Saving Mom

William S. Monaghan

MOM WAS WINNING THE ARGUMENT; IT WAS true that no house had ever been lost to a hurricane in our neighborhood in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie. Johnny Upham, who had built my parents' ranch house at 1009 Falcon Road, had lost his house in a card game at the Metairie Country Club in the 1950s. But since then hurricanes had caused no more damage than downed branches and flooded streets. On Sunday, August 27, 2005 at about four P.M., I was on the phone in Sag Harbor, New York, trying to convince my mother, Eleanor Monaghan, to leave her home. There were only a few hours left before Hurricane Katrina would arrive.

Belatedly, I was worrying about what would happen to an 86-year-old woman alone in a one-story house in a deserted neighborhood if water started rising around her. My mother's activities were more directed toward the garden club, the book club, conversation, friends and her family than on a climb into the attic to escape advancing floodwater. She always looked like she was about to go to a party. On the other hand, she had grown up on a farm in Ohio with no heat or indoor plumbing, and walked several miles through the snow to school until she was 17.

"This storm is as big as the Gulf of Mexico on the satellite map. It's only two in the afternoon, you have time to drive to Baton Rouge." Mom was unmoved. I tried accommodation. "If you don't want to leave, you could go to the house of someone who is also staying in town. Or could I get you a nice hotel room?" Images of sternwheelers steaming across flooded cotton fields from my Louisiana history courses came to mind. I felt dim and unconvincing and said good-bye.

I consulted my daughter, Tess, at college. She said to tell Mom that the uncertainty about her safety in a hurricane would upset her family and she should leave for our sake. I called my mother back and launched the worried-friends-and-relatives argument. She countered that the highways were clogged. Gas stations had block-long lines. She was afraid of getting stuck on the road in the hurricane. She did not want to join the long line of the poor, mostly black, frequently old and incapacitated population shown on television outside the Superdome shelter. And if I kept talking she was going to cry.

Monday, the day of the hurricane, I started calling my mother at nine. After an hour of dialing, she answered the phone, sounding perhaps not perky but at least composed. Tree branches had fallen around the house poking a hole in the roof. She put a bucket under the leak. The power was off when she got up at six. Water was an inch below the door thresholds. But it hadn't rained much more than with other hurricanes, and the rain had stopped, indicating that the water should start to recede. Relieved, I said goodbye. When I called to check on the water level, an hour later, the line was busy.

Then, at about one, the media started reporting breaks in the levees. A 200-foot section of the Lake Ponchartrain levee at the Seventeenth Street Canal had collapsed. The canal runs south to my mother's neighborhood. More calls produced busy signals; water had risen to the height of the telephone wires inside the house.

Our friends in New Orleans had evacuated, or their phones did not work. The media broadcast no information about how to report or rescue victims of the storm. Roadblocks obstructed access to the city. I couldn't tell what was happening or do anything useful from two thousand miles away. Should I depend on state and federal efforts to get my mother out of her house? New Orleans is notorious for ineffectual government, and the size of this problem would overwhelm even a competent local government. When I knew him, my fraternity brother George W. Bush had been an arrogant, talent-free barfly. His only success since then had been his recent crusade to disable the federal government, so I doubted FEMA was up to the job.

I made a reservation to go to Baton Rouge Tuesday afternoon. On the way to the airport the next day, Tess called with emergency and search and rescue phone numbers. Harried by images of the hurricane on every TV monitor, I arrived in Baton Rouge and rented a minivan so I would have a place to sleep.

