

ENTROPY



CREATIVE NONFICTION / ESSAY ♦ FEATURED

THE FLOOD

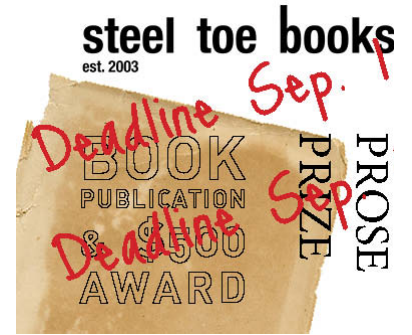
written by Guest Contributor August 20, 2021



Image Credit: Christina Gottardi via Unsplash

In the months leading up to the storm, the weather in Northeast Ohio was dry. In May, June, and July of 2007, the precipitation levels were below normal. But in late August, the remnants of Tropical Storm Erin and a stalled front converged over the area, dropping an inch per hour overnight in some parts. In Ottawa, where Ben’s family lived, the total for the night was over eight inches. The Blanchard River, located just behind his parents’ house, crested at thirty-two feet. At eleven feet, it’s already a flood.

Ben watched the weather from Denver all week, and updated me regularly, stopping by my desk before lunch, or in passing, on his way to fix someone’s computer. When the river swelled to its peak, his parents abandoned their home, and sought safety ten miles down the road at Ben’s sister’s home. There, they watched the news footage of their town, population 4,421, as its stores, parks, library, and schools sank underwater. At their home, water filled the basement and half of the first floor, forever claiming childhood memorabilia, carpets, couches, tables, chairs. In its wrath, the water took walls too, saturating drywall and insulation. It seeped into the garage, filling the car’s engine, transmission, and fuel system with muddy water. It rushed into the barn, drowning haystacks. Ben’s parents had lived in their home for over thirty years. It held five children and eight grandchildren’s worth of memories.



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THE ACCOMPLICES

and the cars at the intersection outside were growing sparse.

“They need help.”

*

We all needed help that summer—Ben’s parents, me, me and Ben. My storm had begun that spring, when my friend’s cousin was killed in a motorcycle accident. He was only 25, a few years younger than me. I was still sitting with that April death, still trying to understand how entire lives could change—and end—without any warning or notice, when I found out in May that I was pregnant.

Ben had already known somehow, or was at least certain in a way that I preferred to deny. There were giveaways: my pants, suddenly tighter; my breasts, suddenly larger and extremely sore; my never-late period, now missing for more than a week. I imagine he knew because he already had two children, because he had fallen to this fate twice before. My past was scattered with a few pregnancy scares, but they had always come out in my favor, so I clung to the ring of the false alarm.

I stopped for a test on my way home from work on a Monday night. In the checkout line, I held the test and a few other items I can no longer recall. The other items were a buffer, meant to muffle the presence of the test. They said, “I’m here to pick up a few things,” not, “I’m about to go under,” not, “My entire world is about to drown me.”

At home, I paced the hallway between the bedroom and bathroom, and made myself wait the entire three minutes before looking at the results, as if the answer were like a slot machine deciding where to land—pregnant, not pregnant, pregnant, not pregnant—and I might see the wrong thing if I looked too soon. But the future had been decided four weeks prior.

I called Ben on my way home from the store, again while waiting for the results, and hours later, after I had pulled myself off of the bathroom floor. And a dozen times in between. Over and over his phone went to voicemail. I realize now that he was deep in his own delay tactic, trying to stretch out the before, avoiding the after. As long as he ignored my calls and voicemails, he could pretend to not know for a little while longer. But that’s not how floods work. They are merciless in their path. They claim lives and livelihoods. They leave cities in ruin. They change the geography of the land.

*

A flood, as the online dictionary has it, is “an overflowing of a large amount of water beyond its normal confines.” It is also “an outpouring of tears or emotion,” and “a very large quantity of people or things that appear or need to be dealt with.”

