NEW ORLEANS IN WORDS

Richard Louth

Every summer since 2001, the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project (SLWP), a National Writing Project site housed at Southeastern Louisiana University, has been hosting “writing marathons” in New Orleans where writers spend from one to three days eating, drinking, and writing their way across the city. Writers traditionally gather at Le Richelieu Hotel for a brief introduction, and then depart in small groups to experience the city as writers. The writing marathon embodies the concepts of freedom, discovery, and community: writers may write whatever they wish and wander wherever they want with whomever they choose as partners. The only restriction is that after individuals write for a period of time (usually 10-15 minutes), they share their writing with their small group (3-4 others) by reading it aloud while members of the group reply with a simple “thank you.” No criticism is allowed. After everyone in the group writes and shares their writing in a particular spot such as a pub or coffeehouse, they enjoy refreshments, talk a bit, and then move on to another spot to write, read aloud, eat, drink, and socialize again. The focus is on writers enjoying themselves by having time to write in good company.

The power of the writing marathon is in its ability to free writers by allowing them to write intensively, without criticism, in a variety of new and familiar places with a community of new and familiar companions. While it thrives upon spontaneity and serendipity, there is a cumulative effect over the course of a day as writers in each small group observe their surroundings, delve deep within themselves, and share their writings and their company with each other.

The concept of the writing marathon originated with Natalie Goldberg, who in Writing Down the Bones described writing groups sharing together over a period of time with no response except a “thank you.” The “New Orleans Writing Marathon” came about when I combined Goldberg’s idea with Hemingway’s concept, in A Moveable Feast, of moving about a city (in his case, Paris) writing in cafes, integrating food and drink in the process, and allowing each location to “transplant” the writer to other times and places (such as one’s past in Michigan).

In a typical New Orleans Writing Marathon, perhaps 30 writers will fan out over the city for one to three days in small groups, crossing paths. Most of these writers are also teachers, and for many, this is a precious opportunity to escape their jobs and everyday cares in order to observe the “poor man’s Paris” as a writer and to discover what thoughts and memories this place provokes deep within. As the city that inspired writers from William Faulkner to Tennessee Williams, New Orleans is full of unexpected treasures for marathon writers, who sense the spirits of these masters around each corner. The writing that results ranges enormously, from descriptive snapshots of places to riffs on overheard conversations, reflections on one’s past, poems, and even short stories.

The collection of “marathon moments” that follows was partly inspired by Josh Clark’s Louisiana in Words, a 2007 anthology of one-minute verbal glimpses of life across Louisiana captured by different authors over a mythical 24 hour period. Using Clark’s book as a model, I began asking marathon writers to pause occasionally each day to capture New Orleans moments in time. Where Clark asked primarily for third person, omniscient, nonfiction focusing on a minute of life in places from Natchitoches to Ponchatoula, marathon writers were free to write in any genre and asked to capture their inner worlds as well as places in New Orleans that inspired reflection. The collection that follows comprises pieces from marathoners’ journals.
over several years, edited and arranged to capture the sights, sounds, and thoughts of these writers as if they crossed paths in New Orleans on one mythical summer day. While individual pieces clearly capture marathon moments, together they create a short story designed to capture the writing marathon experience and New Orleans in words.

5:40 A.M., Morning on the Mississippi
Janice D. Krantz

The wind moves the surface of the river, creating multifaceted diamonds reflecting the jewel-tipped arches of the Greater New Orleans bridge. The ferry sits on the far side poised for passengers, awaiting the life forces to meld with its own. The clouds to the east are taking on that pink cotton candy glow. It is morning in New Orleans and the waters of the Mississippi call me. The beast that feeds our city, shapes our being, and cultivates our soul teaches acceptance. We are who we are because of the river. We are who we are in spite of the river. We are who we are out of reverence for the river.

6:09 A.M., Chartres and St. Peter
Jessica Kastner

The city is still. Her wooden shutters are closed and iron gates locked. Gas flames flicker inside lanterns casting a glow on the empty brick sidewalks and car-lined streets. People inside cool apartments, hotel rooms, and shotgun houses are sleeping in soft beds protected from the rambunctiousness of the night. People outside are sleeping too, tucked away in door nooks and sprawled out on park benches in Jackson Square.

Water is dripping from the balcony above. Three luscious ferns hang suspended in the air above a planter box overflowing with pink and red geraniums. The coo of mourning doves is muffled by the sound of an infringing truck. Two men jump off the back of the truck when it stops at the corner of Chartres and St. Peter. They empty a large bin from the previous day’s excess into the massive mound of refuse that they will carry away and dump into the vastness of a landfill. The truck continues down St. Peter stopping every couple of yards. Another large truck, on its way to replenish provisions, passes by and takes a right onto Bourbon. It joins the fleet unloading fresh bread, milk, produce, and beer to eateries and pubs scattered down the street. The moon disappears behind buildings, and the lantern flames dim. Hues of pink and orange streak the sky and illuminate the city as she begins to stir.

7:30 A.M., Streets of the French Quarter
Richard Long

I love walking the streets of the Upper French Quarter where Barracks and Gov. Nicholls intersect Ursuline and Royal, especially in the morning. Everyone is setting up for the day. The vendors find their spots at The French Market speaking in tongues unknown to me. The balconies drip onto the sidewalk, the cascade an effect of an early morning plant watering. An older man brings coffee and pastries back home or to a hotel where his wife waits still sleepily lying in bed. A young man hoses off the concrete at a hotel. Even the streets are scrubbed clean each morning.

Delivery trucks and workmen make their way through the streets to their task. Soon traffic will make too much movement difficult, but for right now, it is quiet. There is a sewer cover
with Henry Clay’s name on it. I wonder if this street has always been Chartres or if the Kentucky senator’s name once graced this street. As I walk down Ursuline, I almost step on some small citrus fruit. The foliage of gated gardens spills into the city, their fruit trees abandoning their babies on the sidewalk.

I make my way to Croissant D’Or and order an array of croissants. I sit in the window seat. Outside the glass, I see one of the bakers buying a paper. With her work done for the moment, she decides which paper to buy. An old man joins her, his palm full of change. Big cities are filled with paper-machines since home delivery is impossible especially in New Orleans where alleyways hide front doors. New Orleans feels coiled with houses tucked behind other houses. Numerous apartments lurk inside gates and walls. If the city ever gives itself a good early morning stretch, it might fall into Lake Pontchartrain. The homes and hotels along the street each fly their own array of flags like the early explorers claiming their land and identifying who it belongs to: nations, states, teams, military branches and festivals.

I see a sign on the wall that says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” I do as I am told and pick up my tray. As I leave, I put two dollars in the tip jar and glance back to see someone has already taken my spot in the window. He has a single chocolate croissant and an iced mocha. He has more restraint than I did. I guess that he is a local since restraint is for locals and indulgence is for the visitors, but I remind myself that this is New Orleans. Indulgence is for everyone.

7:30 A.M. Café du Monde

Kim Stafford

I’m just looking up at the painting on the wall—Jackson Square, the Cathedral, a black face surrounded by a halo of gold, and the inscription below: “It was just an ordinary day until I met Jesus at the Café du Monde”—when the Black waitress comes drifting toward me with a glass globe of coffee swinging in her hand.

“You wan’ an’thing mo’, baby? Yo wan’ an’thing mo’?”

7:45 A.M., Le Richelieu Hotel, the Terrace Café

Richard Louth

It is a pleasant, empty café overlooking the pool, so cool inside that condensation beads like tears on the plate glass windows. Sitting alone at a table for two, I overhear two waiters at the far end over the coffee pot. One is short and stocky, with long white hair like spaghetti oiled back across his scalp. The other is tall, thin, bald, and walks with something like a limp that is not a limp.

“Hey, haven’t seen you lately, where you been?” says the short, stocky man.

“The hospital,” replies the other.

There is a pause.

“The hospital, are you ok?” asks the short stocky man.

“I’ll know Friday,” replies the other.

8:30 A.M. French Market

Kim Stafford

The man selling turquoise jewelry leans over the tray of blue stones to adjust a necklace.
“How much for this necklace?” I ask.
“You know that’s not real turquoise,” he says.
“It’s not?”
“No, most of what you see for sale anywhere is from China, inferior stone dyed blue. And what passes for red coral is really white coral, dyed red. It takes a century for true red coral to grow one inch. So everything you see here is fake.”

“Why are you telling me this?”
“I like truth.”
“I like your way about that.”
“The least initial disregard for truth is multiplied a thousand times.’ Aristotle.”

9:00 A.M., SLWP Suite, Le Richelieu Hotel

Patsy Mara

Here and Now: Temple Bell chimed meditation led by David Jumonville.

The wooden mallet strikes the small, heavy brass bowl sitting before David on the floor. About twenty of us sit around the room, eyes closed as he begins an awareness meditation focusing on paying attention to the “here and now.”

“Breathe in…breathe out; breathe in…breathe out,” his deep–voiced baritone chimes softly in measured rhythm to the sound of the bell.

We sit, all different yet one, in membership with this group that I have only this morning of my 6th New Orleans Marathon named “The Tribe of the Red Hibiscus.” The newest member here is no less significant than those who have returned religiously to this spot, The Richelieu, to this French Quarter, so many times before.

“Breathe in…breathe out,” David hypnotically continues.

I am keenly aware of the significance each of these has come to play in my soul, my writing soul that is; each leaving a piece of themselves along the way, bit by bit, as we converge then separate, converge then separate, much in the manner of the breathing exercise—breathe in, breathe out, converge, separate, breathe in, breathe out, converge, and separate. As the unity of our in and ex-halations fuels our bodies, so the convergence during this sacred tribal pow-wow that is the Writing Marathon, for such it is indeed, fuels our writing souls and reminds us that regardless of where we disperse to, we are writers.

