

31 Poems (Katrina Series)

Contributed by Bill Lavender

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1

I'm relieved to discover that even in this extremis
I still like what I like in normal times,
a little wine
some pot after dinner

2

writing this by candlelight
last night
3 a.m.
the stars so bright
above the city
& in the bedroom
the utter dark

3

sleeping in this heat—
inconceivable— but
how quickly we get used to it

4

"I love water;
I'm from cuba!"
he yells then splashing around
diving & back up spitting
out a little stream

5

wake up sweating
the sheet soaked
& move to the floor
in front of the door

6

helicopters work
through the night
without lights
one passing
so close I
feel the wind
from the rotor

7

cuba comes to the door
& wants me to rescue
some guy with a baby
I take the rowboat
around the corner.

the guy is terrified
and the three year old also
because of him.
cuba offers me a slug
from his pint of cheap
bourbon &
I take it

8

white joe loses
almost everything
in his basement apartment.
black joe, above him,
and having less to start with,
loses nothing

9

hard to believe
this is only the second night

10

lying in bed
we hear the frogs singing
just like on the river

11

at the paramedic station
they don't want to give up
their generator. thomas says
people are dying at the hospital
& the other says things
are tough all over

12

we row across the bayou
and a family on their
front porch hails us.
"we're gonna die"
they say.
I tell them they will be OK,
and besides, there's no place
to be rescued to

13

they are moving
the old lady across the street
to a higher apartment next door.
cuba & black joe float her
over on an air-bed. 4 of us
each take a corner of the sheet
and carry her up the stairs
and put her on a mattress on the floor
in the empty apartment.
"ohhh my leg, my leg" she says.

14

I keep walking into rooms &
flipping up the light switch

15

the stuff in the fridge
starting to thaw, nanc
cooks a pork loin in the skillet
& we have it with a spinach and
blue cheese salad
on the front porch while
the filthy waters
swirl around us

16

wednesday morning— the level
only went up a quarter inch
in the night, though it
had been rising about a half inch
per hour

17

the dogs are so well
trained they won't pee
on paper in the house
even when I show them how

18

the one radio station
airs only talk radio—
"what did you think was going to happen?"
"did you not hear the evacuation order?"

19

the apartments across
the bayou— what a vile
atmosphere, debris &
oil and gasoline floating in the fetid
water where the pool used to be,
yuppies & vagrants
together in the soup,
stolen boats, everyone
wanting out even though
the building is tall and
relatively safe.
while in our neighborhood
everyone is calm
and friendly and
in much more danger

20

flood water has now, they
say, equalized with the lake—
fluctuations I'm seeing
on my ruler
are the ebb and flow of the tide

21

what sort of management
is required
for this situation?

management of
laws or people?

22

what sense of self
did my mother have
who lived through
the depression &
the flood of '27?
she who never once broke down

23

when we finally hear
that it will take at least a month
to drain the city
we make our decision
and leave
in less than an hour
vi" we leave all our
perishable food
and some booze
with frank who's not
leaving because
he's heard they don't
let you drink at the dome

24

rowing down saint philip
that I have driven so often
people on their porches
"how you makin out?"
"not bad, not bad"

25

when we turn onto
broad we start
to plot our course
carefully— people loading
boats & tubs
"is there a sale today?"
"yeah, it's the hurricane give-away."

26

junkies
floating down canal
in a kiddie pool
shooting up in a kiddie pool
how cool

27

the only police
are FISH AND WILDLIFE—
some sort
of joke?

28

no one makes us
do anything specific

though sometimes they give
orders just out of habit
or fear—
go that way—
go to the
convention center...

29

under the freeway
on saint charles
a thousand unopened
cartons of chocolate
and white milk

30

crazy man fishing
in a puddle
on st charles
hookers on doorsteps
"how ya doin?"
"awright..."
and on prytania
some guy trying to hotwire a car
but he doesn't know how

31

driving out so ridiculously easy
i was videoing the empty road
down tchoupitoulas up the bridge ramp and across
all we saw were a few people walking and one guy
fixing a flat and then on the expressway on the west
bank there was a cluster of cop cars and one of them
heading the wrong way down our side light
flashing and i saw her there out in front
maybe eighteen years old this beautiful black girl
dressed in white running gear and running along
like a nike commercial or something she looked
so perfect leaping along in front of the car and him
behind her with the blue light like he was pulling
her over for speeding except he was just
idling along and looking kind of bored and she
running for all she was worth glancing back
the fear in her eyes but we kept going what else
were we to do? and even way out on highway 90
the traffic lights not working but traffic starting to pick
be a little careful but made it over the 310
and up to the freeway again and headed north up 55
toward ponchatoula but when we got there
the exit was blocked and the town dark just like
new orleans so we hit the I-12 toward baton rouge
trying to call will or deb or anyone on the cell
but it kept saying all circuits were busy and i knew we
could stay with skip in lafayette but we were exhausted
and didn't want to go that far but finally i called him and
set it up and he sounded excited to have us and it started
to sound good even though it meant another two hours
in the car and we were almost through baton rouge when
my cell rings and it is will finally getting through and
deb gets on the phone and very carefully like she is
concentrating for all she's worth gives me directions
to her friend wally's house so I call skip back & have
to tell him we won't be coming after all and i'm sorry

