whole city was built below sea level between these two bodies of water, a historical gaffe that nine Minnesota volunteers helped to endure for at least one more storm.

The park's most apparent damage was atop light poles which bent at strange angles. Most did not produce any light. The enveloping darkness was a soothing contrast to the blinking, albeit sparsely peopled, French Quarter. The scale of damage in the park eluded me for many nights even as we sat within. When it came into focus I remember feeling as if I was finally able to see Seurat's woman with a parasol strolling on an opposite dale.

On that night when I sat silent with my bitter thoughts of segregation and despair our

group was in the historical Beauregard Square section of the park. This is the same plot of land where the tortured souls of slaves supplicated with the gods of Dahomey some three hundred years previous.

When we prairie dwellers sought the green pastures of plenty we instinctively came to the park to connect with the supple femininity of nature. My comrades spoke of a city destroyed in order to snare it in reflection, in the space between syllables and thoughts. We talked about our familiar past and the city's burgeoning future. All the while we were ignorant to the fact that the rebirth, gestation and destruction would happen again and again with or without any of us.

A long trumpet shrilled through my mind and I smelled jazz club cigarettes. I realized that we were neither humanists nor fatalists. Sparrows were not being willed to the ground by our actions or by an unseen hand.

We were not human actors imposing our will on the man-made jungle or reacting to a natural disaster. We were surrounded by the spirits of slaves who adapted to their enslavement, a first-rate artist who came home a second-class citizen and the thousands of impoverished souls ignored by our civilization.

I sat with Sachmo and a light breeze blew a raindrop onto the tip of my nose.