9:15 A.M., Croissant D’or Patisserie

Melissa Dyson

Last day in the Big Easy…I’m feeling a bit saddened by the knowledge that I must leave New Orleans today. However, I mostly feel reassured because I know that I shall return to this enchanted place. Confidence abounds in me because New Orleans’ French Quarter has become a part of me. This will be the fantasyland that I will escape to when the crush of the real world becomes too much to bear. I will remember kiwi testicles and the laughter of Leina and Sharla as we sipped rum punch and mint juleps. I will recall that bourbon isn’t quite so nasty if enough fruit and sugar are added. I’ll envision real lump crab not the gelatinous white sticks with red dye masquerading as crab and know that there is no bad food in the Big Easy. I will immerse myself in the memory of wandering through the French Market, not once but twice, and wondering why French when there are so many Phillipinos, Carribbeans, and Middle Easterners hawking their goods. Molly’s at the Market will come rushing back to my mind and I again will
recall “Pause, beer break…” I’ll remember having a short tour of the 9th Ward and seeing the Katrina houses designating who checked the house, date and number of dead but also the new houses being made into homes. I’ll bring to mind the crazy colorful art at the Croissant D’or and the piece of art that read, “Jesus is coming, look busy.” So when my real life seems to be overwhelming, I will pull forth my memories of the French Quarter with its slow pace and easy-going nature to bolster my strength to face the mental midgets in ninth grade. I will never again forget that there are five vowels and all need to be used; that sugar has an h and no r and quarter has a w; that baby, honey, sugar, and darlin’ are used as a true compliment. But most of all I will remember that the people here are genuine, authentically Southern, and that hospitality is never an afterthought but always a state of mind.

10 A.M., French Quarter Café
“The Prayer”
Barry L. Dunlap

As I slurp my coffee, she enters the shop—white shirt off one shoulder, black skirt, shadowed eyes; she drudges to the rear of the shop, then approaches the man sitting at the window—interrupts his reading—murky dreadlocks uncover his eyes.
She speaks:
“Find me someone who does witchcraft.”
They leave, different directions.

10:25 A.M., The Clover Grill
Robin Parrott

10:45 regular clock, 4:50 Chalmette clock, 9:25 City Hall clock. There’s a ding. The man behind me just clanked his fork against his glass. The waitress at the counter is gossiping with two women police officers. A VH1 or MTV reality show is on the TV that is mounted in the corner of the room. Outside the window, across the street, off a balcony, flags blow in the light wind—a rainbow flag (or three) and two that are red, white, and blue. It sounds like it is Michael Jackson playing in the background. The menu is quirky. It includes sarcastic and funny quotes by each section. One of them says that you are allowed to dance in the aisles but not on the tables. It doesn’t say anything about not getting on the old fashioned soda shop fountain style
bar. This place looks like a fun place to work: “You can beat our prices, but you can’t beat our meat.” A group of women in the restaurant begin dancing to the music while at their table, and the waiter joins in. He is a white, stocky, probably gay guy with a tattoo on his right arm that includes his name: Robby. He has a “mmmhmm” and nasally sweet voice. Shorty, an older black man, grabs the newspaper off the bar. He might get a chance to read, but in comes more people, hungry for brunch. Out the window, tourists pass by in white horse drawn carriages. They have cameras in their hands and wave to us. They think we are natives. Now the TV is playing a commercial with a hot dog man. Appropriate here. There are multiple clocks. The City Hall time, the Chalmette time, and then the regular time. A young guy sits at the bar awkwardly. He just sucked up his bacon. Literally. If I lived here, I’d come in here every day. There is just too much to write about in this small place.

10:30 A.M., Clover Grill, New Orleans, LA
*Christy Mayfield*

The smell of breakfast cooking takes me back to Alabama in the kitchen with my Momma—man, she can fry a mean egg! And nobody beats her tomato gravy! Growing up, we rarely got breakfast during traditional breakfast hours. Momma usually cooked brunch on Sundays after we returned from church. The “we” included me and my brothers. My sister was older and had already moved out and my parents never went to church with us—we rode a big blue bus to get there. A kind old man with a sweet smile named Mr. Childers drove the bus. Mr. Childers often referred to me and my brothers as “his children” as he was quite proud of his part in our salvation. I always reveled in his praise; even years later, when I had children of my own and would visit that church when in town for the weekend, I would seek out Mr. Childers to steal a sweet smile, a warm hug, and a kind word once again. When Mr. Childers dropped us back at home after church around noon, Momma would cease whatever housework she was invariably doing and begin to cook breakfast. Her breakfasts, not to be rivaled by anyone’s I’ve eaten since, were a welcome staple of my childhood, something that I dream of often and the reason why the smell of bacon and eggs cooking always makes me miss my Momma so much that it feels as if there is an actual hole in my chest, a tangible void that, truthfully, only my Momma and her Sunday brunch and maybe Mr. Childers and his big blue bus could possibly fill.

11:11 A.M., City Park, the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden
*David Jumonville*

The museum doesn’t open until noon so by default I find myself in the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden at the day’s designated minute. The green of the first lawn contrasts nicely with the dark bronzes nestled in among the shrubbery like so many precocious children playing at a game of hide and seek in the nude. On the far side of the lagoon, beyond the iris, their parents dressed in white sit on benches as still as tombstones beneath the sheltering oaks. Stately Ponderosa Pines provide the supporting colonnade for an overcast sky, which is a complimentary shade of grey to the one of the wending concrete walkways. What breeze there is is sultry as summer in New Orleans always is, but it is not August so with confidence I can say, I am comfortable.
My colleague Annabel appears in the alleyway leading to the pool and the courtyard where I sit. With her cell phone up to her left ear and her index finger plugging her right ear, she passes a family of four sitting in the sun outside the Terrace Café. I hear her say “All right, baby” to her son on the phone as she leans and shuffles by the low brick wall surrounding evergreens and flowers. Meanwhile, as she deals with her family issues at home, the father at the round table to her right picks up something his son had dropped on the flagstones under the table. With a sour look on his face, he throws it on the middle of the table. A skeletal man with thin red hair on his head and chest, he resembles Van Gogh except for his hard dark eyes. The mother takes the boy—who’d been standing on his chair looking directly at his father—in hand, hops him off the chair, and proceeds inside, no doubt to the potty. The daughter, her back to me in a pink flowered bathing suit and large violet hat, stands white by the black metal table, one delicate hand supporting her as her father shovels food into his mouth with a fork. He eats as if he is starving, and continues to grimace and stare at his food with each bite. In the full sun, he looks hot, and his torso appears pink like a medium steak. A burn is beginning. With each labored bite of his breakfast, he looks more and more unhappy. His daughter continues to watch him. I wonder what she is thinking, then what he is thinking. Whether the vacation is beginning or ending. Whether he loves his wife and children. What he does for a living. He looks like he would mortgage the house and sell the car just to be alone, or alone with his wife. A man with the weight of the world on his hot shoulders. The daughter walks to the edge of the pool, and he watches, ready to pounce if she gets too close, but still eating. Then she backs up to her chair, her eyes on the pool, ignoring him, sensing where the table is behind her, and pirouettes gently just as she reaches it, then sits. He talks to her, looking down, explaining something slowly, about safety perhaps, nodding his head, raising one finger in warning, and the wife and son return, falling in their respective seats. The woman has a blue cast on her left arm and raises it to block out the sun. He talks to her as she eats, and suddenly, as if the sun has come out from behind a cloud or a veil has been raised, something like a smile crosses his face. I wonder what has caused it, and doubt if it will last, yet I smile too.

I still remember the spot, left side of Jackson Square and St. Peter. My back was to the Mississippi. It was 1985 and I was just five minutes off the Albany High School bus. This was our end of the year trip to the French Quarter, a cultural enrichment program for poor kids from a poor school in a poor state.

Two of my buddies stood beside me. I was scared and sweating in the heat. This was New Orleans, the forbidden city. My right hand massaged the handle of the knife in my pocket.

Curtis Raspberry, a classmate, a black kid in a school full of Livingston Parish crackers, stepped in front of a mime, a statue standing atop a dark wooden box. The man was dressed in clownish clothes, a painted tear on his snow-white cheek. Curtis dropped a dollar bill into the mime’s pork pie hat, which was lying below a box on the sidewalk. At least a dozen people were watching, the early morning crowd of spring tourists.
This mime was an unmoving witness to human stillness. We were moved by his inner peace. He was not *Homo sapiens sapiens*, but rigor mortis man, the unmoving man.

Then Curtis rubbed his brow. His face crinkled and he touched his stomach. He stepped forward and reached into the felt hat and removed the dollar, or tried to, when the mime became homicidal, a man-killer, the screaming mime, the vicious mime. The statue began stalking Curtis, backing him to the tall wrought iron park fence, lecturing him about the words of Moses, “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” while the crowd stood with mouths wide open.

This was the French Quarter and these were the Lords of Misrule. It was about time for me to ease the knife out of my pocket.

11:11 A.M., NOMA Sculpture Garden
*Brant Osborn*

Every day during the fourth quarter, the ninth graders in my 3rd period class celebrated what they called “11:11.” This was a little ritual or game that they invented when I brought in one of those clocks that displays the time on the ceiling. The first time that I showed them how it worked by flipping out the lights, one student noticed that the time was 11:11 and for whatever strange reason, commanded everyone to remain silent for one full minute until the numeric symmetry and with it—the spell—were broken. Over time, the ritual lost its meaning a bit. It is difficult to keep ninth graders quiet for any amount of time and inevitably silly noises would mar the silence. Here in the Sculpture Garden next to NOMA, I am observing my own version of 11:11 with a group of writers. It is not difficult for writers to keep quiet, at least once their pens are moving. And the statues in the garden, of course, are always silent. Maybe it is during this sacred minute that they are permitted to speak aloud their observations or to whisper their secrets. I guess that I’ve missed the moment, as time has marched forward, and the minute has now passed.

11:15 A.M., Bourbon Street
*Bev Marshall*

An octogenarian lady holds aloft a pink and white umbrella. It’s not raining, but we all know sun darkens Southern ladies’ skin. Here she comes now; 5’10” red stilettos, raven hair piled high on her head. “New Awlins ladies, them Creole babies.” She struts and the dark man with cornrows emits a low whistle.

I am transported back three years. I’m walking down Bourbon Street wearing a red cocktail dress with a fringed hem, red stilettos, tapping on wet bricks. It is 7 a.m. and the street washer in front of Crazy Kats grins. He drawls, “Whoa.” He thinks I’m a lady of the evening. But mascara streaks my pale face, my eyes are swollen and red. I’d gotten the call before noon the day before. Pap smear gone wrong, breast cancer a certainty. I’ll never see 60 I think, never write the Great American Southern Novel. My friends offer gin and vodka and whiskey and wine. I imbibe it all. Whatever gets you through the night, they say. It’s morning in the Quarter now and this morning, as I make this walk in these shoes and this form fitting dress, music drifts from a balcony and there’s a flower box filled with hope up there. I listen to that blues floating above and sniff stale beer and a robin lights on a wrought iron railing . . . and I’ve found comfort. I pile my hair on my head and strut.

