INTO THE WIND

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1.

Joseph listens to the hurricane's biblical fury and prays for the air to sleep. The floodwaters nearly at his chest, he clubs the bars across the window of his cell, yanking the cool iron with stiff frozen fingers. Calling into the darkness, he counts the strokes out loud. Suddenly, morning is a faraway thing yet Joseph remembers having creased his face against the cell bars, screaming into the sheriff's fleeing back, screaming into the wind.

Joseph beats the bars faster. His breathing is harsh. His arm starts to cramp and his mind trades life-and-death images at a furious pace. He wonders about holding his breath under water, opening his eyes to see the cell walls moving and alert through the filter of the wetness. The storm is only a day old but Joseph can barely remember when he was merely alive, merely a colored prisoner asleep in a tiny cell, waiting to be officially accused, desperate to stand before a New Orleans judge.

At twenty-six, Joseph believes in goodness. He believes the window bars want to let him pass with the tender sway of a modest country gate so he can swim like a child, natural and true, swim as if the floodwaters ringing the ramshackle parish jail were a quiet pond and Joseph would be able, as he claims his liberty, to pause, to momentarily inhabit the joyousness of a divine underwater silence.

2.

Coming from the lake, Joseph throws his pole and the perch in the dirt and runs toward the Model T in front of his house, his fourteen-year-old mind euphoric. He circles the motorcar slowly, his hands behind his back. He's desperate to caress its gleaming red surface. He knows the wealthy driver is just inside, no doubt bringing stories of faraway places, gamblers in close

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dark saloons, outlaws with guns, belching trains, tall majestic ships and homesick sailors, riverboats moaning in the moonlight, stories whose heartbeats exist lifetimes away from Broussard, Louisiana, from Joseph, from his mother's tiny vegetable garden and the neighbors with their endless sorrows and the wild mongrels and Aunt Ella's jelly jar...Joseph's yearning for the world rippling outward.

Joseph suddenly hears the visitor inside. He steps softly onto the porch and peers through a worn screen. Minnie, Joseph's mother, moves a plain blue fan and talks reservedly of the heat. Calvin, Joseph's father, wipes his brow with a damp rag and looks over his shoulder, a nervous gesture that hardens to a twitch in times of stress.

Calvin sees Joseph at the door.

This is Mr. Claude Villard, Calvin tells Joseph. We done spoke about him son I know you recall.

Claude Villard has come to pay late respects to Joseph's dead grandfather, Elijah. Elijah was one of ninety-seven slaves Villard had owned before the war. The third time Elijah had cut from the Villard plantation the blackbirders found him in a nearby well and shot once into his left hip. Calvin was never owned. But he is haunted by his father's legacy and often believes the patrols are still coming. Still hunting. Calvin snaps his neck even in sleep, screaming in the well, pleading for his life, his hands open to God. Through the gauze of this terror, Calvin has hovered over his only child, checking Joseph's breathing long past infancy, beating him without mercy for climbing the cherry trees alone or walking the lanes at dawn.

Joseph stares at the visitor, saying nothing, his desire for tales instantly gone.

I could use a good strong boy, Villard says to Calvin, nodding at Joseph. Got a fleet of flatboats out of New Orleans, pay your boy there a little somethin.

Calvin straightens, his neck in spasm. He strains to look Villard in the eye.

I thank you kindly, says Calvin. My boy young, don't belong in a city, Joseph love a field sky and pure clear rain same as me.

Who says? Joseph murmurs to no one.

3.

At twelve, Joseph had begun to feel his will. He ran shouting into the cane fields with wild tales of false fires. He snapped a chicken's neck from spite.

One night he propped a chair, not letting his father check on him, while Calvin pounded Joseph's door in rage. Minnie led Calvin to bed that night and held him as he wept.

When a boy named Moses had drowned, Joseph, who swam poorly, imagined he had defied his father's worry, imagined he had gone off with Moses in secret, imagined he had seen Moses thrash against the muddy water then slip under the surface of the lake, the death of Moses somehow becoming Joseph's fault.