When I turned on the radio, the van filled with the chaos and panic of the disaster area. It was nothing like the national news reports. Talk radio callers were stranded in their houses asking for help. Boat owners were calling to complain that they were stopped at roadblocks and prevented from rescuing survivors. People asked why New Orleans was on the news and their mangled town was forgotten. A school bus driver from Lafayette had driven with a convoy of fifty buses from Lafayette to New Orleans only to be turned away because the school buses were deemed unsafe. The Greater Faith Church of the Abundance and other imaginatively named places of worship were offering shelter, food and clothing. Callers were looking for missing family and friends. The talk show hosts gave them telephone numbers of organizations that would help. A call came from a lady looking for her mother who had been in a nursing home in Saint Bernard Parish where no information had emerged since the storm began. The announcer advised people to take an axe with them if the water forced them into their attics, so they could break through the roof to escape if the water continued to rise. Callers reported that stockpiles of food and equipment were not being sent to the

disaster area. The radio hosts sneered at their claims and berated them for criticizing the governor, the president and FEMA.

There wasn't much damage from Katrina visible in Baton Rouge. I went to a Whole Foods to use their wifi to pick up my email. Blonde mothers wheeled out mountains of food to the SUV-clogged parking lot. In that utopian American scene it was difficult to think that a lot of people, including my mother, might be drowning in fetid floodwater 80 miles away. I bought a flashlight, some water and dinner, and left for New Orleans.

In clear, hot weather, through spiky green sugar cane fields, Donaldsonville and Thibodoux, the road was unobstructed, with little evidence of the storm. At Raceland, the road was sealed off by state police. I was intimidated by the idea of wandering around a dark, flooded city reported to be populated with carjackers, looters and police with orders to shoot to kill. I turned back, and went to sleep in the van in a cane field in Brusly.

When I awoke Wednesday, radio callers ranted about the disgrace of stores being looted in the midst of a disaster and cheered the Governor's exhortations to shoot the looters. The radio hosts heaped invectives on the thieves. In a calm voice the CFO of Charity Hospital said they had a thousand patients and staff in two facilities with no power and one day's food and water left. They were surrounded by floodwater, tired and desperate. They had carried the most critically ill patients down ten flights of stairs, across the street to Tulane Hospital by boat and upstairs to the helicopter pad. Tulane Hospital security guards refused to let them use the facility, and the patients were carried back. CNN had destroyed what little morale was left when it reported that Charity Hospital had been evacuated. Advertisers told listeners who wanted to participate in the current real estate boom but lacked a down payment that they would lend them the down payment. A Catholic caller wondered why he had heard only Protestant churches offer food and shelter. Jefferson Parish joined New Orleans in declaring martial law and a curfew. Announcers gave callers more telephone numbers for search and rescue requests and missing person's reports.

I had over a dozen phone numbers scribbled on napkins and bags all over the van. None worked. After an hour's dialing I would get through and be placed on hold. Then, most of them disconnected. The few that were answered had no process to find missing persons, no idea of what had happened to the pervious search and rescue requests for my mother, and provided more telephone numbers that didn't work. I called friends and politicians I knew to try to get permission from the state or FEMA to get past the roadblocks.

Back at the Whole Foods, images of chaos featuring helpless black victims and armed black looters now saturated television and the internet. The city resembled the barricaded post-apocalyptic landscape of movies like *Escape From New York* or *Mad Max*. The water was rising in New Orleans, the government had given up trying to stop it, the rescue effort was ineffectual and I was stuck in Baton Rouge.

Then in the afternoon, a radio caller reported that Jefferson Parish refugee centers lacked food, water, toothpaste, soap and toilet paper, and officials would let shipments of supplies through the roadblocks. I had a way to talk my way in and a reason for being there if I was stopped once inside. I filled the van up to the windows with supplies, and headed for New Orleans on Interstate I-10.

For the last 40 miles from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, the massive concrete highway is more bridge than road as it levitates above the tangled green swamp. A few police cars, buses with grates in the windows used for prisoners, and pickups pulling boats were the only evidence of the relief effort on the main route to New Orleans. In the breakdown lane on the westbound side were aged, worn cars that had not made it to Baton Rouge. Flashing lights on police cars, a tent and state police officers came into view at La Place where I-310 diverged. I wanted to avoid questions from the police so I slowed down to let the car in front of me get farther ahead, and when it had cleared the lane, I drove through at about 30, giving a friendly wave to the police. They didn't shoot or follow me. I was in.