11:16 A.M., the Napoleon House
*Eva Guillot*
I decided to write alone. A very different vibe indeed. I'm having an early lunch of stuffed avocado with shrimp remoulade since I did not have protein this morning. Left the hotel and headed down Royal toward Canal looking for the Crescent City Bookstore but realized it is on Chartres instead. Wrote upstairs but then had no one to share with me. I'm still rewriting last summer's story. I wrote this morning trying to change the story to the man's point of view instead of the woman. It is very difficult for me to get inside the head of a cheating husband. The woman's voice I had no problem finding. She's been dumped before and her persistence in attracting losers seems to haunt her always. However, the male perspective is harder to find. Question: Why is he so boyish or childlike, naïve' yet curiously attractive to her?

My lunch has arrived with two groups of people. Two halves of a buttery avocado dripping with shrimp and tangy remoulade sauce. Luscious. Without a group of writers, I feel somewhat freer in my writing, not having to worry about reading crap or going back to the story that wants to be written. Richard has suggested many times that if we wanted to venture off alone, that was okay but in all my marathons, I never did. It is an escape of sorts. I don't feel rushed to find my words and the flow trickles like the water from the fountain nearby in the courtyard. I'm not minding the clang of doors or the waiter's chitchat or even the music I can barely hear.

I do like the balminess of outside rather than the frigid air inside. No one is here to judge me or judge what I have to say. Sometimes I enjoy being alone. Ten months of teaching, being on display, having to be in control tires one out. I needed this escape from my family, school, and yes, from other teachers.

I like being alone and planning time for myself. However, it was a long journey to learn this part of myself. When I was alone on Friday nights as a teenager, watching “Love Boat” in front of a small TV, heater warming my 8' X 8' tiny bedroom while my friends hung out together, I liked where I was. In college on lonely weekends, I enjoyed cooking gourmet meals for one, snuggling on the sofa with my dog and watching the movie I wanted to see. Even in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with hours of studying I faced each night, I enjoyed the solitary comfort of knowing I planned each moment without having to consult a family calendar or check with friends about missed opportunities in this pre-Facebook era. I finally learned to appreciate my independence and linger in my alone time when I was married and spent many nights, weekends and two and a half months alone in a country with no family, friends or social network. When I lived in Singapore, I learned to sleep until whenever, order groceries including vodka delivered to my third floor condominium door, leave for a club via cab whenever I chose, alone. No one questioned or judged me. No one knew or cared. And I learned to be careful with that independence and freedom. Too much limitless indulgence can get one into trouble. Too little interaction with the outside world produces melancholy that will fuel all sorts of delusions. One moment, I was on top of the world or at least at its center, literally living at two degrees above the equator. Another moment, I was at rock bottom, at the very core of a deep depression that saw hours of self-indulgent tears, bottles of booze, a sprained ankle, near mugging and a crisis moment in my young marriage.

Today after years of marriage, family, tragedies, and endless hours of time spent with others, I enjoy my select moments of freedom, of being alone. I love going to a movie of my choice and not having to worry about pleasing someone else. I enjoy choosing my favorite restaurant and eating lunch there once a week, the waiter knowing me by sight, knowing my favorite table by the window, and my needs—to be alone. I seek moments of solitude whether riding my bike, walking in the park, or driving with no destination. I like going to cities without any agenda in mind, walking the streets and discovering for myself new treasures, new moments of experience without anyone to protect me, judge me or help me. It somehow reminds me of those days
being alone in Asia when I had no choice. Either I stayed cooped up in the apartment or I ventured out alone to discover the best chicken rice dish I have ever tasted. Simple roasted chicken, with a bowl of coconut milk infused rice, served with a rich chicken broth sprinkled with green onions slivers and thick oyster sauce for flavoring. That's it. Simple chicken and rice. And twenty-three years later, I can still see, smell and taste it. I miss that meal and have never had it since. The simplicity of a meal, prepared for one, eaten alone in a garden restaurant.

11:22 A.M., The Riverwalk Fountain Plaza
_Sally Kimball_

Geyser gushing water.

Water—bane of New Orleans, and savior.

(Magic Elixir, without which there would be no life)

Unforgiving, breath-robbing terrorist, able to smother human life in the drip of a careless eye.

Believing that man-woman-homo sapiens emerged from water, (Magic Elixir, our bodies’ own salty origins) I can feel more nurtured than threatened here—but let’s turn back that tide:

“Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline…

Louisiana, Louisiana…they tryin’ to wash you away…”

Water—a power beyond human control—force of nature, ancient element, limitless and all-powerful—we can only borrow a tiny portion of its hold over us.

As the cheerful calliope plays a hurdy-gurdy accompaniment to the fountain’s dance, I know that once it was a carnival of horrors. The laughter was washed aside in Katrina’s rude slap upside New Orlean’s reeling head—unable to recoil fast enough to avoid Mother Nature’s wrath. We must have been very wicked.

Glittering and glistening, this pure water’s spray (Magic Elixir, liquid hydrogen and oxygen in perfect chemical allegiance) belies its true intent for the Big Easy.

11:30 A.M., Molly’s at the Market
_Richard Louth_

The light in Molly’s window is strong, reaching through to the bar, where a husband and wife from Fort Worth sip margaritas. They are the only others here besides me and the bartender, Matt, himself a recent transplant, who engages them in conversation. They talk about Katrina though none of them were here for it, about putting kids through college, about the usual things. Pope Pius and the jukebox smile at them. A sarcophagus looks down. The ashes of the bar’s owner, Jim Monaghan, gaze from between the cash register and a portrait of the poet Yeats.

“It cost us 75 thousand for the kids,” says the husband, shaking his head, but bragging a little, lost in his drink and relieved that he’s almost done putting his kids through school.

“We come here twice a year,” says his wife.

Another writer, Kelley, enters and orders a Newcastle, says she had planned to join others, but doesn’t plan to now. I decide that if I, too, am going to stay, I will at least order water at this point, so I ask Matt for water, and when he brings it, he asks who we are. Stevie Wonder plays on the juke. I tell him that we are writers, that we are supposed to be reading to others at this moment, and at that moment another writer, George, enters. Suddenly the writers outnumber
the others in Molly’s, and the air changes under the five swirling ceiling fans’ late morning breeze.

So we decide to write, and we write, bending over our writing surfaces, with pens erect and fluid, pouring it all out, recording the moment, and those who are not writers look on like people at a zoo, as we pay them no mind. We are into something special, alone and together, that no one who doesn’t know it could really understand, so suddenly we are removed and special, and no one else matters. I put a dollar in the juke and ask George to choose the tunes—Edith Piaf’s “Circus Song” and Roy Orbison’s “I’ve Been Crying over You”—and I realize that at this moment, nothing on earth could blast the writers from this spot, for we are at Molly’s, and it is one of those rare and special New Orleans moments granted only to those who wait. We need do nothing but enjoy it, and record it, if we can. And we are the only persons who can do it right now. In my heart, I believe that is why we are here. Thank you for paying your kids’ tuition in Texas, folks, and thanks for coming to this city to celebrate—that is all wonderful, and we applaud you for coming, for knowing to come here and nowhere else—but we are the ones chosen to tell this story.

Matt takes the moment as an opportunity to clean the bar and begins removing all the bottles from their shelves. Jamesons, Jose Cuervo, and Captain Morgan stand naked like liquored men shamefully awaiting arrest on a narrow mahogany ledge by the cash register while Matt sprays the window behind their familiar spaces and wipes the area down. While Elvis whines of “Burning Love,” Kelley confides that she was born in the wrong century. Matt asks her if she would like another Newcastle, and she replies, “I have to drive home in about an hour . . . yes, give me another.” So I order a shot of Bushmills to go with my water and we play Springsteen’s “Thunder Road,” and Elvis’s “Love Me Tender,” and for good luck, Sinatra’s “The Best is Yet to Come,” leaving only two dollars in my wallet, but it does not matter. I could not be happier or more at home. I am where I should be and know it, and the others know that they belong here too. We share the knowledge that we are here to record and make real this one special moment in the universe. We are supposed to be elsewhere, but it does not matter anymore because we are here, and this is where we were meant to be.

11:35 A.M. French Market

Annabel Servat

The bright colors caught my eye, then the soft tones of muted hues. There was a middle-aged man, dark complexion, but light eyes, wise eyes.

“Before I even look, do you have anything to fit me?”

“Oh, yes; in here, these.”

“I wear a size 14.”

A slight crinkle at the corner of his eyes, “I know. I have five sisters.” He was, of course, right. How could he not be? His eye for sizing and his expertise with cloth exceeded all expectations. This man was wise about clothing.

“I’m not sure which color.”

“Take this one; the fabric is better. And I’ll give you a good price on both of these. This one will look good too.” His judgment of the fabric was, again, correct, and as a fiber expert myself, I recognized it immediately.

I had not even noticed the dress, but I pulled it over my head.

“It seems a little tight.”

“You have on clothes.”
“Oh, yeah.”
We make our transaction and I go in search of an old-fashioned fan. I find three in another booth. On the way back to my destination, I pass the fabric man again.
“When you come back, come see me. I have an off-white two piece dress—will look really good on you.”
“Ok. I will. My name is Annabel. And you?”
“I am Solomon.” Of course.

11:36 A.M., Croissant d’Or
“Under the Sign of Villa Convento”
_Terry O’Mara_

He sits on stoop
left arm propped on green painted electrical box
plastic bag between jean legs
his eyes droop
he lowers himself
elbows to knees
salted midnight beard to chest.
The morning shade is waning,
the white towel dampens
against the brown skin of his neck—
he is waiting.
Hands clasp.
Or praying.

11:50 A.M., Dauphine Street
_Annabel Servat_

Somewhere behind, two distinct voices bespeak the presence of bantam roosters, with their sharp, squeaky crowing. They punctuate the quiet enhanced by air-conditioner hum and trickling water to the right. A pigeon flies above, disturbing and rattling the dry palm fronds towering overhead. Not yet noon, but already hot, it is a day like Louisiana morning coffee, steaming and potent.

A wooden gate—not old cypress but weathered the same grey color, hangs akimbo. An extension cord is coiled around the post—most likely powering the fountain flowing through the small copper-green lion’s mouth, then dripping into the brick pool. Large potted bromeliads take center stage; well more stage right, but still up front. Tall dieffenbachia, tiger striped, and elephant ears drape slightly over the back edge not quite falling into the water—just leaning forward, listening. A rusty brown urn catches the cascade and lets it drip into a lower pool. St. Anthony peeps out from under the large leaves. He’s grey-green with Louisiana air and age, but he’s there, quietly guarding.

