

Interlude

Landfall

I read on Twitter that waiting for a hurricane is like being stalked by a turtle. There are intense preparations, followed by extended lulls and worried second-guessing. It's an autumn ritual here: watching for tropical disturbances to "organize" into named storms, which increases potential for danger and activates higher insurance deductibles. The turtle crawls to the Gulf, having ravaged a Caribbean outpost before reassembling and strengthening again. Its Doppler-surveilled path is dotted by text alerts. Local stations interrupt their regularly scheduled programming. Meteorologists perfect the art of repetition. Reporters stake out their usual spots: at Lake Pontchartrain to measure waves; on the Gulf Coast to interview the fool-hearted and fearful; at crowded grocery stores; at sandbag distribution points; over highway evacuation routes. From podiums, officials urge precautions. Schools announce closures. We stare at the Doppler's latest rotation. Family members elsewhere check in with offers of spare bedrooms. We haul plants inside, tuck away patio furniture, and tie down the porch swings. Check the corner bodega for freezer ice and batteries. Find the hurricane box of candles and nonperishables in the closet. Top off the gas tank and park on higher ground. Canvas the neighborhood. Clear debris from storm drains. We will discuss taping up the windows but won't do it. Pull down the shades. Charge cell phones. Locate board games and playing cards. Watch the turtle.

As it makes landfall, we see split screens of Doppler radar and wind- and rain-battered communities: swinging traffic lights, swaying trees, and torn away rooftops. Outer bands of weather test our defenses. The sky darkens. The wind whips through in waves like timed contractions. Eventually, cells of extreme gusts begin lashing against the house. When the power goes out, which it will, we track local broadcasts for a bit on cell phones and then a transistor radio. We keep playing board games. At night, the electric lamps go on. The wind rips against the house. We move away from the windows. We present calm faces to the children. And when a particularly long gust lashes against the window and you hear something crack or break, you feel your body clench and your abdomen clamp and, momentarily, you feel alone.