It’s the “need to be dealt with” part that resonates with me. The idea that one can be flooded with something, overwhelmed by something, and not deal with it. I think that summer, that fall, prove otherwise. One can in fact go months, years, not dealing with anything.

*

BY JANICE LEE, SEPT 2021.

Imagine a Death embodies a vast, preternal and intensely intimate terrain... sentence sentence, her rhapsodic fearlessness and t logic not only reflects and withstands, it back... The result is the greatest work to one of America’s most elemental voices: death-defiers, a kind of lamp that breaks dark.

– Blake Butler, author of *Ali*

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something else—that version of myself, the one who, at 29, had managed to get through life relatively unscathed. I know that isn’t true, that people don’t have eating disorders, or drug and alcohol problems, that they don’t sleep around, or seek relationships with emotionally unavailable men if they are truly unscathed. I had actually been struggling for years, but the abortion and its aftermath were the tipping point.

“All flesh that moved on the earth perished.” So says Genesis about the bible’s Flood. “...all that was on the dry land, all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, died.” I too felt hollowed out, like something left floating in the aftermath of a storm.

*

That summer was the end of something for Ben too. But for him it was a bullet dodged. A problem resolved. He moved forward almost immediately, and insisted I do too.

“If you keep talking about it, it won’t ever go away,” Ben said one afternoon. We were on our way to the reptile store, where he bought his weekly supply of crickets for his pet chameleon, Oscar. The windows were rolled down, the wind blowing through the car.

He probably didn’t say that. He had to have known that whether we talked about the abortion or didn’t, it would never go away. It would always be something that had happened, something we had done. But he hadn’t wanted to sort through his feelings about it, or listen as I sorted through mine. It was done. It couldn’t be taken back or changed.

“So stop bringing it up.”

Maybe it was easier to keep the dam up, holding as long as it could. Maybe it was necessary, life-saving even, to not submerge, not go under. But I wonder if the immersion would have been healing, cleansing, clarifying. To the earth, floods are an essential process of renewal. Floodwaters carry nutrients and sediments that enrich the soil. They wash away acid water, and push salt water toward the sea. Had I dealt with things at the time, maybe I too would have been cleansed. Maybe I wouldn’t have felt the need to run away six months later. Maybe I wouldn’t have packed up everything and hauled it to Boston, leaving my job, my life, in my wake. Maybe I wouldn’t have started numbing myself with a bottle of wine every night, or sunk further into myself, deep beneath the surface, where I would stay for years.

*

I was still bleeding, my body still trying to heal a month later, when a friend called. His wife was in the hospital having her abdomen drained—a side effect of the fertility treatments I didn’t know she had been having. I didn’t know that she had had three miscarriages either, or that they had been trying to get pregnant for five years. My friend was stuck at work and needed someone to be with his wife until he could get there.

“She’s pregnant,” he told me. “Just a few days.”

When I told Ben the news that evening, he was sitting on one of the patio chairs outside his apartment, smoking a cigarette. I stood before him, my back to the intersection, to the cars, to the world, and waited for the words—his or mine—to make meaning out of it. I wanted someone to explain the punchline, to solve the riddle. I wanted an answer to the question I still have—what kind of sick fuck joke is that? In what kind of universe are babies given to those who don’t want them, and taken from those who do? There weren’t any

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FIND US ON FACEBOOK



*

I didn't want to go to Ohio with Ben. Or I did, but I knew the right thing to do was to not go. It was time to stop acting like we were a real couple, like we would ever be a real couple. So when Ben asked, I told him no. I used work as an excuse. But when I told my boss about the flood, about Ben's parents' ruined house, she didn't hesitate to send me on my way.

So we left for Ohio on Saturday morning. I packed only clothes I didn't need to bring home and a pair of old tennis shoes. In eastern Colorado, we were still alert, still energetic. The skies were blue, the sun was shining, and it almost felt like a road trip we wanted to take. I played deejay with Ben's iPod, and watched the land flatten outside the window as we headed east. When we passed the sign for the town of Wiggins, I laughed.