11:50 A.M., Jansen’s patio, Dauphine Street
_David Jumonville_
The roosters in the next patio over crow and a breeze blows so gently it hardly stirs the elephant ears. It’s cooling, but sweat is still running down my back and my forearm soaks the pages of this notebook. I find myself distracted from the writing wondering how the heat and humidity, the sweat running down faces and limbs feels to a tourist, to a visitor from Oregon? I grew up here and occasionally I still find it oppressive. But mostly to me it is sensual, even a bit salacious. It reminds me of sex in the afternoon with the light filtering in though louvered shutters. Green shutters, of course. Why would they be any other color? I wonder why are the shutters in New Orleans always painted green?

12:00 P.M., The Clover Grill

Tracy Ferrington

The waiter, George, is beautiful. Tall, dark, lean, with movements like a cat, he is in charge—in charge of the register, in charge of the front counter, in charge of the orders, in charge of himself. I’m going through a funk. I haven’t been in charge of myself for quite a while, and when he comes to the table, his swagger makes my head swim.

The menu says, “Ask about our pie,” so I ask George about the pie, so obedient and compliant. What I really want is his swagger.

He tells me about the pie, and something makes me say lemon, but I want blueberry. He writes down lemon, and says, “Okaaay,” in a sad tone, and I say, “No. Not lemon.”

He looks at me, pleased that I’m about to take charge of myself and order what I really want. And I’m about to say, “Make it blueberry,” when he smiles mischievously, and then begins to really sell that lemon pie. He talks about the smooth filling, not too sweet, and he describes the crispy buttery vanilla wafery crust, and the sweet meringue—soft mounds with brown peaks.

“Oh,” I say. “I’ll have the lemon.”

“Okaaay,” he says, giving me this look that says, “You poor child. You are not in charge of yourself. You cannot even order pie.”

He leaves me at the table craving blueberry pie and confidence.

12:00 P.M., Harry’s Corner Bar

George Dorrill

I’m sitting in Harry’s Corner Bar, at Harry’s Corner, the corner of Chartres and Dumaine. Patsy Cline is singing “I Fall to Pieces” on the jukebox. I’m sipping a Bloody Mary. Patsy has finished singing, and now the Bee Gees are singing “New York Mining Disaster.” I had a hard time smiling this morning when David directed us to, but I’m having no problem smiling now. The inimitable sound of a Harley cranking up outside and driving away. Three ladies at the table next to ours drinking wine, one with a peace-signed tie-dyed tee shirt. Now Johnny Cash singing “I Walk the Line.” My smile broadens. At the bar, on the left end, a lady reading the newspaper. Five seats down, a man in a two-colored tee shirt wearing a yellow ball cap. A fourth lady joins the three already there. She is fanning herself with an oriental fan. Now Don and Phil singing “Cathy’s Clown.” My mouth opens as I smile still more broadly. A man in a peaked cap and a Hawaiian shirt is yelling to someone outside the open door. Now he is back at the bar drinking a beer. Two more men are sitting at the bar next to the man in the Hawaiian shirt. Traveling Wilburys now singing “It’s All Right.” It is all right. One of the men who had been at the bar has walked out the door. He was wearing a peaked cap and neon blue tee shirt. The bartender
is a tall thin man with gray hair and dark glasses, wearing a gray tee shirt with an emblem on front. The Beatles sing “Hey, You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” from the movie Help. I have seen that movie six or seven times. “Gather ’round, all you clowns, let me hear you say: ‘Hey, you’ve got to hide your love away.’” A flute reprises the theme, as tambourines play underneath. It ends, but there’s one yet to go, I believe. Here it comes now—Fleetwood Mac with “Rhiannon.” Stevie Nicks is belting out the song. I should have put in five dollars instead of two. I could stay here all afternoon. I’m sorry to say this, Molly’s, but Harry’s has a much better jute-bots selection than you do, as far as I am concerned. I will stop writing only when the music stops playing. The men are watching the HDTV screen. Something about the Stanley Cup. Thank you, Eva for the loan of this pen; it helps me write fluently. The music having ended, my New Orleans moment has passed.

12:00 P.M. Muriel’s Restaurant, Jackson Square

Andree Cosby

I am at Muriel’s for lunch and am lucky enough to have a window seat to watch the ever-evolving circus in Jackson Square. Muriel’s advertises itself as the ultimate in opulence and decadence with the very best of Creole cuisine. There are lots of lunching ladies, and the ones next to my table are all dressed in shades of pastel linen. The one with the white straw hat suddenly yanks my attention from the boy outside who has pierced himself with a variety of fishhooks.

They strap her to a table, and it’s like a crane comes between her legs. It relieves the pressure, she says.

My mind is fishing around, trying to find a hook or eye into the conversation. The entire society is intrigued with violence, I think. Maybe I am too.

“Here’s your seafood gumbo, baby doll,” says the waiter, pouring it from a tin cup into a bowl. I guess this is a sign of opulence—to have to wash two containers for one portion of soup. And I must say, calling a complete stranger “baby doll” is a kind of decadence.

The woman at the table continues as I sip the broth and compare it to my dead daddy’s version.

At first it’s hard to get up, and you’re sore for about an hour. She leans into the table as if telling an intimate secret for the ears of her friends only, but between nibbles of shrimp remoulade, she is actually shouting into the opulent, decadent room. Later in the day, you feel better though. No accidents.

Oh my, I think, as I dab the corners of my mouth with the white cloth napkin; is this some sort of procedure that older women have to suffer to cure incontinence? I pledge to myself to begin kegel exercises. I can’t tell if this woman is talking about herself or someone she knows.

The gumbo is tasty but too thick. I wonder if I’ll ever find one as good as my daddy’s. As I take a bite of lump crabmeat, the waiter approaches to confirm the rest of my order.

“You want the dressing on the side, right sweetie?”

“You bet, Bronco,” I say, minus the Bronco, though I’d love to say it, but like a good New Orleanian, I just endure the “endearment.”

Good Lord, she’s seventy-three years old, and she’s tried everything, says the woman in the white hat after a swig of wine. It’s like Chinese torture. They pull your spine like hell. The other ladies at her table are calmly eating, staring at their plates, not asking questions, not blushing. She had a disc, the woman explains.

Phew! I think. She had a disc. Thank God Almighty for that!
Frank had been on this boat for over thirty years; however, today he had been checking the boat at every stop for 6 hours, only four more until he could leave for home. Most days on the ferry followed a pattern that bordered on monotony, but other days the strangest things happened. Today was an exception that bordered on chaotic.

The boat had been stopped for the last 30 minutes waiting for the cops to arrive; some guy was causing trouble with the security guard. Frank did not know the exact problem, but he did know the people were getting restless. He walked around surveying the passengers and checking the anchors on each side. At the front of the boat he found a woman and little boy gazing at the St. Louis Cathedral. She was snapping pictures of the landscape and a few of, most likely, her son. The little boy’s face was peaceful. He looked as if he could take a nap right on the deck.

Frank approached, prepared to share his story. He stood in front of the boy and nodded his head towards the mother.

Every time he caught a passenger seated on the deck he made a point to make them uncomfortable. He hated when people sat on the boat deck; the rides were always short, although this trip across had taken a little longer. This was his boat, and he didn't like people sitting down. He had a short explanation prepared for the child that he had shared with hundreds of people over the last several years.

“Hey boy,” he looked down and he spoke. “Do you know what happens when you sit on that hot steel for too long?”

“No sir.”

“Well, if you sit there for too long, you'll get stuck. And then, you'll have to ride the ferry until it gets dark,” he informed the boy as he watched the expression on his face. Everyone usually responded the same way—the usual face, as if he were crazy or senile just because of his age. People outside his generation were disrespectful and he did not care for the attitude one bit. That this child knew the word ‘sir’ was a surprise. Maybe, there was hope for the world after all.

“I don’t think I’ll be sitting for that long. I’m going to stand back up as soon as the boat starts moving again,” he said with a shrug and a frown.

“Okay, but I warned you.” He strode down the deck to check the anchor. So much for respecting your elders. My mama would have popped my head if I talked back to an adult. He continued ranting about the disrespect of children and teenagers while checking the ferry. His day continued in a sameness that threatened to overtake his sanity, but before he lost his cool, his day ended, and he drove home.

That night as he dressed for a nice dinner in a small restaurant, he reflected on his day. His wife, Shirley, walked into the room and put her fists on her ample hips, “Al, are you ready to go yet? I swear, you take longer than a teenage girl trying to fix her hair obsessed with a mirror.”

“Shut-up woman! I’m coming and since you’re riding with me, we’ll leave when I say I’m ready.” He buttoned up the rest of his shirt, walked down the hall, and grabbed the keys.

“Now come on,” he grabbed her hand, and they stepped out the door. He opened the door for Shirley and moved around to the driver’s side of the car. They rode to the restaurant in silence and once there, sat in a corner away from all the other people. They were Saturday night regulars bound to a schedule that in their stage of life could not be broken. After being seated, Frank hesitantly began conversation.
“Shirley, I’ve been thinking about something. Now don’t you say anything until I’m finished.”

“I think I’m going to retire at the end of the year. I...”

She started to open her mouth, but he kept going. “I have my thirty years in and I’m ready to do some things that need to be done around the house.”

He finished, and she picked up the conversation. “For some reason, this doesn’t seem very sudden. I think that would probably be a good idea, but we need to check a few things out. Within the year we could have all of the paperwork and insurance stuff figured out.”

“I’m glad you agree. I’m just tired; it’s the same thing every day, and retirement has to be better than this.”

“Well, I think you would enjoy being home, but what got you thinking about this?”

“The last several weeks I’ve just gotten tired of riding that stupid boat back and forth from shore to shore. All the people taking the boat for a free ride is getting old and I’m sick of waiting on them. Like today, there was this little boy and his mom on the boat. He was sitting and I hate when people sit on a three minute boat ride. So, I wanted to make him feel uncomfortable and told him my story about getting stuck to the steel. I think he just thought I was some old, weird guy.”

She chuckled, “Did you ever think that it could be the story?”

“No, but that’s beside the point. I don’t want to keep working for years. I don’t have time to do the things that I want. I’m always working, and I’ve thought about this. I’m ready to retire.”

Their food arrived, and they ate in silence. Once they were back in the car, Shirley picked up the conversation.

“Frank, if this is what you want, then I’m okay with it. It’ll be nice to have you home during the day.”

“Thanks, Shirley. I was worried about what you would say.”

Frank drove home and continued speaking with his wife. It had been a while since they had spoken for more than a few minutes. For the first time in several years, they were both looking forward to the next few years. Frank would not have to go to work every day, and she would finally get some of the house repairs up to date. They got home after a fifteen minute drive and sat in front of the television watching the news until they both fell asleep.

