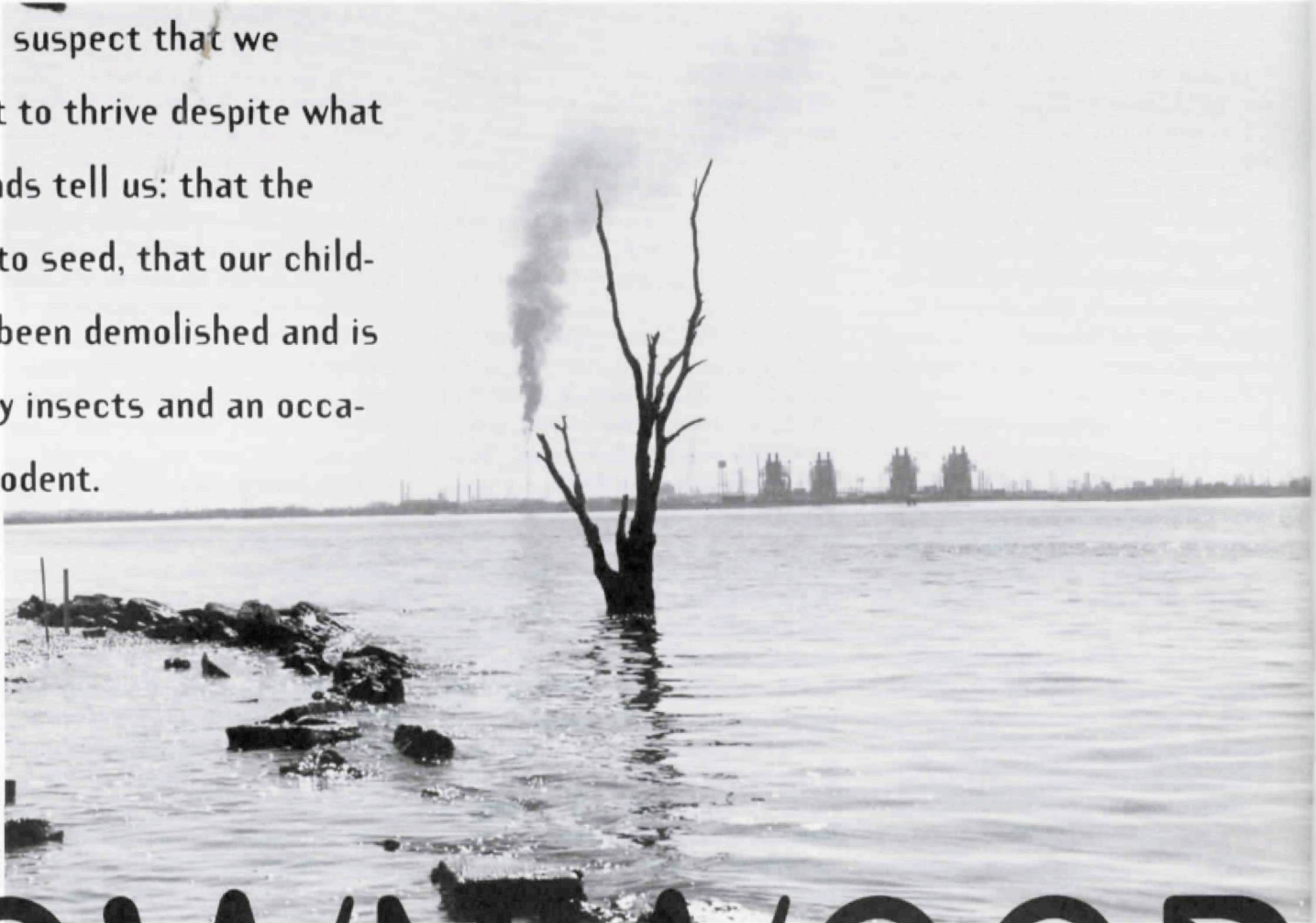


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ENID E. JIMENEZ



BROWNWOOD

As with any other hopeless situation, all that was left to take care of was the details – how this part of the city would die, and who would absorb the costs.