"It's such a good name," I said. "So fun to say. It would be a good name for a pet."

"But it would have to have a mister," Ben said, laughing. "Mr. Wiggins."

Once we hit Iowa, the rain was relentless, torrential. Visibility was almost zero, but Ben blasted through the night anyway, barely slowing down—eyes staring straight ahead, hands gripping the wheel.

When we arrived in Ottawa, just after dawn, the land was soggy. Most of the thick brown water that had covered the town had receded, leaving everything it had touched with a layer of dirt. The grasses everywhere were flat, as if permanently left in the indentation of something heavy. Water lines rose on tree trunks and buildings. From the line down everything was dirty. There were piles of trash—bigger than a car—of furniture, wood, bricks, toys, clothing, linens, insulation, on every corner. FEMA would arrive the next day to begin hauling it all away. They would come back the next day, and the next. Where did they take it all—the discarded, the broken, the unwanted?

Ben drove slowly through town first. The streets were mostly empty, except for the people who occasionally stepped out of buildings, carrying a load of trash. His parents' house stood on a small hill at the end of the street, and as we neared it, the air in the car became heavier. Ben let out a noise that surprised me, like something long stifled, and wiped tears from his eyes. I rubbed the back of his neck, and ran my fingers through his hair. I realized then why he had really invited me. It wasn't just about having another body to put to work, or someone to keep him company on the long drive. Ben had lost something in those waters. They had rushed in, and taken something when they left. Ottawa was not just the place he had grown up or the place he had left behind. Ottawa had been his home, and that home had now been altered. He had lost something he would never get back.

*

We were up with the sun most days and worked doing whatever we were told. The entire basement and first floor of the house had to be cleaned out. After that, floors and paneling had to be removed and insulation needed to be stripped. I hauled jagged boards and pieces of wood pierced with nails to the trash pile, which grew taller with every passing hour. We cleared out soggy books, couch cushions, mattresses, bricks, chairs, kitchen utensils, unidentified papers. Anything the water had touched had to go.

Flood waters carry whatever they pick up along the way, making the water filthy. The water carries chemicals, sewage, and infectious diseases, so even though the temperatures were high, the air humid, we wore long

owner unknown. I spent one morning cleaning out the garage, hosing down the walls, clearing it of everything that had washed in. I spent another on my hands and knees, hammering a paint scraper into pieces of a tile floor, dismantling it piece by small piece.

“The whole thing has to come up,” Ben’s father had said. There was a radio on in one corner, blaring classic rock, and a fan blowing in the other, trying in vain to suck the moisture from everything. My hands grew sore from the gripping, the pounding. My neck and back ached. There was a smell permeating the air, like the river, like a swamp, like something that was both alive and dead.

We worked until nightfall every day, until the fading light and our tired muscles made it impossible to do anything. Back at Ben’s sister’s house, I would strip myself of my brown, sodden clothes and throw them in the washing machine so I had something to work in the next day. In the shower, the dirt and the mud from my body would pool underneath me, darkening the white porcelain tub.

On one of the last days, I was assigned to the barn, the tall brown structure on the side of the property. As kids, Ben and his siblings had thrown parties there, gotten drunk in there, slept in there. I could picture how lively it must have been. I imagined it filled with light and music, a keg hiding in the back corner, kids making out on bales of hay, dancing, sitting up in the rafters with beer in their hands, peering down on the whole scene.

“Watch out for mice,” Ben said as he led me through the barn, pointing at which areas needed to be cleaned up. He left me in the barn with a shovel and a rake, and I worked the morning there, picking through the debris slowly, quietly, trying not to disturb whatever might be hiding in the piles of hay and wreckage. The only light came from the open barn door and one small window in the back. As I worked, I heard the mice squeaking above me and prayed they wouldn’t come flying down. At lunch, I told Ben I wasn’t going back into the barn alone.

“It gives me the heebie-jeebies,” I told him. “I’m not working in there unless you’re there with me.”