12:50 P.M., Royal Street
“Stop, Lock and Hold”
Jeralyn Spiehler

Long, sturdy brown fingers
wrapped around a tiny, white clutched fist,
bony, dark hand reaching around
to gently position patent-leathered feet in lacy white socks.
Blond Shirley Temple curls
nearly eclipsed in tall, black shadow.
He’s teaching a baby tourist to freeze
New Orleans style
lest her upper middle class comfort ever escapes her.
You can pick up a little cash anywhere,
with a pose held fast,  
a smile frozen over muscles contracted,  
the only movement an involuntary twitch,  
and the final break to smile and nod  
in gratitude for the dollar bills of strangers,  
dropped into a five gallon bucket.

1 P.M., Z’OTZ Coffee House  
Sharla Keen-Mills

Z’OTZ. The grungy but interesting coffee shop Uptown across from Eclectic Home. The dark interior looks as if Emos tried to go Voodoo and ended up with Slightly-Erotic-Neglected-Display-Window: a bizarre mix of mannequins painted in intense hues, shrunken heads, and candelabra arranged to mimic genitalia. Still, the dark wooden benches and narrow plank tables invite writing until, until…the music blaring from the speakers sounds like a Russian cartoon. Yeah, like I know what a Russian cartoon is. Could make for some interesting writing. Kind of Bohemian. No, now it’s more like Marlene Dietrich. Marlene Dietrich on crack.

The other patrons and I begin to lose our color. We fade to black and white. Gazing through ribbons of smoke hanging in the air, I see the dark intense barista’s mugs of java metamorphose into highball glasses and foaming steins of lager.

A serious young man with short-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed beard reaches confidently for the shoulders of the blonde bombshell seated by his side. He strikes a match on his boot and shelters the flame in the cup of his hand as Bombshell’s cigarette glows into life.

Miz Bartender begins a rant about excessive remodeling. “Why can’t they just stop and leave it alone? Step back; take a deep breath; find a new hobby!” Her vehemence settles over the room like a smothering gas. The couple at the bar leave to escape her zeal—to breathe.

Bombshell leans into her bearded companion and the tattoo of a swallow on his neck reforms itself into a Swastika as his plaid shirt and jeans become the black wool tunic and laced jodhpurs of a German officer’s uniform. The open toe of Bombshell’s pale slipper rubs over his polished boot. He shoots the bartender a piercing look that immediately ceases her high-pitched D.I.Y. tirade. Very quickly, two more glasses arrive at his table.

The half-dozen other patrons relax their shoulders onto their backs and lean more forward over their mugs and glasses, resuming quiet conversation. With a rustle of satin, a tall dark-haired woman wearing a pageboy a’ la Veronica Lake slinks up to the microphone standing in a dark back corner. Her bright sequined gown reveals a shapely leg through the slit up the left side. She begins a low throaty Slavic croon and backs into the shadows, startled by a spotlight pooling around her face. A tubby man with greasy dark hair, large dark glasses, and a stained vest enters the circle of light squeezing an accordion and barking like a dog. The singer’s increasingly irritating voice emerges with renewed vigor as she vies for dominance over the piped instrument and its barking player.

Mr. Beard-and-Boots rises and strides to the door. “Herr Dych, come back. Don’t be that way,” cries Bombshell.  
“Lebe wohl.”  
“Bitte.”

Herr Dych glances at the barking and screeching duo in the corner, nods curtly, and says a final “Auf Wiedersehen!”
The song of Sequins-and-Legs reaches a fever pitch that irritates the entire central nervous system of the remaining patrons. One at a time, they make their way to the door, some shivering with spinal spasms as they exit.

The now quite inebriated Bombshell stands, teetering slightly on her slippers as she approaches the shrill bartender. With exaggerated delicacy, she reaches into her beaded handbag and pulls out a tiny pistol which she aims into the widening eyes of the thin black-haired woman. By now the wailing accordion is diminished by Tubby’s barking and the howling of Sequins-and-Legs. Holding up her hand as if to ward off the attack, Miz Bartender shrieks, “Elena, stop! Why? What the …?”

Just as she squeezes the trigger, Bombshell shouts in fury, “You hired that wailing wench and her dog!”

Discharging the small revolver and the resulting violent lift of her hand causes her to stumble, but Bombshell regains her balance and puts the pistol to her own head, and suddenly—the color and present-day return to the room. I find I’ve aimed my index finger into my own temple. I leap up and flee the sounds of The Tiger Lilies and the Kronos Quartet blasting from the speakers at ZOTZ. That barista needs to remodel her taste in music.

1:20 P.M., New Orleans Museum of Art

Christy C. Mayfield

We’ve retreated inside to the wonderful, and literally breathtaking upon entry, air conditioning. The cushion under me is squishy, soft leather and feels nicer than the metal bench I was sitting on outside. The concrete wall feels cool against my bare back, exposed because of my sassy blue halter. I love the way voices echo in this atrium; it’s melodic and soothing although one wouldn’t expect it to be. Except for the rumble of hunger in my stomach, I’m perfectly happy in this spot, writing. This is not good writing, but is flowing easily nonetheless and I suspect shall get good at any moment, which is pretty much my attitude about life lately. I feel like I’m on the precipice of something not just good, but great and sweet like fresh figs for breakfast. Life, I’ve learned of late, is too short to dwell for too long on the bad parts. For while dwelling, one misses out on some really fun things, like the incredibly cute shoes that just caught my eye as they passed. They have about a three inch, thick, orange heel. The rest of the shoe has a variety of designs all over. They are perfectly placed at the bottom of a pair of skinny, pale yet surprisingly beautiful legs. The girl who owns them walks upright and I get the impression that she might carry the stature even if she didn’t have on those heels. She gives off an air of confidence that is not lost on those around her as I notice several eyes jut her way when she passes. She has an exquisite brunette braid that hangs down the middle of her back and for a reason I can’t grasp, she reminds me of the Plain White T’s song, “Hey There Delilah.” Maybe it’s because she looks like a girl who could handle a name like that, as not just anybody could.

1:30 P.M., St. Louis Cathedral

Andrée Cosby

Joseph Campbell calls the cathedral the archetypal symbol of the Medieval era—their still point in a very raucous world. Even now, surrounded by commerce and pleasure palaces of every persuasion, not to mention the sweltering New Orleans summer heat, St. Louis Cathedral is indeed a refuge for we dwellers in the 21st century. One of my colleagues, George Dorrill, and I take a break there as we make our way down Chartres Street to a lunch at Bacco.
The air-conditioning hits my face like a divine visitation and immediately soothes my body and soul. I notice a sentry of hundreds of candles in the vestibule, each one representing someone’s prayer, hope, or wish. George genuflects as we make our way into the nave; I do not, but I remember being taught this practice as a child at St. Rita School. Even though I disagree with many tenets of Catholicism, it somehow still pulls me. Could it be the Gregorian chant playing in the background? George says it’s early imprinting. And in spite of my intellectual dissonance with the church, I am grateful for the sense of the sacred that I was exposed to as a little girl.

We memorized the entire Catechism in first grade. WHO IS GOD? GOD IS THE SUPREME BEING. WHERE IS GOD? GOD IS EVERYWHERE. WHY DID GOD MAKE ME? GOD MADE ME TO KNOW, LOVE, AND SERVE HIM IN THIS WORLD. I still believe this part, and when I look back, I realize that Catechism was my favorite subject, even more than Reading. It was so mysterious and interesting—much more so than *The Adventures of Dick and Jane*—our literary text.

Whenever I visit, I love to read the Latin captions on the ceiling—Sanctus+ Sanctus+ Sanctus+ Dominus+ Deus+ Sabbath+. I can feel a sense of awe and wonder tugging at my jaded mind, and I am ready to give myself over to it. As I gaze at a stained glass window depicting one of the Stations of the Cross—the one where Veronica wipes Jesus’s face and gets a photographic image—George whispers, “Ready to go eat?” I nod, he genuflects, and we make our way to a most generous offering of 10 cent martinis.

1:35 P.M., Bacco

*Deborah Launey*

THREE martinis, Deb??? What were you thinking?? Surely this is something out of the ordinary, a totally different experience. Maybe if I sit here long enough I’ll be OK; maybe I’ll be able to write. I’m sitting at a window in Bacco, home of the 10¢ martini. I gaze out on Royal Street, trying to see through my alcohol haze. A young person catches my attention, well, actually I first see the grey mongrel dog that follows on his heels. The big dog calmly follows her master amidst the jostling crowds. She seems like such a patient dog. I follow the dog’s gaze to her master and notice that the youth holds a puppy in her arms. The expression on the dog’s face almost mirrors that of the teenager’s. Both dog and youth adore the little pup. As I watch, the young face leans in, nuzzling the pup and laughing when a tiny pink tongue laps his nose. It makes me smile. In passing, I notice the young person’s attire, and abruptly have to stare. I am not even sure whether she is a he? She is an amazing looking creature, tall, slender, and no muscle definition. Does he even shave yet? The longish black hair is shaved on one side and sculpted into odd lengths and angles on the other. A Mohawk fringe and a rat’s tail complete this odd work of art in hair. He wears a halter-bra type top. In front a leopard skin fabric drapes over one shoulder and ends in a cropped midriff. A beige fishnet band stretches across her back. Skimpy black shorts flutter in the breeze. One side is split to the waist to reveal a shapely thigh.

I realize that seeing the oddly dressed youth with his dogs has changed my entire reaction. Seeing her love for her pets completely captivated me. Sadly, I might have otherwise judged his unique attire harshly. But as a writer I see differently; I notice. As this bare-footed Peter Pan scampers down the street I smile again.

1:45 P.M., Pirate’s Alley
The air is different here. Wet, heavy, sticky—I like it. I’m not sure I even knew I liked it before. I’ve hardly ever experienced it. I live in the high desert of Eastern Oregon where the air is bone dry and heat comes at you more like a sauna and less like a steam room. Maybe the novelty of this climate would soon wear off if every day I had to trudge through the heat and humidity and I would soon grow to resent it, but for now it feels like a big wet kiss from an exotic lover.

This hot sticky air seems suited to this place. It brings the smells to your nose—fried catfish, gumbo, etouffee, crawfish boils, chicory coffee, and jambalaya. It carries the sounds to your ears—the cacophony of greetings, the pelting of a steamy afternoon thunder shower, the seductive lurrings of a lone saxophone playing for crumpled dollar bills on the street corner. It filters the colors of the streets—the brilliant red on the Tabasco bottle, the lush green of the grass in Jackson Square, the explosion of foliage on the wrought iron terraces. Where I live the hot dry desert air carries its own smells, sounds and colors but it’s nothing like this. Here the air is hot, sticky, languid, teeming with life like a primordial stew or a hot wet kiss.