to get him psyched and then not come through
but it's all we can do and then there are will and ben in the
front yard to wave us down and we pull in the driveway
and charlie drops his head to the wheel and we
all three of us and the two dogs and the two cats in their
cages begin to extricate ourselves from the little VW
and everyone comes out and we're hugging hello
and everyone crying and not really knowing why
but glad to be there and going in and sitting around
the table on the deck the house one of those big ranch
styles so common in baton rouge and wally's very
sweet to us and there's wine to drink and we sit around and
swap stories into the wee hours and then go to bed
and deb tells us that wally doesn't let animals in her house
so we have to leave the dogs and even the cats outside
but renny starts to go a little crazy because he's never
spent the night outside in his life so after everyone goes
to bed i go out and sneak renny and gracie into our room
and they lie down on either side of the bed and i
figure i'll get up early and get them out before anyone
even knows i can't sleep anyway so i get up about dawn
to take them but of course they turn the wrong way
and go straight into wally's room where her husband
whom we haven't even met yet is putting on his tie and
he's looking down at these two nutty happy dogs huffing
around his legs all big grins and slobber
like he can't believe his eyes and i have to go in & grab
them saying i'm so sorry i'm so sorry and get them out
on the deck and give them a biscuit and some water
and then i see that the cat's cage is standing open and i
go back in and wake nanc up saying jesus baby
kitterz is gone i can't believe it i can't believe it and she
just turns over and starts sobbing into the pillow and then
i go around getting everyone up and we're all running
around the neighborhood saying kitty kitty and shaking
her food box and silly shit like that for about an hour
until i realize there is nothing to be done she's either gonna
come back or not so we go inside and wally is fixing a
big breakfast and we all sit around the dining table with her
fine china and after that i go back out and i look at the cage
and the house and the carport and the plants around the
house in the front yard and i try to think like a cat would
think like how she would be in a strange place and stay
in the shadows and close like between the bushes and the house
and away from the dogs on the deck and i walk slowly around
the house watching the bushes and then on the very far corner
there she is under the bush so calm and seeming bored
doesn't even bother to run or anything just looks at me
and i just say come on and she walks right out
and then it's good-byes all around as they're heading for
arkansas and us to florida to take gracie and the car
and the cat back to alex and kat and charlie is heading
to his brother's place in alexandria and our plan is to
drop him at the bus station but we're watching the news
and it is saying there are 200,000 people in downtown
baton rouge trying to get out and we know we can't do
that we're gonna have to take him all the way up there
anyway it isn't all that far and we take off but first we
stop at a clinic for shots and a check up from this ER doctor
friend of deb's and he looks at us looks at our throats looks
at the cut on my finger asks me how i did it and i tell him
how i was getting in the boat and fell and caught that finger
under a strut and scraped it all up and maybe even broke it
and immersed it in the flood water so he gives me an antibiotic
and nothing for nanc since the throat cultures come up negative

