

UPROOTED

by Rachel N. Spear

Times are changing. And things will never be the same. I'm not saying that life will be better or worse, just different.

– John R. Hayward

08.04.12

The moving truck is packed. And it is almost time to set out on a journey across the country, or rather, on a journey home. After being away from the Gulf Coast of Mississippi for almost a decade, I am heading back. The decision to relocate myself, my dog, my books, and all other physical belongings from North Carolina to my birth state is bittersweet, one that feels more like a calling than a choice.

10.16.12

Two months in, and I have had my ups and downs, which is probably sad to admit. But it is the truth. Some days, I even question why I moved back. Perhaps the trite saying of one cannot return home is true, as I feel lost in this world. Or maybe not lost. Rather, I long for my former routine, my historic one-bedroom apartment, my yellow office, my favorite stores, my running route – my Wilmington life.

At times, I replay my reasons for accepting the offer to teach composition at the University of Southern Mississippi. Better pay. Direct connection to my specialty. I wish the rationale was solely job-related, but some part of me feels as if making the transition back to Mississippi, where I spent twenty-three years of my life, relates to something beyond long-term goals. I can validate this decision with phrases that stress my professionalism, but somewhere deeper than logic, hidden behind this a career-driven persona is a little girl who desires to heal old wounds, to return to a life before times changed.

August 28, 2005.

I woke up in my Baton Rouge apartment to an aunt's early phone call. She informed me that Katrina had strengthened to a category 5. With a sound of unease and urgency, she asked if I wanted to drive home and evacuate with them. My hometown, was, or would soon be, under mandatory evacuation.

Waveland, MS, is home. Forever and always. No matter where my wings take me. That place and its neighboring town, Bay St. Louis, have my roots. Part of a typical Southern family, I grew up not as an individual, but as a Hayward. We, my extended family, were interwoven in an almost codependent nature, doing everything as a unit and oversharing the smallest detail. During my childhood, life, at times, was hard to distinguish where my family stopped and I began, but this seemed normal. I was conditioned to believe and act a certain way, wired to be and do as a Hayward. Because of this (at times) neurotic closeness, leaving the family, first for college and then for graduate school and then for my first faculty position, has had its challenges. But no matter where I physically live, my town and family are a part of my very being, and that August morning, the thought that Katrina could, indeed, make landfall anywhere near my home was unnerving.

With raised concerns, I packed my car, left Baton Rouge, and headed east into Waveland – having plans to assist the family with last minute preparations and then to be a part of our caravan out of town.

September, 2005.

The first days after the storm are a blur. I cannot remember exacts. But I do remember emotions. I yelled at a cousin, cried on the floor of a friend's bathroom, stopped and sat on a staircase to collect myself before having to face people again. I wanted to avoid speaking about the loss and destruction.

Waveland and Bay St. Louis were hit hard by the storm. My hometown had been wiped out, washed out, turned to "Wasteland," as a media article insensitively described it. Since I no longer "lived" there, I suffered from loss coupled with survivor's remorse.

My Louisiana one-bedroom apartment became the place of refuge for family members. We had nine people, dogs, and a couple of cats. I would wake up, crawl over my aunt in my bed, slide past two cousins on an air mattress, tiptoe past the ones in the living room, and try to shower and make my coffee and head to work without disturbing them – all the while wanting to remain with them.

Baton Rouge was up and running, and as a graduate student, I had four seminars to attend, one class to teach, and students to educate. Some of them had been impacted as well; some of them had been displaced. I cared for them, but I also put up a front, held onto my professionalism, distanced myself from my personal life when I was on campus. In all honesty, I cannot recall one student's name from that semester. I was too distracted. I went through the motions, did anything and everything. But I was not mindfully present. Too consumed with what had to be done. Too crushed to realize I had stopped eating. Too conflicted with wanting to be elsewhere.

Today, I am grateful for friends, many of them. One took in some family members to sleep on her floor; another handed over her entire apartment. Another friend called me out, made me recognize that I needed to pay more attention, needed to focus on myself, needed to get my body back into a three-digit weight. And my best friend, since middle school, who, like so many, lost everything... She and I talked. A lot. We would call each other to check in, to support each other. Our good and bad days seemed opposite, and one could listen while the other cried. We could offer words of comfort, if we had any words to share.

Those days, I grew closer to my loved ones, and I grew closer to two other graduate students who were attending Louisiana State University, both from New Orleans, both who remain great friends. We shared a pain, a hurt, a loss that others on campus could only brush.

Yet... somehow I still felt alone. My home – from my grandfather's house to the town itself – was gone.

August 21, 1999.