The swamp ended and the wrecked buildings began where the highway descends to grade at the airport. I rolled down the window and the van filled with the steamy air and sweet tropical smell of New Orleans. The walls of a huge mini-storage building had been torn off; the contents spilled out to the ground. The highway was dry. The neighborhoods to the side of the road only had water in the streets, but fallen trees had carved houses into pieces. The mirrored glass windows of a high-rise were shattered. Helicopters were landing and taking off next to a group of emergency vehicles blocking the highway at the intersection of I-10 and Causeway Boulevard. Police cars sat with their lights flashing at intersections on the deserted roads. Electric cables snaked through the streets and draped over houses and cars. At Airline Highway, emergency vehicles were parked on the elevated traffic rotary. The ramps down to the highway in the direction of central New Orleans were being used to launch boats into floodwater that extended as far as I could see. It was almost dark when I turned down Metairie Road toward our house. Trucks passed loaded with soil, and 30 or 40 sandbags sat in the intersection, the type that were being used in the failed attempt to block the breaks in the levees, sandbags about the size of a large garbage can.

As I drove slowly through the six-inch-deep water, my cell phone rang. It was my mother. She had reached safety. Water had risen to her waist in the house. Two young black men had floated her out of her house on a swimming pool raft and taken them to stay with their family. When that house flooded they escaped by boat to dry land. She was calling from a satellite phone at the intersection of Clearview Expressway and I-10 where buses were to load evacuees. They might take her to Baton Rouge, Lafayette, or Houston. She would call when she got to another phone. She had to hang up.

The intersection Mom mentioned was empty. Three buses that had been chartered to transport dogs from an animal hospital were all I found at another refugee center. The police sent me to Sam's Club, which appeared to be deserted. But as I turned in to the parking lot, my headlights revealed hundreds of people sitting on the asphalt. There were no chairs, beds, toilets, police or aid workers. A few had shopping carts filled with garbage bags and suitcases. Mom wasn't there. I unloaded the supplies

from the van into shopping carts and left them at the edge of the crowd.

Returning to the Causeway Boulevard helicopter landing area, I parked on the grass and walked toward the glare of the emergency lighting. Vehicles of police, ambulance and emergency rescue crews from Texas, Arkansas and south Louisiana were parked in the lanes of the interstate. Under the overpass and between the lanes was a medical facility, the only three portable toilets in the area. Throngs of policemen and national guardsmen stood around. Doctors and nurses were examining people. Patients lay on cots in the road. The police, National Guard, medical personnel and helicopter pilots were all white.

A disheveled crowd lined the right side of the highway behind the steel barrier at the edge of the breakdown lane. Behind them were about a thousand more people sitting on the ground. I walked among the grimy, dispirited, mostly black figures sitting or lying in the mud looking for my mother. Past the emergency medical unit, two Salvation Army canteen trucks were dispensing food. Beyond the canteen trucks the highway disappeared into the floodwater. Green National Guard helicopters thundered out of the dark and descended to the grassy landing area to the left, directed by a National Guardsman with a radio. Cowering under the shrieking rotors, people disembarked, aided by guardsmen wearing blue surgical gloves.

Most of the evacuees carried garbage bags of belongings. There was a high proportion of the old and infirm. Many could not walk and needed stretchers or wheelchairs to move out of the landing area. Food, false teeth, baby bottles, blue rubber gloves, plastic bags, medicine containers and clothing littered the landing area and the path to the crowd on the other side of the highway. A front-end loader moved up and down the highway plowing the lost possessions into a heap at the side of the road.