At supper, the night they got word that Moses had died, Calvin pointed at his son, his finger like a small bent back. The world will surely devour you, Calvin said to Joseph, his voice trembling. Mind me now and live.

His father's admonition brought shame to Joseph's face and Joseph's brittle nerves soon merged with the fact of Moses, the boy's death triggering a tidal wave of imaginary disgrace that swallowed Joseph alive. A week after Moses died, coming from sleep, Joseph first noticed his mind separating. He felt like a stranger to himself and to circumstance, as if his living memory had contracted and left him without a shred of recognizable self. His skin hung looser on his bones, his soul floated beside him. He could barely remember who or where he was and gave himself a test, a list of questions to bring his right mind closer.

4.

Claude Villard stands to leave. He steadies his cane. Joseph steps back from the screen door to let him pass. Joseph hears a clap of distant thunder. He hears a flapping sound. He turns to see one of the perch on its back with its mouth open, hungry for rain.

Lemme get those fixed up for supper, Minnie says in the kitchen. A fine thing what you done, Joseph. A good fine catch.

Ah, Mama, Joseph says. Go on.

Joseph was born dry. His mother, too old to be giving birth, brought him into the world against the want of her own body. In his first hours of life, neighbors wondered how he had stayed alive inside her. Joseph crawled early. When he was nine, his neighbor Miss Monroe read him the Bible. She taught him to write but cautioned him to keep his mind a secret. Out loud Joseph would speak the story of the prodigal son before he wrote down the words. The speaking and the writing felt sacred. He repeated over and over the one

sentence that moved him, the younger son gathering what he needed and pursuing distant lands.

Joseph goes to the front room to wait for supper. He listens to the cloudburst. Behind the chair he sees gloves Villard left behind. He caresses the strange black leather. He slips a glove on slowly and feels the softness take his fingers. He runs a smooth forefinger across his mouth. He feels intimate with a traveler's need to protect his hands and draws a deep borrowed pleasure. He holds a sleek finger in the air as if testing the wind, pretending his journey is near.

5.

Twelve years later, hard sheets of rain pound the roof of the jail. The sound is deafening. Joseph, in a lower bunk, lies on a worn mattress with a thin blanket at his feet. Joseph yearns for an absence of wetness, a stillness, the hurricane miraculously changing its mind. The sheriff flips a magazine in the damp morning light. A sharp brutal wind puts fists to the old windows. Joseph sits up.

Tiny pools of water gather at the sheriff's feet. He coughs nervously. Another angry gust. The modest structure shakes like a body with fever. Joseph holds the bars with both hands. He stares at the sheriff and the sheriff, after putting away the magazine, stares back.

A year after he had first arrived in the gently curving Crescent City, Joseph was admiring a history book in the window of a Royal Street gift shop when a Negro man ran from the store holding a silk umbrella. A young store keep followed the man outside and pointed at Joseph who was detained.

I got stories I could tell us both, Joseph tells the sheriff, a wobble in his voice. Heaps. Make the time go.

Save your strength, Joseph. Save it up, the sheriff says. You shoulda stayed put with your relations. Never shoulda strayed all over this proud fair state.

The sheriff comes to the end of the magazine and takes keys from the wall.

I'm leavin, he tells Joseph, looking down. You'll be fine. Don't get crazy. Can't let you out. Telegraph said prison authorities are comin for the coloreds. Gonna move you all before the storm goes wild. The sheriff gets sugar sandwiches and apples. Don't eat em all at once, he tells Joseph, passing the food through. Gotta last.

Whatdaya mean last? Joseph says. I thought they's comin...?

Lightning fingers an oak whose bewildered limb flies over Trinity Baptist and smacks the jail's roof. The sheriff flinches and gets out a handkerchief. His hand shakes. He steps back but hits the wall. He forgets he's holding the handkerchief and wipes sweat from his forehead and mouth with the back of his arm.