Valentine's Day, 1969, sometime after midnight, I was awakened by a garbled voice droning from a bullhorn aimed with some urgency from the window of a Baytown city truck. My mother, brothers, and I were bleary-eyed and cranky as we prepared to evacuate our home in the Brownwood subdivision of Baytown. Galveston Bay, not more than 200 yards from our front porch, had finally pushed into the streets, and the neighborhood was now officially submerged.

We loaded all our pets – two dogs, a rabbit named Coco, and an extremely pregnant cat – into our Volkswagen hatchback. My older brother had to release his reptile collection into the backyard, for all intents and purposes

now a swimming pool. Then we ploughed through the rising water in the floating VW, toward the promise of higher ground.

The rain storms had begun in January. They were scattered at first, tentative. By February, they had settled in like an unwelcome guest. As we drove in the pelting deluge, I was reminded that there were only two roads out of the Brownwood subdivision – two arteries that fed the entire neighborhood with inhabitants, or depleted it. The road closest to us was already flooded by the time we got there. Headlighted cars, those that could still move, were lined up for hundreds of yards like sullen fireflies. By our turn to move through it, water had begun seeping in through the floorboards.

The Volkswagen virtually lost contact with the street as it bobbed around in the waves like a toy boat. My mother wondered aloud if we would be swept away in the current.

By way of warning, the real estate agent who sold us the house had mentioned Hurricane Carla. Carla had pounded Baytown in earnest back in 1961, she said, knocking the breath out of the town for quite a while. The agent had even showed my mother the water marks: brown stains that climbed the wall to within an inch of the ceiling in the kitchen. Still, we bought the house, with the same blind faith that makes people trust that lightning will never strike in the same place twice.

All of the bayshore, a patchwork of neighborhoods that included Brownwood, had been plagued by the problem of "critical sinkage" since the early 1940s, with an estimated subsidence of five to five and a half feet between that time and 1972. An old newspaper clipping I found recently has engineers clinically ascribing the flooding problem that had affected thousands of Brownwood residences to subsidence caused by the "huge withdrawal of underground water by the City of Baytown and industry along the Houston Ship Channel." Thus had the stage been set for the flood in February 1969; by the time it arrived, the death of Brownwood had been irrevocably set in motion. In retrospect, there was no hope for another outcome. As with any other hopeless situation, all that was left to take care of was the details – how this part of the city would die, and who would absorb the costs.

In the predawn blackness, we couldn't decipher the demarcation between the street and the seemingly bottomless ditches that we knew flanked it, the same ditches from which we had extracted a snapping turtle the size of a truck tire the summer before. We drove for an hour, turning in just before dawn at a motel with a hissing neon sign out front. Although we were exhausted, we could not sleep. The dogs fought, the rabbit gnawed something in a corner, and, true to our bad luck, the cat delivered five kittens in the bathroom.

Before the flood, we had lived one block from Galveston Bay, and if you focused your eyes real hard on the gaps between the trees across the street, you could say

we had a bay view. I remember wading barefoot in the smelly bay, checking other people's crab cages and pushing beached trash fish toward the outgoing tides with pieces of shells. Sometimes the tide would bring with it a crop of bloated mullet that would clog the beach for a week. The water was brackish and gasoline infested. There was so much oil in it that you could swirl a stick and create eddies of rainbows.

The fact that the weather was always humid was a given. The fact that our neighborhood was a mosquito breeding ground, a thriving habitat for water moccasins, rattlesnakes, and snapping turtles, also went without saying. Strange crablike spiders that looked like they were dipped in plastic loved to build their webs beside our front door. There was an abundance of thick vines, and many of the trees were majestically tall oaks draped with Spanish moss, giving the place a Deep South appearance. There was a pervasive refinery stench that my family lovingly referred to as "Channel Number Seven," an odiferous mixture of sulphur, oil, and other chemicals that almost congealed in your nose, smelling for all the world like ham and rotten eggs. Those deliciously long summers we spent in Brownwood by the bay put calluses as thick as cardboard on our feet, gave us sunburns that peeled the bridges of our noses off, and turned our hair so blond and strawlike that an occasional bird sought us out for nesting materials. Brownwood was, for us children, paradise. Then the flood came and ruined our house.