He did come, but I had the feeling I was pulling him away from something. As we raked and dug and hauled, Ben reminisced about his youth, about the girls he liked in high school, about his best friends. When he heard the squeaking, I told him I thought there were mice up there somewhere.

“That’s not a mouse,” he said, putting down his shovel.

I followed Ben across the barn, up the ladder, and onto the platform above. Rafters spanned the length of the barn, and held boxes labeled with names, years. It was dark, damp, and hard to see very far. Ben brushed aside cobwebs as he walked across the boards, but they assaulted me anyway. When he found the kitten, it was lying balled up in the hay. It was a little larger than a roll of quarters and covered in orange and white fur. Its eyes were closed, its ears still stuck to its head.

Ben picked it up gently and held it delicately in his strong palms. “It must be hungry.”

“Where’s the mom?”

“I bet she left it in the flood.”

At the bottom of the ladder, Ben placed the kitten gently in my palms, and climbed back up. I don’t know how he knew to go back up there, I hadn’t seen any other kittens, but a few minutes later he returned holding another, this one black and white.

When we walked out of the barn we must have looked like two little kids, our palms outstretched, cradling baby birds that had fallen from their nest. Ben’s mom found us a large bucket to put them in. Ben seemed to know instinctually what to do—that the kittens needed to be warm, first and foremost. At the pet store, he knew what kind of formula to buy, and knew how to use a dropper to squeeze the formula into their mouths.

“That’s what the mom normally does after they eat,” he said. “She licks them until they go.”

He watched me as I rubbed gently until the cloth got warm, dampened. The kitten’s little belly deflated too.

A kitten’s eyes will open sometime between days five and fourteen, which meant we had found the kittens just after they were born. I wonder sometimes if we were right to take the kittens in, to feed them and warm them and make sure they urinated. Or had we snatched them from their loving family? I wondered if their mother came back to the barn at some point and found the nest empty, or if something had happened to her or if she had left, as Ben suspected, on purpose.

It’s not uncommon for kittens to be abandoned. The mother may get lost or killed while out hunting. She may get stuck somewhere. Her kittens may have a deformity or a disease. Maybe she had too many kittens, and couldn’t feed them all. Maybe she developed an infection in her mammary gland, making nursing too painful. Or maybe she was what’s called a premature mom—a very young mom who is confused or disinterested. That mom may come around, figure out her maternal instincts and be just fine. Or she might leave and never return.

I wondered which mother those kittens had—if she left on purpose, or if she drowned as the river swelled, crashing over its banks. Had she been caught out there, chasing her prey? Had her last thoughts been of her babies, left sleeping in the barn? Had she worried about who would feed them? Who would take care of them?

*

At night I would wake to the cries of the kittens. They were hungry, or they were cold, or they were both. I would crawl out of bed in the dark, sit on the floor beside the bucket, and shine the light from my cell phone inside. I would take one kitten out, give it a bottle, rub its belly, and then lay it back down, asleep. I would pull out the other and repeat each step until it too, was sound asleep. I would cover them in the old t-shirts we had found for blankets. The cycle repeated every few hours throughout the night. Sometimes I would wake Ben and make him do it, but mostly it was me, alone in the dark, nursing the kittens.

I’m not blind to the parallels of this story anymore, to what it’s like to be a new parent—nighttime feedings, the sudden failure to be grossed out by bodily fluids, continual worry. I see now how the kittens became surrogates for me, how they held something that I had been left with after the abortion—how they carried out what had been stopped in its tracks. They gave me something to care for, a place to put the love I wasn’t supposed to feel, because there hadn’t been anything to feel it for, nothing had been born to give it to.

*

I don’t think there was ever a question about whether the kittens were coming home with us, whether Ben would keep them. Our remaining days and nights in Ohio, the time in the car and in the motel rooms on the way back, and the weeks after we returned home became solely about the kittens. On the drive home we named them—the orange and white cat Mr. Wiggins, the black and white cat Ottawa. Once home, Ben brought the bucket to work with him and between the two of us, we fed them at regular, three-hour intervals. As the weeks wore on, their eyes opened, and their ears stuck up. They began crawling and walking all over everything. They learned how to use the litter box, how to feed themselves. And they slept, always together, creating one ball of orange and black and white fur.