2 P.M., Bourbon Street

Richard Louth

You stop noticing legless men in the French Quarter after your third in a row. As I walked down Bourbon Street towards St. Philip, a gray cloud of drizzle pursuing me across Canal, I ran into my first legless man around Iberville. His body stopped at his waist. He was stocky, black, propped in a wheelchair in front of a blues bar, not even shaking a can. On the corner of the next block another spun like a top on the pavement, pouring the contents of a dark liquor bottle down a black funnel that snaked beneath his white shirt for some reason unknown to me. He sat across from an oblivious Lucky Dog man who leaned against his machine in a striped uniform and hat. The third legless man—well, I don’t recall exactly where he sat or how he looked, for I barely noticed him at all. Which is why I write.

To see a legless man is a startling thing. Half a torso, propped up in a chair or against a wall, passed by crowds of chatting walkers, half a man, it seems impossible. At first you want to avoid looking. Then you want to peek. Then you want to walk around him. Then you want to walk away, even run away, without looking back, hoping he will not notice you. You hope he doesn’t curse you. You wonder how in the world this could happen to a human. Why God would let it happen. You ask questions as you approach, questions as you pass, questions as you walk away. How can a man lose half his body? How can he still survive? You want to ask the Lord, you want to ask the man. You want to know but then again really don’t want to know. You know that drunk tourists must ask, indecently, and that they no doubt deal with it better than you would and drop coins in his cup and that they are better than you for that.

You dread ever seeing one of these beings when you are with your child. How would you explain? How could you expose your child to this? And could you ever expose that child as well to the fact it could be you or the child sitting there instead? To see one sitting on Bourbon, exposed in front of a strip bar with naked women’s torsos plastered on billboards above him and silhouette-dancing in the window behind, is to see the mystery of New Orleans. It is obscene, absurd, comical, the cosmic joke. But the joke isn’t told until the man talks to you and you realize he has accepted this, he has no self pity, he has nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, sees the same things that you do but even better, may in fact be a better person, a more living
person than you. To see one jostling and bumping down the broken sidewalks with his right hand pressed full throttle on the stick that controls his motion is alarming. You wonder, what if the wheelchair turns over. It surely must happen sometime. Does someone have to pick him up, like a broken fire hydrant, and put him back in his contraption? Who does that? How do you pick up half a man? How do you touch him? What is it that is left? Will he fall apart, melt, decay in your hands, give up the ghost? Or will he infect you with his mortality? Will it happen to you, then, too? And if it does, will he understand, will he help you, or will he laugh? The cosmic joke.

After you pass your third legless man on your journey home, how good does it feel to put your key in the lock, shoulder the door open, snap on the overhead light switch with your elbow, and with a swift nudge of the hip, close the door behind you?

2:05 P.M., Cigar Factory, Decatur Street

*Brant Osborn*

The Latin music plays on inside the Cigar Factory on Decatur Street, which offers all of the ingredients necessary for the proper savoring of the ancient process of making personal ashes. The music pulsing from overhead speakers begins to skip, but the beat is too infectious to stay stuck for long, and the sensual insistence of the maracas is enough to jar the laser loose from the groove in the CD. The next tune hits, a ballsy, brass-driven number, a song with major cojones. I believe it is referred to as cojonic music, which is a category no doubt generated outside of the Latin community as the members and guests on the inside are usually far too busy enjoying the music to bother with classifying it. Smoke rolls from my lips, a sensual, undulating sculpture capturing the souls of three sisters dancing. Chaos mathematicians could perhaps predict the standards of such a random deviation of smoke, but the sisters are gone in the ether before I can even begin to phrase the equation.

A sign reads “Steal Here—Die Here.” I risk another glance behind the counter, steal another peek at Dominican hands rolling Dominican tobacco, converting the raw materials into perfectly smokable cigars with the same kind of magic employed by clowns converting balloons into animals, only with twice the speed and none of the levity. After all, this is serious business. This ancient process has allowed the carving out of a place in the future for the families that the hands are responsible for supporting. I cannot state for a fact that this last is true, as I do not speak the language and cannot ask. I can say, though, that I have observed the hands at work on many occasions, and I know enough about being on the receiving end of that kind of love.

2:07 P.M., Lafayette Cemetery No. 1

*Leina Ball*

We arrive at Lafayette Cemetery (number one) prior to closing. As we walk under the arch, Chet asks how many cemetery puns can we come up with. Ellen instantly replies, “People are just die-in to get in here.” We laugh and dodge the sun under the shade of massive Magnolia trees. I settle, alone, near a vault selected for comfort. After all isn’t this a place where you are supposed to rest easy? Under a layer of fallen, but still impressive Magnolia leaves the ground ripples and cracks revealing its battle with time, roots, flooding, settling and all the other agents that have acted upon this quiet space. Above ground tombs are built out of necessity here. Robert S. Whann, died Sept 3rd 1865, below, Ella C, died Oct 8th 1865; was this his wife barely living a month past her husband? No birthdates on this tomb, just death dates. The Whann family, who were they? How long did they have those names? What is the state of their remains
that have collected here from 1865-1941? Some say wife of, none say husband of. Ferns sprout out of exposed brick areas, out of death springs life.

People wandering by appear as tourists, browsing the scenery, not remembering or paying respects to their dead. If we pass through this space are we now part of this place? Have our paths crossed with people already dead? Fake flowers in cement vases withstand time, fitting in a place where plastic beads have much power. In our culture we seem to fear death and have a negative association with death, yet this sanctuary of remembrance feels so peaceful. Is it a comfort in an uncertain life, a life of unpredictable content and time, that we will die someday? Chauncy Tyler, does anyone still use this name? Under the four Whann’s the slate lists two Tyler’s, two Jacob’s, two more Whann’s and finally one Tyler. What does this signify? It’s sticky hot.

I’m glad we ended our marathon experience here in the same place where all the bodies from all of these unknown lives have come to rest. Are skeletons resting in peace if they are disintegrating to dust? Are they still “buried” here if the dust got washed away in a flood? How long do the clothes last? On our first day of this writing institute the ever eloquent Melanie Plesh started our traditional, Natalie Goldberg style marathon with the prompt “box,” and we wrote and shared. The next word was “bones.” We have now been on our New Orleans Marathon for three days and as always it has been so transformative that I can hardly believe we are still in the same week as our first day. By chance or fate I am concluding the week in a place full of boxes and bones, an echo from the start. Part of me wants to get stuck in the warm rain here, barefoot, to lie right here knowing I am still living.

I glance further to the Deacon tomb. Like most it includes birth and death dates. Why do we immediately want to calculate how long people lived by their tombstone? Is it a curiosity of how long we will live, what our tombstone will read, if we have one? Winnifred Deacon born Jan. 13, 1896, died May 29, 1975; what did she do during her time as Winnifred? Does it matter? Don’t we all matter because our very presence has a ripple effect upon others and upon our environment? It seems neat to have lived across the turn of a century. I guess many of us have lived across the turn of a millennium! What if there is no time or space? What if we could be anywhere, with anyone, anytime?

2:07 P.M., Lafayette Cemetery No. 1

Chet Parrott

The wind rustles the thick rubbery texture of the chestnut magnolia leaves that lie spread across the derelict pavement. Machinery hums in the background and the monotony is punctuated with the sound of passing automobiles. I have passed through the courtyard and cemetery gates into a land of disrepair and forgotten history. The stones represent both short and lengthy lives of people who have lived in this city and now no longer do. The creeping mold compromises the integrity of the marble and concrete structures and an army of black ants carries a dead beetle to dinner. Oddly fitting for a cemetery. A group of men tramp through the leaves and disturb the silence. The end of a thought. The end of rest. I wonder if the dead wake up when we walk across their graves, much like neighbors in cheap apartments become angry at the people above them when their tramping elephant-like feet disturb evening repose. The hot sticky scent of cheap cologne and musk wafts downwind to choke my lungs. “There is a whole district of these cemeteries, isn’t this shit cool?” one of the malodorous frat boys states with an irreverent line of cigarette smoke trailing from his lanky form. A red-breasted robin hops onto a collective grave and interrupts the march of the ants. Again, oddly fitting. The food chain exists even in a cemetery. Even our futile attempts to honor the dead with stone
seem small in comparison to the chain of life that continues beyond our sphere of existence. Victoria Smith Fluke “A Beautiful Uptown Lady.” I wonder what she might have been like. I imagine a 5’6” brunette with a flowing white dress and dainty summer hat sitting on an old-southern porch of an Acadian-style home. She is sipping a glass of homemade lemonade and nibbling on a warm piece of cornbread whilst talking to all the passers-by about “those ugly downtown ladies.” A bead of sweat pops out on my forehead and begins to make the pathway down to my nose until a cool breeze whips against my face and showers the pavement next to me with the essence of my body’s water. My life giving life to the earth. The cycle continues. This place makes me think of birth and death and how the cycle infinitely repeats itself. I wonder if my children will be described as beautiful uptown ladies, I wonder how I will be described? I think cranky, self-absorbed, computer geek doesn’t have the poetic quality I’d like. I think, much to the chagrin of my imaginary children, I’ll just write my own.

2:07 P.M., Lafayette Cemetery No. 1

Christy C. Mayfield

The Lafayette Cemetery on Washington Avenue is proving an exceptional muse, full of so many writing possibilities that I may very well be over-inspired. Add the oppressive heat, the sweat dripping down my neck and between my thighs, the noise of passing traffic, and the unyielding pain in my big toe, no doubt still lingering from the encounter with the old man at the Cat’s Meow on Bourbon last night, and good writing may be elusive to me in this moment, much like sobriety on Mardi Gras Day. Yet just as I finish that doubting line, the writing gods smile upon me and a cool breeze and peaceful quiet descends here in the shade of the tomb of the Lauer Family, all of them long dead as there have been no recent additions to this headstone. I’d like to imagine that is because the remainder of the Lauer family are all alive, well, and prospering—although I’m sure that’s not the case. Many of these tombs have not had recent additions. When does a family decide to stop using the family tomb? Does the tomb ever fill up? These daunting, above-ground monuments, distinctive to low-lying cities like New Orleans, seem to have the capacity to go on forever, allowing room for even the largest of Creole families. Two tourists pass me as I ponder this, quieting when near me out of respect for the writing I’m doing. They probably think I’m writing memories of a lost family member—writing in mourning of a dead parrain perhaps. When, in fact, I’m being just as invasive and disrespectful of these holy ancestral grounds as they, maybe more, since I’m actually sitting on the gravesite of the Schunn family. I’d like to think that Donald wouldn’t mind my intrusion as my including him and his neighbors the Lauers in my writing gives them life again in a sense. As a matter of fact, on my way to this spot, I passed a tomb that contained, among others, of course, a two-and-a-half-year-old named Clara Grace. My first reaction was to her name—so beautiful, and probably chosen with much adoration and love for her and the family members who bore that name before her. My second reaction was sadness at how young Clara Grace was when she died. What might have caused the end of such a young existence? I am sad for Clara Grace and her parents. For her because of the life she never got to live out. With a name like hers, I imagine she would have done incredible things: become a doctor perhaps, saving the lives of those around her or making them more comfortable during their illnesses as she has made me more comfortable in this cemetery. Or a poet perhaps, recording New Orleans moments just as we have strived to do here today. Would she have lived to be a grandmother, the kind with soft, white curls and a squishy belly for her grandchildren to burrow into when they’re afraid, she being the only one who could quell their fears with her matriarchal magic? No, I don’t think the Schunns or the Lauers would mind my intrusion. They would encourage me even. “Write on,
dear writer. Write the life Clara Grace missed. Write the beauty that could have been her. Your words alone can bypass the restraints of death. They will set her free from his choking grip. Because of you she will live and love and linger forevermore. Yes, write, friend, write on,” they’d say to me.