Joseph, you did this now, you didn't have to steal that umbrella.

Joseph's jaw works a clench. He speaks slowly. Sheriff, he says, I explained the circumstances precisely...

The sheriff looks at him like he's seen a ghost and Joseph stops short, feeling, in his desperation, his educated second tongue rising.

I done told it over and over, Joseph adds, correcting his speech, I never took nothin from that store there, mindin my own self.

As the sheriff turns to leave, Joseph lunges through the bars to grab his shirt.

From deep in his history, Joseph sees a vision of his Aunt Clara's hungry baby when she was first born, her eyes tight, fists in the air, every stitch of her gathered up into a scream. Joseph grips the cell bars and leans his head back. The shriek never leaves Joseph's tongue but he hears it clear in his mind, a siren guttural howl crawling the wall of his throat, the sound of a bobcat tearing the head off a wild hog.

6.

Joseph sleeps. Hours later he rises and goes to the cell window. The water has risen to his ankles. He stands on his toes and pushes open the dirty pane. Along with the food, he had put his shoes on the top bunk to spare them. His feet are cold in the dark cold water, the sun nearly set, his feet almost numb. Across what was once a road, Joseph sees the tide rising toward the windows of the Poland Station streetcar barn, the telegraph poles shorter in the storm. He gets a sandwich and chews slowly.

He wonders about escaping and feels shame for thinking he deserves to, a chance to swim away like a fish-man he once became in a dream. The front door of the jail suddenly creaks alive and Joseph rushes forward, calling out to no one and splashing himself, dropping the bread in the water. He returns to his bunk and lies on his back, his wet feet wetting the mattress. Panic again takes his bones. He pretends he never ran away. Never got accused.

Papa, he whispers to the ceiling, his eyes open.

Joseph feels a tingle in his fingers, the strange sensation of unknowing as

the separating returns. He can't remember his name for a few seconds, can't remember why the rain is in the room with him and his bunk nearly drowned. To calm the storm in his mind, he pretends he's home watching his mama mend an apron. Joseph is grateful for the pleasantness of the reverie, the crickets filling up the night air with a safe right sound.

7.

Joseph counts backward to keep track of the days since he left his mother and father in Brossard, fleeing, finally, the mongrels and rice pudding and pig fairs the day his father lost his senses and tried to lock him in a barn to keep him close. High wide clouds chase each other overhead. The New Orleans pavement burns Joseph's feet. He is standing in the middle of Franklin Street near an old man in a stained red tie playing a clarinet.

Joseph watches a boy watching another boy who is dancing and laughing. Joseph's legs ache and his belly is empty. Silently, Joseph talks to his dead grandfather Elijah, wishing his grandfather could hear.

The slave owner Claude Villard had not purchased Elijah from the back of a filthy wagon because of Elijah's obvious physical strength. Villard somehow respected Elijah, a respect he could never admit. He respected the way Elijah had answered his questions, this slave not feeling owned all the way down, something most owners feared. It was this unusual, unsettling attachment that made Villard want to be visible to his favorite slave, to dance like a man out of his senses.

Claude Villard brought Elijah inside from the fields one day and showed him his art, huge canvases in ugly gold frames, renowned English painters, ladies ghostly pale in immense white gowns, diamond garlands in their braids, men in buckled boots, elaborate balls, feasting tables full enough to feed a slave family for a hundred years. Claude Villard began to dance across his gold rug like the people in the paintings, hugging himself, shouting at Elijah, euphoric over the civilized grace of the English. Elijah felt strange and wicked in the house. He pitied the owner and looked down as Villard danced. More than whips and dogs, Elijah felt his visit with the bewitched master had stolen his soul. Days later Elijah ran from the plantation a third time with a soft night wind and a blinding moon. Coarse summer twigs snapped beneath his feet. He felt his heart moving in the corner of his eyes.