Of all the flooding types, flash floods are the most dangerous. Water that flows at 6 mph exerts the same force as air blowing at EF5 tornado wind speeds, which is over 200 mph. It's hard to understand how something so seemingly slow moving can have that kind of power. But flash flood water is tricky. It isn't deep, but it is stronger than it looks. Only six inches of flowing water can knock you off your feet, which means that no matter how slowly you step in, how carefully you stand, the water might push you over anyway.

*

The Saturday Ottawa died was a flash, something you never see coming. I had only been gone a few hours, and everything had been fine when I left. That's what I would tell Ben, over and over, first through the phone to his hotel room in Vegas, and then after he had returned home, after I had brought back only one of the two kittens he had left in my care. It had been a rainy weekend in October. It was a good day for watching movies, for reading, for napping, which had been my plan, until work had called and needed me there at 1:00.

The kittens were playing in my bedroom when I left. I had stacked boxes and books on the floor, giving them their own "room" to live in. They had a litter box and water and food. They had beds, toys, everything two eight-week old kittens could need. But when I opened the bedroom door at 4:00, only Mr. Wiggins was standing, mewling to greet me. Ottawa was lying on his side, eyes closed, struggling to breathe.

When I think about it now, I wonder about how my actions affected Mr. Wiggins. I wonder if she (we would find out months later that Mr. Wiggins was a girl, a revelation that provided no shortage of laughter) had been confused, scared, when I had dashed to the floor, had started shaking, had cried, "Nononononono." I had found a shoebox and placed Ottawa inside, and run out the door. I had left with her only companion, and returned, hours later, without him. Later that night she would crawl all over the house, underneath the couch, on my shoulders, looking for Ottawa. Did she think I had stolen him, ripped him away?

At the vet's office I tried calling Ben over and over. He never answered the phone when he took trips with his brothers, a fact that I both understood and hated. I left him another message, telling him it was urgent. I had tried to hold my voice steady, not let the tears crack through, but I hadn't succeeded.

It was dark by the time the veterinarian told me there was nothing they could do. They didn't know what had gone wrong.

"Sometimes these guys are just born with something," the vet said. "There was nothing you could have done."

When Ben finally called me back later that night, I hadn't planned on having to defend myself, on having to reiterate over and over that there had been no signs.

"I just don't understand," Ben said. "There had to have been something that you missed." I could hear his brothers in the background, rustling around in the hotel room, talking and preparing to go out. He wasn't going to call me a liar, or accuse me of lying, but I heard it in his tone of voice, in the questioning. It was the same tone he had used a year earlier when I had borrowed his laptop. The screen had gone black in the middle of my typing, and never recovered. He thought then too that I did something—spilled something, dropped something—and wasn't admitting to it.

"There wasn't. Everything was fine when I left." I was crying, had been crying all night. I would continue to cry the rest of the weekend, for weeks after, as if the floodgates had finally opened, as if the last six months had finally shown up, wanting to be released.

*

I wish there had been a positive aspect to the tears I cried that weekend. I wish they had been like the kind of floodwaters that clean things up, clear things out. I wish they had let what was buried beneath the surface rise up, overflow, resettle.

Instead, I became burdened, overloaded. I began to trudge through the days. And then six months later, I ran. I picked up what I could and moved to Boston. But I didn't know that you can't outrun floodwaters when they come—rising, flowing, seeping. It's the same with the truth. You can't hide from it even if you move two thousand miles away, even if you soak yourself in bottle after bottle of pinot noir. It will find you once the water settles, once the silt and the sediment fall back to the earth, once the muddy waters become clear again. Trees and buildings and land dry again. They solidify. But sometimes normal never exists again. Sometimes, the damage is permanent.



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