and while he's looking at us he's telling us about the hospital downtown and how they're to the point of triage now like if someone has turned septic they're not giving them ventilators because there are only so many ventilators to go around and he knows when he tells the nurse that this one or that is going to die but there is nothing to be done and i tell him well in new orleans most of the hospitals lost all power and there was sewage backing up in the lower floors and the patients and even the nurses and doctors dying there waiting for rescue and then we're out and heading to alexandria we make it quick about 90 minutes to charlie's brother's house and saying good-bye to charlie we break down and nanc is practically bawling and i'm crying too hugging him and then we're back in the car me and nanc and the two dogs and cats and heading across on the state road to florida we have to stay far north to avoid the washed out roads near the coast driving through big pine trees snapped in the middle like toothpicks and all laying down pointing the same direction like metal filings pointing to a magnet or compass needles and they are even pointing north we got into shalimar about ten that night after twelve hours on the road and kissing hello to alex and kat and rich who is kat's dad he has a beach house on a bayou there with a dry dock and rich says how about a beer and i say great and do you have some bourbon and after a couple of boilermakers kat and i are skinny dipping in the bay but nanc won't come in because she says the water is black like the water was in the streets and rich's place so big and lovely and go to bed that night pleasantly drunk but wake up about 4 and go in to the bathroom to pee and while i'm in there starting to cry and can't stop and back in the bed nanc saying what is it baby and then she just starts crying too and next day we go shopping to get some clothes and we all get bathing suits at wal-mart and i get a snorkel and fins too but nanc can't find a suit she likes and we end up going to three other stores till she finds one she can live with and then we go back to rich's place and he wants to take us for a boat ride but nanc isn't feeling well enough to go so i go with rich and alex and kat and we stop out on a sandbar and i snorkel a bit and there is this big boat anchored by us and girls in bikinis dancing to pop songs on the boom box up on the flying bridge and i'm staring at them there's something about it i just can't get i can't understand why anyone would do that can't understand what it means and driving back i go and sit on the bow so no one can see my face and cry into the wind as we speed across the blue florida water and that night rich asks me and alex to come with him to break down his sister's art show in fort walton so we do because rich is being really nice to us it is an arts and crafts fair at a condo and commercial complex on the beach and his sister is so happy she has sold many paintings and made a ton of contacts so we help her break down the tent and load the paintings and gear into the SUV and as we head down to her apartment rich is telling us how painting has been such a boon for his sister because she really needed something after her husband died a few years ago and this was a great gig like those big horizontal canvases she pays about a hundred bucks for the canvas and paint and paints the thing in about two hours

and then sells one for 1800 not bad especially
if she starts developing steady customers and this
show tonight is like a first step in that direction
so he's really happy for her and next day nanc's brother jay
calls and tells us they're driving two cars down
to atlanta from richmond tomorrow one for his wife's
mom and one for us if we want to borrow it and nanc says
sure hell yes we want it thanks so much and we
buy a ticket to fly to atlanta on tuesday and while
we're reserving the flight i'm watching the TV
out of the corner of my eye and i have to yell
jesus look it's the can it's the fucking can
and all of us go over crowd around the TV
to see the helicopter landing on top of the apartments
we call the can because it used to be the american
can factory and it's right down the street
from our house and we're looking at people
running around on the roof do we know them? who is that?
is that brett and jonathan? are they getting everyone?
but we can't tell anything it's just a video bit on
CNN and then I start to really get worried about brett
because if they take them out in copters they probably
go to the convention center and he will have to leave
his dogs and i wake up that night thinking about it
and once again i can't stop crying and the next day
i send out all kinds of emails worrying about brett
and call randy in atlanta and tell him we'll be there
for one night tuesday can we stay with them? and
he says yes of course and i'm looking forward to
seeing john and randy and tracy and also mike
and kim are staying in atlanta at some relatives
house so we decide we'll go see them too while we're
up there and then i get an email from jennifer
with a forward from someone announcing that FEMA
is looking for people with construction experience
to help rebuild new Orleans & I'm thinking this is what
I want to do I want to go back and help to do something
so i email a quick resume with my construction experience
on it and about five minutes later my cell rings and it
is the guy from this firm called AICS saying that i'm
qualified to be a construction manager 2 and i ask when
they will need me and he says yesterday and i say what
would i be doing and he says i have no idea and i
say how much would it pay and he says a cm2
starts out at 46 bucks an hour plus per diem and
lodging expense and car and cell phone all total
i'd be knocking down about 18 grand a month
but working 7 12 hour days per week
and i start to think that might be ok it would be good
to feel like i was doing something and then make
some money besides i mean at that rate what
difference would it make if insurance covered
my truck sitting under water on st. philip street
i could just buy a new one and make a little
money besides to fix up the camp or whatever
and when tuesday rolls around we
get on the plane at eglad and the stewardess
finds out we're from new orleans and tells some other
people on the flight and they all want to know
what it was like and at one point the stewardess asks
me if we need any money and i say no but thank you
we are fine we lost hardly anything we're in great shape
compared to lots of others and when we get off the
plane in atlanta the stewardess heather was her name
hugs us goodbye and randy picks us up outside baggage