2:45 P.M., Ursulines Avenue
Richard Louth

From behind the window of a French Quarter café, I watch a goateed young man in a black t-shirt and shorts bike towards me down the middle of Ursulines Avenue. On his handlebars, a tall fruit basket, vase-like in shape, sits precariously with groceries sticking out and a straw-pierced soft drink moving like a pendulum on top. He stops the bike mid-street, lowers his soft drink to the broken, bumpy asphalt with his left hand while he balances the basket with his right. Then with his right hand he lowers the basket to the street and begins extracting the contents. He takes out two clear plastic bags of green leaves and re-positions them at the bottom of the basket, and then puts the white plastic bags of groceries on top, with a box of SOS announcing itself in one corner. Still sitting on the bike, he reverses the process, like an artist, balancing the tall basket on his handlebars and his soft drink on top. With a soft push, he launches forward. At that moment one could not help but watch. As he gains momentum, you whisper softly to yourself, “It will fall,” and for an instant it looks like it will, for the whole basket leans forward, and the soft drink leans back, and the bike inches forward while the young man with the goatee leans back, and then suddenly, everything is righted, the basket returns to vertical, and the biker pedals on, unable to see the road in front from behind the basket, but moving forward nevertheless, faster and faster, until he is gone from sight.

3:00 P.M., Molly’s at the Market
Melanie Anne Plesh

Drinking in New Orleans. I’m at the window of Molly’s at the Market, somewhere between outside and inside. Behind me is the clatter of people letting their guards down. Angels and alley cats are working things out at the bar. Two men are tossing around the word Stonehenge and lighting their cigarettes with Zippos. I hear the hinges creak and the lids slap shut. It’s a rich sound. I probably only think I smell the lighter fluid. I let them and their conversation and their Zippos melt into the general manic din. A diva in neon green with a shrill nasal voice laughs too loud and I feel bitten by her. I relegate her too, and let my attention float back to the outside, to a princess in a yellow net tutu, to a man drinking something from a purple twelve inch approximation of Barbie. Someone named “Roachlegg” has been writing on the bathroom walls.

It’s three o’clock in the afternoon. I know this because a wide-eyed woman in Mardi Gras beads just looked over my shoulder into the fully peopled bar behind me and announced with incredulity, “It’s only three o’clock in the afternoon.” Hmm, it’s later than I thought.

In a ripe and unguarded moment, an old man in a heavy frayed tweed coat stops at the window in front of me. His eyes are so tender. Soft. Too soft for this world. He speaks a language I cannot understand. Probably no one could. But I want to. While his eyes are on me, his hand is in the ashtray taking the cigarette butts out and putting them in his pocket. I offer
him a whole cigarette, hoping he’ll stay. He holds it up to his face like it’s something dear, then he backs out of my view and is gone. I feel unaccountably bereft.

The sun is gone now behind a rain cloud. Nina Simone is singing “Suzanne.” Perfume like iced flowers drifts in through the window.

3:11 P.M., Pirate’s Alley Café, outdoor Patio
Christie Varnado

A thirty-something man passes wearing aviator sunglasses, a turquoise tee, black pants, black socks, and black shoes. He is wearing a tan messenger bag across his chest and is walking rather briskly. The plugs from his iPod are stuffed into his ears, and he seems unaffected by the world around him. I wonder why he’s in such a hurry.

A withered old man sits alone at a table near mine. His hair is thin and snow white, his skin is a dark tan, and he appears to be wilted by the heat. He sits sipping on a brown drink in a clear plastic cup, a cola I presume. He’s been here for a while but suddenly gets up and walks away, the sweating cup in his right hand. He carries a small black plastic garbage bag, the top rolled down and tightly clutched in his left hand. I wonder what is in his bag.

Above my head hangs a long metal pipe, part of an old sprinkler system obviously no longer in use. A line of metal prongs sticks up on top of the pipe holding hundreds of tangled, faded Mardi Gras beads of various colors and sizes. I wonder how long they have been here and whose necks they once adorned.

A shabby-looking couple passes by engaged in a conversation, maybe an argument. The man has stringy long black hair, a salt and pepper moustache, and a rough complexion. He faces her as he walks and talks with tattooed arms flailing in the air; she is either ignoring him or simply letting him rant, as she only looks ahead to where they are going. Likely in her forties but appearing closer to sixty, she wears a red bandana on the top of her head covering her black hair that is speckled with gray. From under her do-rag, long braids hang at each side of her face and fall onto her shoulders. Her painted on blue jeans and tight yellow shirt reveal the outline of her thin body and very large bust. She carries a beer in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other. She is not an attractive woman. Maybe it’s from the nonstop partying or smoking 2 packs of cigarettes a day. Maybe it’s from pulling all night shifts behind the bar or the endless stream of tequila shots being fed to her by desperate men. I wonder what path in life led her to look this way.

3:15 P.M., St. Louis Cathedral
Tracy Ferrington

The cool air soothes away the heat of the square. I attempt to find a quiet spirit here, a respite from the noisy street. The statues and paintings peer down on me, and I assume an attitude of gratefulness before I put pen to paper. The church is quiet, nearly empty, but for a group of tourists being led by a guide (for the sign says, “Please do not go about the church without a guide.”).

The guide directs the group down the aisle and stops them next to the pew where I am seated, prepared to write something amazing. Annoyed at first by this intrusion, I convince myself that his lecture will enhance what I write. I imagine his voice to be British, his intriguing
stories allowing me to blend the historical with the mystical.

I am drawn out of my romantic reverie by the sound of his real voice, a combination of Jerry Seinfeld and Cyndi Lauper. He is pointing out the pipe organ, with pipes ranging from three inches to thirty-two inches. He mentions a recent concert: “They read the creation story. And the organist made sound effects. I didn’t stay, though. Been on my feet all day, and it was standing room only. I ain’t staying on my feet to hear no long-haired music. No sir. If I’d known he was going to make sound effects, though, I’d a stayed.”

5:32 P.M., Algiers Point
Jeanne Northrup

Weather.com claims it is not supposed to be raining, but huge diamond-like drops have begun to fall so I turn off the air conditioning and open both doors to allow a cool breeze through my little apartment in Algiers Point. I pour a glass of wine and retire to the back stoop to observe the reactions of my garden to the unexpected treat. I plug in my little patio lights that are round globes of pale color and remind me of Peter Pan’s fairies. I believe.

The dogs cringe behind me because of thunder and lightning. They are Louisiana dogs, born and bred, and I find it curious that they are still afraid of storms after all these years. Perhaps it is all a ploy to make me feel needed. I play along. “It’s all right,” I say, “it’s just a little storm. It can’t get you.” They regard me with some skepticism and retire to three interior corners, incredulous that I will voluntarily be sprayed with water.

The cats pod around on the floor behind me, safe from the rain, but unafraid of the storm. They are waiting for me to finish the wine and fix dinner. They’ll remain patient, for a while anyway.

Although the rain seems to be heavy, the plants are not bowed, but reach up to catch each precious drop, growing greener and healthier, radiating an otherworldly glow as dusk approaches. The rain, like a lover, caresses every surface and fold, every leaf and fruit, every flower.

This is all I need to remind me of why I stay here in spite of the heat, humidity, distracted drivers and tomato horn worms—just an afternoon shower that drops the 90 degree temperature to 80, and to observe the joy my plants share with an unexpected lover.

5:56 P.M., Grounds of the Old US Mint
Ellen Steigman

The heat is sweltering at the Cajun Zydeco Festival. Even in the shade, this is the heat that permeates every layer of skin, muscle, fat and bone; the kind of heat that gets right in there and beats in your veins alongside your blood. Tourists and locals mix and match on the lawn, all happy simply to be alive as a band from Mamou plays on a stage that sprang up just that morning. A sassy granny in navy Bermuda shorts and an ivory blouse two-steps behind the counter of the t-shirt booth where she is volunteering. A poster titled “Friends of the Fest” hangs behind her with the names of local benefactors, the ones who are dedicated to keeping Louisiana culture thriving despite the challenges of dispersion, modernity and satellite television. At the front of the crowd, large banners flowing down the sides of the stage depict a saxophone player in a fedora bursting ecstatically from a beer bottle. This emblem is part of the official logo of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and this musician and his imaginary
compatriots have been co-opted into local art so frequently that they could earn air miles on thousands of t-shirts worn home each year. But somehow, the anonymous musician is still elating, a symbol of the joy that glows forth from the crowd and the couples who look like they were born swinging to the beat. Folks take turns cooling off in the spray of an industrial strength mist-fan, and smells from food booths waft temptingly over the lawn. Another summer weekend in New Orleans, another celebration. Laissez les bon temps roulez.

6:00 P.M., Muriel's Restaurant balcony
Richard Louth

At 6 P.M. exactly, the bell tolls while I am sitting alone with a Sazerac at the third round marble-topped table on the balcony watching two men jog up Chartres and into the square before the Cathedral. The Cathedral's bell tolls three times. Then, another three times. Then, another three times. I'm wondering why it tolls nine times when a different bell from the Cathedral, louder and clearer than the last, begins. It tolls six times, nine times, fifteen, twenty, before I lose count. Loud and clear, over thirty times it calls sinners into St. Louis Cathedral, and I see them flow towards the entrance like Dante's damned. Why, I wonder, is the bell that tolls time so dull, so restrained, while the call for sinners rings so loud and incessant. A black bus pulls up to the corner below me and disgorges men and women wearing little identification tags so that they will not be lost. Two men on the balcony call down to them and tell them to enter the side door, and one of the crowd below points up at the balcony and shouts, “Martinis!” Up Chartres all the way to Canal the sun still lingers on the sides of buildings like hammered gold. The music in the square has stopped, and the black magician in top hat with three silver rings and a dove who had entertained before the Cathedral has disappeared.

