

A photograph of a flooded street, likely in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The water is deep, reaching up to the knees of people wading through it. In the foreground, a sign on a metal post reads "Canal". The water reflects the sky and the silhouettes of people and trees. The overall mood is somber and depicts the aftermath of a natural disaster.

What Lies Beneath

KATRINA, RACE,
AND THE STATE OF
THE NATION

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a raging flood of tears
ewuare osayande

they are pulling our dead out of the dead water now

they are pulling our dead out of the dead water now
like they pulled Till out of the Tallahatchie River
and even if we did place the blame where it belongs
would they get off like the men who murdered Emmett?

while reporters blamed us for staying
refusing to see the chains that tied us to the catastrophe
that was to come
like when they tied Malcolm Little's dad
to the tracks
and left him for dead
cause they knew the train was coming

they knew the flood was coming
they knew the levees would break
they were warned
but did nothing
they were warned
but did nothing

they refused to prepare

they are pulling our dead out of the dead water now
counting them as if they were tallying votes
but you cannot measure disgrace with a body count

and no one wins in death

what have we now but our heartbeats?
and tears
and the whys
of our questions keep coming

even Jesus was said
to have fed the poor
with a few fish and some bread
should we not expect more
from the richest nation
in the history of the world?

scabs are being ripped away
like the homes
revealing old wounds
bleeding sores
infected by the toxic scum
of lies we ingest

as the media contrived words to describe the people
when for five days they were treated like slaves

time warped to the days of whips, chains
and names that were not our own

slave ship screams

ancestors haunt in their hollers for help
in front of cameras that don't care
sending an SOS of sorrow
to a world that looks on in pity and contempt

but hope doesn't stop hunger
and faith can't quench a thirst
mouths parched in the parish
surrounded by water

but can't take a drink

yes, this is hell

the smell of rotting flesh and feces
the stench of death
like bush's breath hot with deceit
burning under a louisiana sun
merciless as a slave master
hysterical heat

gnashing teeth, bleeding gums
and the children
the babies delirious with grief

and still they were trapped by the help that would come
abandoned by rescue teams on Highway 10

the help that didn't help
the help that held them hostage
at convention centers that became concentration camps

no refuge
no refuge
no refuge
for the women and their children
and the elders dying in their wheel chairs

smuggled to the super dome that became the prison
at Abu Ghraib
blindfolded by the darkness
and tortured due to the ineptitude of officials
sinking in a cess pool of paranoia
held hostage by helplessness

how long did it take Africans
in texas to learn that they were free?

we know how slow the government can be
when it comes to we
who are Black and poor

families again severed
like before
when the auction block was swollen with our blood and tears
the years are of no consequence

and now we wander the country looking for wives and sons,
daughters and fathers, nanas, poppas, husbands and cousins
and lovers and friends and mothers and nieces, nephews and...

tracing the scent of love in hope of embracing them again
on this side

pouring through web pages
hoping to notice a name that sounds like happiness
watching the tv
hoping to recognize a face
that resembles our own

looking for family

longing for home

and I can hear Nina Simone singing
"Mississippi Goddamn Blues"
we who picked cotton there
grew families out of the very ground
we never owned
sucked down gristle just to survive
raised God out the dust bowl
and blew life into our bodies
with nothing
nothing
nothing
but the defiant desire to live

and once more nothing is all we have
but the defiant desire to live again

resurrected like the Jeez that is us

who will march a jazz dirge
on down Bourbon Street
to honor those whose bodies still float in the Ninth Ward?

who will rebuild the city
that city of saints and haints?
bring the reconstruction that never came after lee surrendered
the war

jim crow knows
let trent lott rot in the rubble of his plantation mansion
for all those that perished unnecessarily

yes there is anger
a raging flood of tears

bush looted our taxes
sent them overseas
robbed our rights
cracked presidential jokes as the smoke still rose

"the soft bigotry of low expectations" is bush's to claim
a smug racism he learned on his mother's knee

yes the US is a Third World nation
no corporate press can cover the truth now
where dictators lie, cheat and steal
then kill the poor that would defy them

the emperor has no clothes
his ass is exposed
been stripped naked by his own shame
time to name names

there is a raging flood headed right to the White House

and FEMA can't rescue you now

what has happened here is a crime
the homicide of an entire city

hear the prophecy my ancestors sung

God showed Noah
by the rainbow sign
said it won't be water but fire next time

the flames are burning!