

# Typhoon

*An Editor's Note*

*When Joseph Conrad described a typhoon, he said very little about towering waves, or darkness, or the whistling of the wind in the shrouds.*

— Antoine de Saint Exupéry

I visited the Florida Keys two days before Hurricane Andrew went through, in 1992. Virtually oblivious to danger, blissful among the brisk winds and breakers, I turned around, drove north, and caught a flight home with nothing more than a tourist's appreciation for the potential of human desperation. In a poem about that drive through the Keys, I wrote, "The sky walks right in / to homes with a bucket / of water for Miami, the rot / of mangroves in marshes along Highway One."

That seems to me now, since Hurricane Katrina, as the kind of poeticized and ultimately phoney language that betrays someone who never got waste deep in the actual flood—like the flood that covered much of the Gulf coast this season, or whatever flood one meets. The event could as well be a forest fire, which a poet friend recently faced in the Idaho mountains. The world offers us all the authentic experiences we can handle, from political to family-centered typhoons; easy, conventional language just won't stand up to authentic human suffering, or its heroism.

For that, we go to literature. It happens—not by coincidence, I hope—that this issue of *New Letters* has something to show us about human desperation and its transcendence. "I am scared," writes Mia Leonin, in "John the Baptist," the essay that opens this issue. "I am terrified that I have died or that I've never lived a real moment but in the sleeve of one of Jesus' parables." She is on the bus in Bogotá, Colombia, and, as a writer, she has just comprehended what Robert Day describes in his own essay

included here, “The Committee to Save the World.” “I am not a ‘thinker,’” Day insists. “Nor am I a ‘problem solver.’ . . . I am by nature a story teller. That is, stories happen to me.”

Leonin’s essay sets the course for everything that follows, which is global in its concern, moral in its desire. Wendell Berry, Bharati Mukherjee, Andrei Codrescu—himself displaced by Katrina—others here, have only to weigh their vocations in literature against their authentic experiences. We need journalists to rescue the facts of events; but in their furious speed, called communications, journalists during Katrina often reached into their tool kits to describe the storm, “packing” 160-mph winds, and the coast’s “deteriorating conditions.” Gas prices would, guess what, “spike”; journalists tucked away in Washington, D.C., would tell us about “the rising tide” of crime, “the fire storm” of criticism; and I would think of my own poor writing about Andrew. The writer who flew home two days before the flood has nothing in common with the frail grandmother who fought for her life against Katrina. To echo Saint Exupéry, the grandmother was much too busy.

“There is nothing dramatic in the world, nothing pathetic, except in human relations,” writes Saint Exupéry in *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. That is the moral imperative of literary writing. “The physical drama cannot touch us until some one points out its spiritual sense.” The literature of a typhoon builds slowly, out of a gesture. We ask of our great writers to stay in the storm awhile, to get a feel for it.

“Rising up between the cracked sidewalks and the thick clouds of smoke overhead,” writes Mia Leonin, about the homeless people of Bogotá, “they stride purposefully down the median with capes of burlap sacks and random scraps of fabric flying behind them.” We prefer our writers to step off the paved walkways of conventional prose. In the essays, poems, and stories here, readers will find themselves on slippery footing, with writers who have decided to stay and face the human drama, and point out its spiritual sense.

– Robert Stewart