In the landing area I steadied a tall, elderly black man inching his way through the debris. He had been separated from his wife who had Alzheimer's disease. In his hand he carried a plastic bag containing her medicine. A large black plastic trash bag was wrapped tightly around his right foot. I was relieved to find he had a shoe on under the garbage bag when I untangled it. I walked him to the other side of the road where a Guardsman was moving elderly people to the front of a line waiting for buses. The man said he could not stand any longer. A lady behind him in line held him steady while I found a wheelchair at the medical area. When I returned she had found a suitcase for him to sit on. I left him waiting in the wheelchair.

During the hour and a half trip back to Baton Rouge only a few buses were going in the direction of New Orleans. The evacuees at the I-10 landing site would be there all night. Once the road reached solid ground I pulled off the highway and went to sleep.

At 10 on Thursday, my mother phoned to say that a bus had taken her to the Houston Astrodome where she had spent the night. At eight Wednesday night she had departed from the Causeway Boulevard helicopter landing area. I had passed within three hundred feet of her twice without finding her. A friend in Houston agreed to pick her up, take her shopping for clothes, give her a place to stay and put her on a plane to New York on Friday.

I had the rest of the day to take more supplies to New Orleans. Sam's Club in Baton Rouge was jammed with ambulance crews, rescue teams, firemen and workers from refugee shelters. I bought a thousand individual portions of fruit, pasta, soup, meat and juice that could be opened by hand and loaded them into the van. At the roadblock, the police were forcing traffic off the road to New Orleans and onto I-310. I followed the other cars to the right and swerved to the left behind the state troopers to get back on the highway to New Orleans.

At the Zephyr baseball field refugee center my mother had mentioned, five stocky men in camouflage uniforms carrying shotguns blocked the entrance. One of them aimed his shotgun at me and, shouting, demanded to know what I wanted. When I told him I was looking for the refugee center, he said they were all gone and told me to get out. He kept the shotgun pointed at me and stood 20 feet from the van. I asked where the refugees were and he became more agitated. He yelled that people had been shooting at him all day and asked me if I had a full tank of gas in the van. Hearing that I did, he told me to drive out before my van was stolen and I was stranded or murdered. He said the city was so dangerous the military was leaving.

There was no one left in the New Orleans Sam's Club parking lot. At Causeway and I-10, the crowd, now numbering close to 2,000, was partially sheltered beneath the overpass leaving many sitting resignedly in the rain. There were five buses in the westbound expressway lane loading evacuees. I inched the van through the police, refugees and piles of debris to the Salvation Army canteen and unloaded the food.

At ten o'clock that night I tried to reach our house again. Five blocks from home the water was too deep to drive farther. Frogs croaked in the gloom under the oak trees. Houses jutted from water extending in every direction. I heard a faint splash but didn't see anyone when I turned on the flashlight. Then I heard someone coming through the water toward me. It was a tall black man carrying a plastic bag. He didn't look like a carjacker. We stood talking for a minute, and then he disappeared into the dark, walking toward downtown.

Hedges, fallen tree limbs and fences tangled my legs as I waded toward the house. The water grew deeper, reaching my waist. Swimming in the stinking floodwater seemed foolish, so I struggled back to the van. A white pickup appeared from the direction of downtown New Orleans. The driver had cut his leg and wanted to know if he could reach Ochsner Hospital.

Friday I flew to La Guardia to meet my mother. Other than bruises on her arms and some lost weight, the hurricane appeared to have had a worse effect on me than on her. Her hair had been done at a salon in Houston, she wore a new pumpkin colored blouse and olive pinstripe pants, and she enthused about how nice everyone was to her when they heard she was from New Orleans. Four days of tense, feral life in tropical Louisiana had left me looking like the refugee.

As we drove to Manhattan she told me what had happened. After our call on the day of the hurricane, as she stepped into the playroom, the rug moved and its surface rippled away from her foot. A half-inch of water was in

the room and the carpet was floating. Even then she still expected the water to recede as it always had before.