Years later, still limping from the bullet but free, Elijah would whisper the story of the dancing owner to Joseph nestled in his lap. Joseph never under-

stood why the slave owner danced but the picture of his own flesh and blood entered him, his grandfather pursuing the world and running without fear. It was this running that painted a desperate, beautiful yearning on the membrane of Joseph's hopeful, child-shaped, still-wet heart.

8.

A month after he arrives in New Orleans Joseph meets a crippled barkeep on Chamberlin Street who lets him sweep the place morning and night. Joseph sleeps in the man's basement. Sometimes Joseph makes a few cents leaving packages at the tops of rickety stairs. Sometimes he shines shoes, feeling a lust when he wraps bold fingers around a heavy coin. Sometimes he sees wild rabbits in tall grasses on the edge of town. Sometimes he unloads a barge. Sometimes he listens to the saxophones moaning softly. Sometimes he drinks himself to stupor. Sometimes he bathes in a stream, cuts his foot and watches the tide take his blood. Sometimes he helps a man shoe horses, blushing, smiling shyly at the women, curious about the rustle and tide of their skirts as they pass.

Life in New Orleans feels hopeful. Immediate. Joseph trusts the pealing salmon and vermilion patchwork stucco. The poverty of the Quarter and the ordinariness of the view relax him, the strict borders of his childhood becoming a soft formless memory. Joseph feels a sublime joy in faces and dispositions. He has not journeyed so far from his mama's fishcakes but those restrictions feel a lifetime away. He is soothed by the mélange of inflections that find his ear and he begs stories from strangers, anxious to be intimate with the entire known world.

It is dusk. Joseph walks along Decatur Street, North Rampart Street, Basin Street, closer to the river, past the taverns and the waves of laughter exploding from the bordellos. He's never gone in but likes to watch the poor coloreds stumbling in and out of Bo's Jungle on Canal Street. Tonight Joseph sees a skinny Negro fighting with a white sailor. Joseph loves that life is reckless and unknowable. Freed from the coffin of his youth Joseph trembles, thrilled to be among the living.

9.

We are raining, Joseph whispers as night falls, the sheriff's promise of rescue an awful lie. We are raining.

The water lashes the cell window in thick braids, seeping in through loose

boards, running the walls to meet the lake that covers a shimmering floor, the night wind a violent, howling phantom.

Joseph has moved into the upper bunk. The green-grey water smells of animal stench, the fetid core of the earth upheaved. Cold air edges sideways through crevices in the wood, chilling his bones. He struggles to calm his chattering teeth. He inspects the cell he has occupied these months, scanning the walls for pressure points and a way out.

Joseph eats the last sandwich. He thinks about the sheriff asleep in a dry bed expecting to forget. Over time, he's certain the sheriff will open endless doors for strangers. The sheriff will hesitate to tie a horse or chain a barn and when he tries, he'll feel a disgrace whose mystery will create a bottomless, unknowable shame.

Sheriff, you and I will be close for the rest of our lives, Joseph says to the water and the darkness. Intimate.

10.

Annielle's shirt is torn and her breast nearly exposed when Joseph first sees her near the rear of a dim narrow passage in a part of New Orleans he had never explored. Annielle is arguing with a black man in a dark-blue suit. Joseph has never seen a black woman's body and he likes the way her breast moves when her fist in the air becomes a small tethered bird. Joseph can't hear their words but the sound of Annielle's pitched voice comes toward him deliberate and proud, the way tall ships with vast sails enter port. The man brushes hard past Joseph. Annielle sees Joseph and stops, pulling her torn shirt across her body.

Not what you think, she tells Joseph with a harsh stare.

I'm not thinking anything, Joseph replies.

Joseph wonders why his thoughts matter to her. Something in her face speaks to him of shyness. Of love. She starts down the corridor. He follows. She stands behind a basement door. She keeps her glowing eyes on him, her face softer. She talks fast and low about things Joseph doesn't understand. Negotiations. Terms. Confused, Joseph listens. He feels rained on, her words, her scent. A sensation greater than desire consumes him. Annielle is a ferocious anchor and Joseph senses she could drain some of the worry from his soul.