My grandfather, the man who was and remains my father-figure, passed away peacefully. When my mother called, she tried to break the news gently. I was at a sorority sister's house in Jackson, MS, sleeping, and it was either early in the morning or late in the evening. I answered, was lost for words,

and left to head home. Only, my home, as I knew it, was lacking. The greatest presence that made home, home was gone. I may not have recognized this then, but I do now. More than ever.

My grandfather and I shared a special bond, one that no one in the family could deny. I cared for him during the summers when he became ill. I had a list of his medicines in my purse at all times; that sheet of paper now lives in a box in the top of my closet. I drove him around town, drove him to buy "lotto" tickets, drove him to the cemetery to visit my deceased grandmother's grave. I made him his instant coffee; I sat with him, pretending to watch his John Wayne movies. I listened to all his stories about our family plantation, assisted with his paperwork, loved him a little more each and every day.

He and his house were home. No matter where I lived, I always knew where I could return. His door had always been open. Even after his death, my family continued to use his place as the central meeting location, never dissociating the communal feel connected to those walls. He had raised us a certain way, and that way revolved around family, and he, and his house, seemed to be the glue behind it all.

11.08.12

I sit on my sofa, trying to piece together my feelings of displacement, trying to figure out when I first felt homeless. Was it when Katrina wiped out my hometown? Was it when my grandfather passed? Or was it when I left for college and my mother, along with my address, moved to New York?

May 28, 1998.

My high school graduation was typical, but the next day was a wedding rehearsal followed by my mother's marriage. After that, my bedroom and high school paraphernalia moved to upstate New York with my mom, and I started Millsaps College, just three hours away from my hometown.

During weekends, I returned "home" to the Gulf Coast, staying with family members, sleeping in spare bedrooms, on sofas. For longer holidays, I flew north to spend time with my mom, my cats, her new husband. But I never felt as if I belonged there. I had a room, albeit small. My twin bed, dresser, and shelf full of books and photographs fit snugly, but my ever-changing dorm room felt more mine than this foreign space that housed my not-quite-college-enough belongings. I did try to welcome this change. I even, from time to time, felt lucky to see a different part of the country.

I was happy for my mother. She deserved love, but this change disrupted my definition of home more than I anticipated. I had a New York address, but my heart refused to leave Mississippi. My mother was now in one location; my cousins, sister, niece, grandfather, life, family, in another.

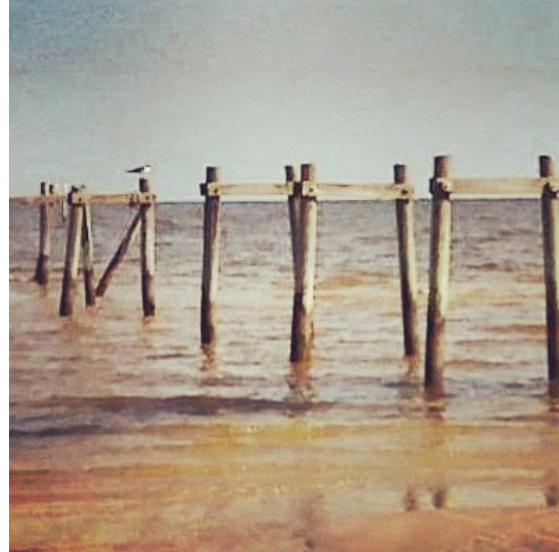
My family. The Haywards.

920 Beach Boulevard, Waveland, MS.

That was the address of my grandparents' house, our family house. Anyone in our clan could go and come as they pleased. No one had to knock. Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners were there. Birthday parties were there. And we all had -access. That place was the prime location for all of us and for our

gatherings. A two-story house, not one of those extravagant mansions that lined the beach. But it had sentimental value. It had character; it had my grandfather's soul. Well before I was born, he had converted an old barn into a house, which is the house that I remember as home. My laughter. My joy. My childhood. Wrapped in those walls. Because it was once a barn, it actually sat behind one of those beautiful beach houses. The large, oak tree at the top of the shelled driveway had a wooden sign with the address and "John R. Hayward," pointing down the driveway.

Many times, we walked down the tree-lined driveway to the pier. Some of us would fish; others would attempt to tan. We celebrated, shot fireworks, or just talked. The look of the pier would change – storms would take it away, and my cousins would rebuild it, altering it ever-so-slightly, often with any of the wood that they could retrieve. However, since Katrina, it has not been rebuilt. I do not foresee that it ever will.



August 29, 2005.

My cousins and I walked a beach, but it was not our beach. It was in Panama City. We had driven over the day/night before; traffic crawled across the coast, as all the residents evacuated last minute. We drove that far in part to escape the storm, in case it shifted, but also to find an empty hotel. We did not have all of the family with us. We were scattered. Some went north; others went west. And others stayed.