She put the rattan chairs in the playroom on top of the pool table. She lifted the bottom of the floor-length drapery onto chairs. She got out her sewing box and pinned up the ruffle at the bottom of her mother's couch so it wouldn't get wet. By the time she reached the end of the ruffle the water had risen further and the part she had pinned up was wet. The Persian rug she rolled up in the next room was too heavy to lift. In the living room brown blotches were spreading across the beige carpet. In her closet she moved things on hangers to higher clothes rods and placed clothing on higher shelves. Damp brown stains were climbing up the dresses she had not yet moved. The water was up to her ankles. She put her jewelry in a bag and, walking to the kitchen, put it in the cupboard above the stove. From the kitchen window she saw the deserted neighborhood disappearing in a sea of brown water.

Soap, scouring powder and sponges floated out into the room when she opened the cupboard doors beneath the sink. In the refrigerator, water was up to the bottom shelf. She took out bread, mayonnaise, cheese and an apple. She made a cheese sandwich at the counter and wrapped it in plastic to keep it fresh. The water was eight inches deep in the playroom, and her feet were cold. She put the sandwich, the apple and a book she had been reading on the pool table, climbed up using a low table as a step, and sat on one of the chairs she had placed there earlier. She began to read. Occasionally, splashes and clunking noises could be heard from other parts of the house. The drapery looped over the furniture was now wet. The alarm shrieked from her car in the carport and slowly diminished in volume until it was no longer audible. As she watched, water would rise beneath a chair, appear at the back of the seat, and slowly float the chair off the floor until it toppled into the water. She ate half the cheese sandwich and rewrapped the remainder.

At dusk, she climbed down into the knee-deep water. Nothing was visible beneath the brown surface. Thresholds, the rolled up carpet, flowerpots and furniture lurked underwater. Books, bowls, newspapers and trashcans floated on the surface. Slowly she waded toward the kitchen. Mom found candles and put them in the kitchen, the dining room and the dressing room. The walls and ceilings rippled with the reflections of her flashlight, shadows of floating furniture, candle flames and the water's surface.

There was nothing to do in the dark, ruined house. The bed was still dry, so she climbed in and tried to go to sleep. At six A.M. she awoke. She sat up and put her feet over the side of the bed into the water. In the gray light she noticed the bedside table had disappeared. The chest of drawers was only a few inches from her knees and the end of the bed was touching the bedroom door. The bed was no longer in the same place where it had been the night before. It was floating around the room.

She dropped into the waist-deep water. Stepping over the fallen plant stand that blocked the bedroom door, she made her way to the kitchen and sat at the high chair with her legs in the water and her head resting on a pillow on the counter. Outside the window, the water level was two bricks below the top of the patio wall. After about an hour

she walked around the house moving her possessions that weren't wet to higher shelves. When she returned to the kitchen the brick wall outside had disappeared beneath the floodwater.

She dialed the phone but it didn't work. She pushed the button on her emergency medical alarm. From the hall closet she retrieved the three-legged cane my father had used when he was sick. Tugging the swollen front door open, she made her way down the step, over submerged tree branches to the sidewalk. Only her shoulders and her head were above the water. Intense sunlight illuminated every detail of the silent neighborhood. She looked up and down the street. There was no motion in the houses or on the water between them. The heat and humidity made breathing difficult. She could feel her heart beating faster and she was getting dizzy. She had never learned to swim. Now she was afraid. She retreated to the house.

She climbed back up to the chair on the pool table and tried to read her book. Two hours later, at noon, she walked into the dressing room and heard voices. Looking out the window she saw two young black men on the steps of the house on the corner that belonged to the Reise family. She got the sash open and shouted for help. Denard and Garrard Alexander, ages 24 and 17 respectively, appeared in the water at her front step, towing a swimming pool float. Denard said, "You should come to our house. We have food and water. We'll take care of you."