Annielle goes inside. Joseph needs her to return. He waits for a long time on a wooden crate in a dingy corridor, barely a slit in a wall. He watches a

beetle drag a fly. When the moon clouds over he disappears but returns the next day and the next. On the tenth day Annielle opens the door and Joseph goes in.

11.

Outside his cell the wind has grown calmer but the water rises faster now, the smaller, lighter things in the cell floating in the grey-brown surge. Joseph tries to calculate the number of inches between the rising water and the top of his head. He imagines kissing the ceiling, gulping the last stitch of air.

Outside in the distance Joseph hears people for the first time. He shouts at the walls of his cell to no one, ecstatic, relieved. He slides off his bunk, easing more of himself into the freezing water, shocking his lungs. He holds the bars and pushes open the window, gagging on the tide.

He sees a devastated city. A bridge has disappeared along with three barges. Ships, once in the harbor, have been hurled onto buildings and houses. In the distance, people are swimming. Ashamed of the impulse, he calls out in a small, desperate voice. He thinks about waving his arms. He imagines the sheriff in a boat, shooting him in the hip as he swims to shore.

I am Joseph Villard, he murmurs.

He is moved by so much life in the sea, the city still alive in this immense watery grave. He sees a rich lady's hat with long wet feathers. He sees a silk umbrella. A washbasin. A black derby. Lumber from a ship. Joseph feels the separating suddenly. He can't remember why he's wet, why the world is entombed, why the red velvet chair is in the sea and not on a porch near a delicate lace cloth covering a table holding a cool pitcher of lemonade. He waits, watching the water, wondering about the chaos, all these things put into the wind. He starts to cry, less for himself, more for the things in his drowned life, the arrogant tide seizing and claiming them, swelling them unnaturally, draining and devastating the will of each separate object to live on. He sees Annielle on a raft calling his name. He sees a frantic black horse still reined, lurching its carriage. He sees a bowtie. Suspenders. Snakes. He sees his father in a wagon, his head twitching backward.

Even in crisis the world for Joseph is in color, rapturous, the wan pale hues of his childhood meager by comparison. He recognizes the tenacious beauty of a city in deluge, his adopted city, textures lost to him, things flailing in the out-of-place tide, bobbing, moaning, the wail of beloved objects Joseph is sure he can hear, the tuba, the teacups, the knitting needle, the bar-

ber scissors, the buttons, everything floating, bearing witness, their collective luster, their luminescence damned and betrayed.

I AM JOSEPH VILLARD, he begins to shout over and over, unafraid of the sheriff or any living thing, a sea of wet wind drowning his words and blinding him with spray. I LIVE.

His eyes bigger, he sees a narrow piece of firewood floating in the tide. He forces his shoulder against the bars. The wind shifts and the wood drifts out of reach. Joseph tries harder, wincing against the sharp ropes of pain knotting his chest. The tide again turns, this time in his favor. He grabs the wood, laughing, crying, screaming into the mist. With the last of his strength he pounds the bolts holding the bars across the cell window. I AM JOSEPH VILLARD, he sings, weeping, counting the strokes out loud. I AM JOSEPH VILLARD.

Two bars release. He watches his arm rise and strike but soon the firewood starts to split. I am Joseph Villard, he says quieter, each stroke draining him, the remaining three bars unyielding and defiant. Joseph's legs are frozen and numb. What's left to him of his real body begins at the water line, his neck, his face, his hands.

12.

Joseph pounds slower and slower, his bones feeling hollow. His head falls forward. He drops the firewood, holding onto the window and leaning back into the water. He floats there, feeling none of his body. He listens to the renewed bellow of a bleak sadistic wind commanding the world. He smiles to himself, proud of his journey, proud of having his own story to tell should a visitor come again in a spotless Model T. Joseph murmurs a prayer to his mother and father and the dead boy Moses then closes his eyes to dream.