One helicopter hovers above, shades of Katrina in a clear blue sky.

6:48 P.M., The Columns Hotel, St. Charles Avenue
Carolyn Vosburg

The Columns Hotel, a New Orleans uptown jewel, springs to life as the summer sun sets. In the center of the grand front porch old men in white linen sip martinis at a five-top, a copy of The Levee the only non-alcoholic item adorning the table. Out front, across from the street car tracks, a shaggy blond—spawn of white linen—parks his SUV and springs from the driver's seat lighting a cigarette. Chic in his white polo and seersucker shorts he saunters assuredly toward the St. Charles landmark barely acknowledging the fresh-faced and sun-kissed companion on his arm. He takes three drags before stamping the cigarette out in the concrete receptacle at the base of the ancient steps. He is at ease ascending the historic stairs. At the pinnacle of the porch the man-child nods respectfully at the old men. They are his legacy. One day he will drink martinis out front. Today he orders whiskey on the rocks and talks too loudly while the bartender smiles politely at his juvenile crassness.

7:15 P.M., Royal and St. Peter
Vicky Tangi

Across the street, a voice resonating with the pure soul of Irma Thomas and the smoky persuasion of Norah Jones compels me to pause on my way to join a childhood friend. The music is familiar, evoking a sweet and recent memory. It's Bob Marley's “No Woman, No Cry,” a song I had danced barefoot to across a cool slate kitchen floor not ten days ago in the steamy
northeast of Brazil, my hosts and I preparing a barbecue for a group of friends, our cleaning and cooking energized by the beat and the projection of our own voices. Jane was soaking lettuce leaves and fragrant herbs in vinegar water, while Vladimir rubbed sea salt on chunks of dark red beef, and I cut up chicken and sausage for jambalaya. Sofi and Vinicius were hopping in and out underfoot, their delighted squeals and giggles accenting the synchronous spirit among us. Everything's gonna be all right, everything's gonna be all right. Happy and upbeat.

But the music across the street is slow, gentle, sure, the singer sending out consolation, empathy, and hope to someone far away. Or deep within. Hush little darlin', don't shed no tear/ No woman, no cry. She turns her regally sculpted, shaved head toward the guitarist, who plays the soulful melody, each chord a caress, wrapping around and melding with the lyrics. The slogan on the singer's t-shirt reads, “Race for the Cure.” I call my waiting friend, who has already raced for the cure and is winning, and tell her I'll be a few minutes more. I cannot leave until this song is finished.

Crossing the street, I drop my insufficient dollar bill into the basket by the two women and dare to lift my voice, an inconspicuous whisper, in sync with the music they make. Their name is Mother Tongue.

Later on we hit the streets, my childhood friend and I, racing onward to the corner where I hope the duo will still be playing, a mutual agreement between the two artists and me that if they'd still be there, I'd buy their CD. I desperately want this music, their song my talisman for this time in the Quarter and for what came just before and what will surely come after; the backdrop for a summer of writing.

And then we see them, join them at the corner. They smile in recognition, and when their song is finished, I ask if they'd please do “No Woman, No Cry.” They look at each other, and the singer says apologetically, “Well, we just did that one,” but they see the hope in my eyes and look at each other again.

The guitarist strums the opening, her long slender fingers moving with grace and intention. And then the singer utters a soft cry that builds to a wail, a keening of lover's cry, birth cry, woman cry; of joy and loss and passion and victory. A million stories told before a word is uttered. The spectators move closer—a man with his 3-year-old son, both wearing Hawaiian shirts; a Hispanic guy who comes back to ruffle the little boy's golden hair; an elderly couple, leaning their gray heads to catch every word; and a long-haired woman with strong Native American features, weaving unsteadily in and out among us. The singer's words are wistful, yearning, confident. In this great future, you can't forget your past/So dry your eyes I say.

The Native American woman says to everyone and no one, “I feel my grandmother here. She's here.” And she bows East Indian manner to the singer and guitarist. Passing between my friend and me, she turns back and tosses two small cubes into the basket of dollar bills. “My grandmother's earrings.” She looks at us. “I was gonna sell 'em for crack, but they need it more. They deserve it.” She moves on. I pick up my CDs from beside the basket. We say goodbye to the two women whose name is Mother Tongue. Everything’s gonna be all right. Everything is gonna be all right. Mother Tongue. A talisman for many things.

10:35 P.M., Bar on Frenchman Street

*Terry O'Mara*

“How you folks doin'?” He held out his right hand, elbow up, hand down. As I reached to shake it, he announced to my friend and me, “I'm Jackie Chan.”

My buddy played along, “I'm Bruce Lee.” I figured that would make me Chuck Norris, so I declared such. We all had a laugh, probably one as fake as the next.
I had noticed him trying to talk to an older blonde in a tight wife-beater and neon green skirt. One could tell that they knew each other. One could also tell that she wished they didn’t. She went to the restroom and switched seats when she came back.

Every now and then, he’d ask us if we were doing all right or try to catch us off guard with another announcement and a hand on the shoulder. A couple of people, dressed well, but with long sleeves and sweat marks—obviously tourists—went to buy drinks near Jackie. Jackie, of course, introduced himself, and I caught on to his scheme. He asked, “Can I get a Bud? Can I get a Bud?”

The tourists, after being pestered for a few minutes, agreed and bought him a beer. He turned and drank quietly. After a few more minutes, he looked at me and said, “It’s a good night, Chuck.”

He smiled big, showing his full set of slightly yellowed teeth. He got up, half full beer bottle in raised hand, and danced alone with his eyes closed in the small open space between the bar and the seated patrons.

11:00 P.M., Flanagan’s Pub
Richard Louth

A thin girl wearing a white halter top over a black bra orders a Bloody Mary from bartender Keith and dips her cucumber slowly in the red depths. Her hair falls on her shoulders in orange chopstick braids. She wears the latest eyeglasses.

“You look like you’re 30 years old,” Keith says, smiling. “Is that old?”

She slowly stirs her drink with the cucumber. The armband on her thin right arm is black and thin as her bra strap. She does not look up.

11:12 P.M., Pirate’s Alley
Michelle Rasso

Santa, Baby.

A breeze blows through Pirate’s Alley as I sit in green plastic chairs with a motley crew of friends. There is an unfamiliar cool in the air on this late night in New Orleans. We are listening to one another’s stories in the shadows of the St. Louis Cathedral, and we gather closer, a sign of intimacy as well as a need to compensate for a rowdy group of spring breakers sitting across the alleyway from us. They are drunkenly belting out random songs that invade our conversation—school fight songs, theme song montages, and commercial jingles—violating our intimacy. Just as my secret hopes for them to leave rapidly, taking their rowdiness with them, are about to become not-so-secret, we see him. He is walking from the other end of the alleyway with a red plastic cup in his hand. The unidentified beverage makes its way to his lips as he moseys toward us, swaying to a tune in his head. His bright red crocs stand out against his knee-length white socks. His wrinkled and tattered shorts are a dark shade of pink, faded from the bright apple red I can tell they once were. Tucked in and stretched tight across his plump belly is a peppermint-striped tee. He walks towards the screen door leading to an apartment next to the bar, and opens it as he reaches into the worn short pocket with his free hand, searching for his keys. He looks our way and smiles through his fluffy, snow-white beard as we stare in disbelief. His eyes sparkle over his reddened cheeks as he takes the cup between his teeth to free his hands and open the large wooden door. His long white hair brushes his shoulders as he shuffles in. He turns to wave goodnight to us all and to all of us a goodnight.
The room is hazy with random plumes of cigarette smoke and the lights are dim. Outside the doors, the night is black, only tiny pinpoints of light for stars. Beneath his feet the floor is worn and the air is cooler but still thick with humidity. As he turns from wiping up one table, he spots three women sitting down at a table he hasn’t gotten to yet. At his approach, they order various vodkas. For the blonde it is Ketel One and tonic. The brunette orders a lemon drop martini. The redhead orders a Cosmo. They are laughing and talking, their voices cascading over each other as they tell their stories. There is an elderly man asleep a few tables over that makes him think for a second of his grandfather and the sterile white room he barely lives in now. He leaves him alone, letting him sleep a bit longer.

At the piano Mike sings, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” The women are talking and as he passes, eyeing their drinks for refills, he hears bits of their conversation. “So I was walking down the street to the sto—” as he drops off six beers to a table of guys in Polo shirts and khaki shorts. Two whiskeys on the rocks on his tray, he hears, “Buck naked in a swing in a white room came to sub at Walker,” as he weaves through the crowd toward the angry couple with forced smiles seated at the piano. “In a trailer with my freezer door duck-taped shut” filters through the noise as he cleans up a round of tequila shots.

Their voices are a cacophony of sound and laughter as he moves through the bar. The trio asks for the check and then thrust three twenties at him for an eighteen dollar bill. Two glasses of Pinot Grigio with a pinot noir at the piano, another round of tequila shots for the girls hanging out of their tops, two crown and cokes for the newlyweds that stumbled in. Mike starts singing about twenty dollar bills and the redhead says archly “irony, people!” and he remembers he hasn’t gotten them their change. He rushes to cash out the ticket and then deliver it to them. They smile, say thank you, polite Southern ladies even after a few drinks. They finish their round and head out the door, leaving empty Dixie cups, some crumpled cocktail napkins, and five ones.

Dr. Love slumbers
black leather hat slung low over eyes
over beard barely graying
under red apple wind chimes
his hand grasps loosely his cane
made of golf club and black tape.
Alabama Slim sings about his blues—
love and loss and moving on.
Dr. Love does not stir,
he knows.
He’s been there.
He’s touched the beat of hearts before.
He’s touched their nipples in circular motions,
licked their passions,
feared them drift away into his arms.
He introduced himself earlier,
“I’m Dr. Love. I’m always here.
Let me know if I can help.”

The End

Works Cited


Contributors

LEINA BALL, Co-director of SLWP’s 2010 Summer Institute and Advanced Institute and National Board Certified teacher, has taught all core subjects in 4th-8th grades over the past dozen years and is now working with home-schoolers in California.

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