She retrieved her cheese sandwich, her purse and a dry pair of pants and a blouse. On the front step they lifted Mom onto the float and pushed her toward the Reise house. From the seemingly deserted house, people were waving to them from the porch, as excited to see her as she was to see them, and shouting, "Come on, come on, we're going to take care of you." They waded in and lifted Mom out of the water. There were eighteen of them, aged nine months to eighty-nine years old, all related to Evelyn Alexander, who sat in the hall at the top of the stairs in a wheelchair, paralyzed by a stroke. They appeared worried that mom might think they did not have permission to be there, and Evelyn's daughter Ernestine, the Reises' maid, had Mom talk to Donna Reise on the phone. When mom tried to make another call, the line was dead.

The afternoon heat kept Mom in the shade of her second floor bedroom they gave her. The damp air was still, and the temperature was in the nineties. People came in to talk and bring bottles of water. On the porch outside her window, seven cousins tried to attract the attention of helicopters flying overhead by yelling and waving red towels. They shouted: "He was standing right in the door of the helicopter. He looked right at us. He saw us, he saw us."

The two Alexander brothers went out with the raft looking for help. Wading to Metairie Road, they found the body of a man named Webb in the street, but no rescue workers.

That evening Mom and some of the older Alexanders stood outside, gazing at the watery scene, and chatting about their families. From the elevated deck, the neighborhood resembled houseboats on a lake. The burglar alarm went off in Mom's house when the water reached the control panel, and the sound echoed off the houses until the battery ran down. The helicopters had disappeared. The family went downstairs to eat. Later, Ernestine came up holding a can and asked if my mother would like mushroom soup for dinner. When it was dark the younger children went to sleep on the deck and the adults sat and talked. Mom fell asleep fanning herself on the bed.

When they woke up the floodwater had risen eight inches above the first floor. They were almost out of food and water. The men went out again to look for help. At 10 there was a shout. Garrard and Denard had found two men in a boat who were getting their family out of a house by the Metairie Country Club. They were nearly out of fuel but came to help. The Alexander brothers brought Mom down the steps, over the submerged shrubbery at the corner of the house, and lifted her into the boat idling in the front yard. Children were sitting in a row on the transom at the back. Lisa and Evelyn and her wheelchair were the last in, and the boat backed away from the house.

The boatman guided them toward the elevated New Orleans Public Belt Railroad. The flood had created a new landscape. Streets had disappeared. Houses floated, bisected by the plane of the water's surface. Mom could barely tell which house was hers. At the crossing the boat approached the grade. The children jumped into the water and ran up to the tracks. Ernestine's niece Catina carried her baby. Lisa, Ernestine's granddaughters Gomesha and Yoshika, and Catina's husband, Elbert, carried Evelyn in her wheelchair up to the track. The boatmen said to walk to the left toward the sheriff's office on Airline Highway, a mile away, and pulled away to pick up the rest of the family.

My mother walked behind the children, pausing to throw branches off the track to make it easier for the others to push the wheelchair over the uneven ballast. Exposed in the sun on the dark rail ties, it was even hotter than in the house. One four-year-old boy raced back and forth wearing a white adult T-shirt that came down to his flip-flops. The children ran ahead and returned, then ran ahead again. Larger children of six or seven carried two- and three-year-old cousins.

At the intersection of Metairie Road and Airline Highway the group straggled down the railroad embankment to the Sheriff's office. An officer standing outside walked them over to a van in the parking lot, opened the back doors, and told them he would take them to a refugee facility at Zephyr Field. They sat on the van's floor because it was used to transport prisoners and had no windows or seats. Ernestine and her sister Wanda, Denard, Garrard, and Catina's children, Elbert Junior, Avis, and Aston, were in the second group and hadn't arrived yet. Everyone wanted to wait for them but the truck was full and the officer promised to return to the Sheriff's office and bring them later.

After a short airless ride, they climbed out of the sweltering van at a building on the grounds at the baseball field. The adults sat on a bench next to Evelyn, and the children played in the dusty field. At noon a Salvation Army canteen truck appeared. Mom thought the baloney and mustard sandwich tasted great. The remaining family members did not arrive, and Catina rocked back and forth holding her baby and crying. At five the food truck returned. Evelyn rejected the sandwich and canned peaches but liked the vegetables Mom fed her.