claim and takes us by jay's friend's house to pick up the car and then to decatur for a burger and beer and then to their place and then nanc goes to bed cause she's beat and john and i take some hits off his bong and start to jam in his office upstairs he has all these new effects boxes for his guitars and he has just bought a new five string bass and randy and tracy come up and read some poems to the noise and we drink beer and toke on the bong and thrash the guitars till after 3 and then i crawl into bed with nanc and in what seems like a couple of hours get up and pack up and leave just leaving them a note because we even forgot to talk about when we were leaving then we call mike and kim and head up to their place by buckhead for breakfast it's on provincial oak circle which is off of provincial oak lane which is off of provincial oak road in provincial oaks sub division and the house is enormous mike's sister's place they are hawaii at the moment there's a picture of george and laura bush on the fridge signed thanks and kim is saying how she doesn't think they'll be back for a long time their house was flooded to the second floor but anyway she kind of likes it here she's saying hey i got here and there's a gym and a pool down the street and i'm thinking hey i could get used to this and nanc says yeah it looks like a lot of people won't be coming back and kim says yeah i guess that might be one of the you know sort of good things that happens that some people well you know some that we'd just as soon see gone won't be coming back and then we have to go again and get in the jeep SUV that jay has loaned us and head back down to florida and we only stay one more night at rich's because we want to get home or least home to our camp in ponchatoula and have some time to ourselves so we pack up renny and the cat and our little bit of stuff and kiss good bye again and nanc is saying goodbye to gracie and she breaks down which no one understands because who would break down saying goodbye to a friend's dog but gracie had been through it with us and she'll always be special to us after that driving back to louisiana we've got gas cans strapped to the top of the gas guzzling SUV and some places the gas is over three bucks a gallon and some places there simply isn't any gas and once again we have to move north on the little roads to avoid the beach highways and halfway through mississippi we start to really worry about gas and then outside picayune there is a station open with national guard troops standing guard on the line and we get in it the guards are kids maybe 20 years old in fatigues with machine guns and they are just directing traffic and we get our gas and head on down through bogalusa which it turns out is utterly trashed trees smashed through houses and rubble all over the road none of the traffic lights working like some sort of ghost town cops riding around on four wheelers and we take a wrong turn somewhere and wind up in sun and as we pull up to the only intersection there i say to nanc which way now and she says oh i fucked up and i look at the map and we've doubled back gone way out of the way and she says sorry and i say if i'd been reading the map it wouldn't have happened and she says ok just fucking

leave me here ok and she gets out and starts walking down the highway and i pull up beside her and say come on i'm sorry get in so she gets in looking resigned and defeated and starts to cry and says i'm sorry i fucked up but why do you have to be so mean? and i say i don't know i can't help it i'm fucked up too and she's sitting there bawling and saying i just want to go home i want to go home and see my friends and they aren't there there isn't anyone there any more and i drive on and we make it to the camp in about another hour and it's a little more of a wreck than we thought it would be with four or five big trees down all around it and the driveway blocked by another one and worst of all the electrical service laying on the ground taken out by a big limb and i set to work to see if i can fix it but it's too much of a mess the weatherhead all broken and the feeder pipe ripped off the meter pan but i take it apart and get the meter pan and the panel mounted back on the house and call tanya our neighbor up river and ask her to recommend an electrician and i call him and he'll come out the next day and i find a long piece of romex and run it to the neighbor's house and steal power from his panel to run our pump and the fridge for the night though the fridge is a wreck we'd left a little bit of meat in the freezer and the smell is the stench of death so we decide to sleep on the screen porch which turns out to be lovely anyway with the owls and water birds cackling through the night and i can listen to them because i can't sleep anyway and the next day i fire up the chain saw and start to hack at the trees which lay all around the house and just get it so we can walk around and drive in the driveway and i have to go in to ponchatoula and buy some tools at one point and there is a woman in the hardware store getting a key made and she's telling the attendant that she needs the key because they've never locked their house before but they've heard that all this riff-raff from new orleans is moving in now and now they are going to have to start locking their doors and the electrician comes out in the afternoon and starts to work on the service a young kid about 20 but i watch him and he is smart and careful and he won't reinstall the old feeders because the insulation is cracked and i like him being careful like that and he likes talking to me and doesn't seem to mind me looking over his shoulder because he sees i know what he is doing and sees i appreciate it and while we're standing out there the love bugs are swarming i've never seen them so thick they're everywhere in our eyes and mouth and hair and he's saying so you live in new orleans and i say yeah i used to have a house in new orleans and a camp in ponchatoula and now i have a house in ponchatoula and a camp in new orleans and he says i don't get it how anyone could live down there i mean up here you know everyone who is your neighbor and if anyone who comes around who shouldn't be there it's no problem because everyone knows and like no one locks their doors or anything but i tell you what i'm locking my doors now and jesus the fucking love bugs most worthless thing on god's green earth love bugs and i say but it could be worse they could be mosquitos and he says yeah but you know even mosquitos have a purpose you know it's like they live to bite you and make you miserable but love bugs they don't do nothing they don't bite they don't sting they're just there in your eyes and mouth and hair and all over your windshield splattered on your car and every fucking where

millions and millions of them

[Lavender Ink Website]