My sister was one who almost stayed. I can remember calling her on my drive into Waveland to see if she and her husband had changed their minds. He wanted to be at their house to protect it, and she did not want to leave him. I tried desperately to convince her to at least let me take her daughter and son with me to Florida. No luck. However, last minute, they evacuated to Shreveport, and luckily so, as their house did not fare so well.

After the storm, my sister relocated to New York, moving herself and her two children into my mother's house. My sister wanted to keep her kids in school, wanted them to have a somewhat normal life while the town rebuilt. Her husband stayed behind, gutted their house, took care of all the logistical matters post-Katrina. This plan made sense, and I supported her decision to leave town while simultaneously mourning it.

August 28, 2005.

Hancock County was under a mandatory evacuation. After my aunt's morning phone call, I found myself driving into the city as all the other cars were heading the other direction. It was an eerie feeling, and I called my best friend, who was packing her car with a few items and her dog and heading to Texas.

Filled with anxiety, I held back the tears. Mostly. Until the hosts on the local radio station announced that they were going off the air. I was on Highway 90, and before signing off, they told the listeners who were still in town to leave, and they reiterated the collective fear that the storm could be worse than Hurricane Camille.

I stopped at a gas station to fill up my car, and the intercoms screamed, "Pump 3 out of gas; Pump 7 out of gas; Pump 2 out of gas." I drove to one of my aunt's houses, where her sons were boarding the windows and loading the cars. I am not sure of what they packed, but I wish it had been more.

The drive out of town was long. Flooded with worry.

I do not recall how many hours it took, but it was longer than the typical vacation-drive to Florida. However, that drive out was far better than the drive back, due to heightened emotions. When we headed back, I was grateful to be unaccompanied in my car, thankful to have the space to cry alone. But all the emotions must have blocked my memory. I cannot recall much of anything about the drive back – simply that we had a plan to circle north and drive through Hattiesburg and into Baton Rouge. We could not return to Waveland. There was too much debris, and the officials were not allowing residents back into town. We were not sure when they would, but we knew we wanted to be as close as possible for when they did.

August 29, 2005.

I woke to the sound of the hotel room's television. My family had their eyes fastened to the screen, trying to soak in what had happened, trying to hear what had become of our town, our home. The news did not lift our spirits. We listened and watched, but little was revealed about Waveland. All we knew was that it was bad. Eventually, through all the calls, text messages, news, we pieced together a catastrophic list of damages – the aftermath, as it was soon to be called.

The aftermath. A phrase I grew sick of.

Every text that came through just mentioned what was gone: Main Street, gone. Beach Boulevard, gone. Highway 90, gone.

During and after the storm, we attempted to stay in touch with family, everywhere – but especially with the ones who had stayed. Periodically, we received word about water, word about moving to higher ground. But at some point, the updates became spotty, at best. Our priority was focused on making sure that those still on the Coast – my godmother, an aunt, some cousins, my biological father – were safe.

I cannot remember when we received news that all were alive. But as we heard about each one's safety, we told others, calling and texting groups of people and developing a chain to spread the word. I am not sure how long this took, but even after knowing, even after hearing that lives had been spared, I still had this immense sense of loss. And I imagine that I was not alone in feeling this way.

This feeling was echoed in my father's voice when his call finally got through. He said, "Can you hear me? We're fine, the house has some problems, but we're fine. Don't rush to come home... There's nothing to come home to."

Literally speaking, he was right, and all the wreckage and debris made it impossible to even access. I am not sure when officials allowed residents back. Perhaps a couple of days. However, I do know that I was not prepared to see the emptiness. The grey. The lifelessness. The remnants of memories, if any remnants were to be found.

I stood next to my cousin as she looked for any item amongst the destruction that was once her house. I witnessed my sister mourn the loss of her dream home, and eventually her marriage, as the storm crumbled that, too, only more slowly. I helped my aunt search the nothingness, hoping to salvage something, anything.

I stared at the space where my grandfather's house once stood. Even the old oak trees that lined his driveway were uprooted.

The town had been stripped of its charm, wiped bare. People had foundations, had everything snatched away by Katrina's wrath. And I broke. Perhaps not immediately, perhaps not all at once. But my very core was shattered.

11.18.12

My godmother called yesterday to ask where I was going for Thanksgiving – only four days away. I am not sure. Ever since the storm, ever since my grandfather's house was destroyed, and never rebuilt, the family does not have that one location to gather. Of course, the family remains close, but matters are different. The family is growing, is changing, and I still live out of town. When I return, I float among family members' houses. However, I struggle. Without 920 Beach Boulevard, I feel more homeless than ever in the very town I call home.

The storm rattled and changed a lot of people, in ways we may never know. I am different; life is different.

I often think that I am glad my grandfather did not witness Katrina. However, at times, I selfishly long for his presence to restore something displaced within me, to give me that sense of belonging, to help me to locate that rooted feeling.