Gradually the population decreased as people were taken to I-10 to board buses. Mom and the Alexander

family were put in another prisoner van and taken to the loading site where they disembarked near the Salvation Army trucks. A National Guardsman spotted my mother's gray hair amid the group pushing Evelyn's wheelchair and moved them all to the front of the line. Elbert saw the rest of the family in the crowd and everyone started shouting and jumping in the air and calling to Ernestine and the others. Catina cried and hugged her children.

Denard and Garrard had stayed in the neighborhood during the day, ferrying 25 people on the pool raft to higher ground. Ernestine and the group from the second boat trip had been told to walk the two miles along Causeway Boulevard to reach the I-10 evacuation site. Their feet hurt and their skin was blistered from the sun. The two brothers got a ride to I-10 with a man named Ray they had met in the rescue effort.

Eight of the family and mom got on one of the buses. At three in the morning theirs was the second bus to arrive at the Astrodome. Illuminated by the stadium lights, the vast, cold interior echoed with the sound of workers setting up cots. At the entrance, a Red Cross volunteer directed Mom to the medical facility because of the bruises on her arms. When she rejoined them, the Alexanders had staked out a group of cots and saved one for her. A blanket and a bag of toiletries lay on each. The plastic cot, the hard blanket, and the intense lighting made it difficult to sleep. In the morning the children were playing under the cots and racing up and down the steps. When mother returned from the bathroom, one of the family had put a plate of grits and scrambled eggs on her cot.

The Alexanders made their way to La Place, Louisiana to stay with relatives, where 12 people are living in a two-bedroom house. When I call, it is difficult to tell which Alexander I am speaking to. They hand the phone from one person to another, other people in the room are part of the conversation, people walk in and out, and frequently several Alexanders talk into the phone at the same time. The floodwater around Ernestine's house in New Orleans East reached its roof. They are looking for housing but, two weeks after they escaped, nothing is available. Most businesses are closed and none of the family can find work. The FEMA disaster assistance telephone lines hang up as soon as you press one for English.

Mom and I are in my house in downtown Manhattan. From here I watched the World Trade Center collapse. I lived with my daughter in Beijing at the height of the SARS epidemic. I left here for a vacation in Chennai in south India on the day of the Tsunami. For four days I was dodging the police and carjackers in the ruins of south Louisiana. How are we to cope with the relentless folly of man and indiscriminate power of nature? I asked Mom what she would have done Tuesday and Wednesday had she been forced to deal with the water when it rose another two feet. She said she had thought about that at the time, and decided she would climb up to the top of the car.

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Aric Mayer

On the following pages appear photographs by Aric Mayer, an East Africa–born, Brooklyn-based photographer. Mayer entered New Orleans with his camera on September 4, 2005, less than a week after Hurricane Katrina. In the following weeks, he made a large body of medium-format photographs covering the city from flooded Lakeview to the completely wrecked Plaquemines Parish. Here Mayer works to reverse the approach of the breaking news coming out of New Orleans by making the viewer the main character in the narrative of the city's haunting landscape, using operations of the sublime and the grotesque to acknowledge the immensity of the damage.

A REFRIGERATED SEAFOOD TRUCK HANGS IN AN OAK TREE
NEAR BURAS, LA. PHOTO: ARIC MAYER.

GOING INTO THE FLOODED NEIGHBORHOOD OF LAKEVIEW IN NEW ORLEANS NEAR THE 17TH STREET CANAL LEVEE BREACH, SEPTEMBER 4, 2005. PHOTO: ARIC MAYER.

A STREET IN THE BYWATER NEIGHBORHOOD OF NEW ORLEANS.
PHOTO: ARIC MAYER.

THE POLAND STREET WAREHOUSE SMOLDERS ON SEPTEMBER 5, 2005, A WEEK AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA HIT. PHOTO: ARIC MAYER.