So we moved to Houston.

I did not even think of Brownwood for years afterwards. Then in 1985 my stepsister visited me in Houston. She mused about old times there and wondered what it was like now. The last we had heard, it had been declared a disaster area, and no one was allowed in for fear of vandalism. Compelled by curiosity, we packed a picnic lunch and took a day trip to Brownwood.

We were stunned as we approached one of the two roads into the subdivision: it was completely blocked by barricades. The other road was also blocked by a barricade, as well as a pile of trash: things like broken washing machines, foam panels, and dirty lumber. It felt odd to find ourselves denied access to a place

we had once called home.

A man sauntered up. We couldn't tell exactly what he was – off-duty policeman, security guard, or vigilante – but he intimidated us into leaving. We spent the afternoon marveling at all the new fried chicken places built in Baytown since we lived there, and driving through the dilapidated downtown. At dusk, we returned and crawled over the barricades. We ran about a hundred yards, staying close to the ditch in case we needed to hide. It was then that the nightmare began for me. The trees were intact and familiar, but there all recognition stopped. The houses, for the most part 1950s-style clapboard ranch houses with an occasional brick veneer, were all in a shambles. Most of the windows were shot out or gouged out: shattered. A lot of houses were half burned down. Many seemed knocked in with bulldozers or sledgehammers. There was not a roof in sight. Entire yards were uprooted, and the Spanish moss I had once regarded as a touch of elegance was slung here and there in spooky tangles. Only the scent in the air was the same as before. But the breeze blew trash and odd tumbleweeds down the street, mocking my every recollection with the reality that part of my childhood was dead.

Somewhere within each of us is a well-defended perception of the place where we grew up. It is part of the fabric that comprises our thoughts now. Perhaps it is the framework that stokes our individualism. And I suspect that we secretly allow it to thrive despite what our rational minds tell us: that the place has gone to seed, that our childhood home has been demolished and is inhabited only by insects and an occasional passing rodent. We delude ourselves into believing that those places go on forever, as we desperately wish we could. We fix them in our mind's eye, as if they were as permanent as those plastic snow scenes that never change, erode, or experience springtime.

At a party in February 1992, the subject of Brownwood somehow came up, and a new curiosity was awakened in me. I decided to make a second pilgrimage.

We went on a particularly sunny day. I would have been depressed by what I saw if it had been overcast. Now the barricades were gone – there was no need for them anymore. The bay had usurped

much more of the land. There were no buildings anymore, and hardly any evidence that they had ever been there. My friend had to consult a map to find Katherine Street, where my house had been, because the skinny remnants of pavement were gone. We could see the refineries stretched in every direction. I never suspected, as a child, just how encircled we had been by the Orwellian steel towers, cisterns, and gnarled pipes.

I could no longer have any illusions about the place. The flooded cemetery was the only real evidence that anyone had ever even been there. Tombstones still reached above the bay water like the hands of drowning people before they go under for good.

Almost every fledgling Texas city has had to vie for the right to grow. After the discovery of oil at Spindletop at the beginning of this century, many towns along the Gulf Coast started to believe they had a shot at becoming something big. Pelly, Goose Creek, and Old Baytown converged in that faith, creating consolidated Baytown, which continued to aspire to growth. But other towns outgrew it to become sprawling cities, while Baytown continues to mutate and burgeon in unexpected ways. The old downtown, "revitalized" in the early seventies, is a ghost town. A new mall just off Interstate 10 has virtually pulled the heart of the city onto the freeway. But Brownwood no longer exists, except in the memories of those of us who once lived there. It is a silent plot of doomed land, sadly beautiful as the bay slowly swallows it. ■