

Flood Damage



Do you see the basement as half empty or half full?

The great flood of ought eight finds me philosophical about material belongings and the maniacal nature of nature. A recent letter to the editor warned of God's wrath: the floods, the rash weather, all of it evidence that sinners would be soaked to the bone for their loose mores and worldly ways.

Spared by my sparkling clean moral record, and a little help from the sump pump, very few of my belongings were lost in the deluge. The Lord saith my collection of arcane country albums, including a few gospel favorites, had to go. Thusly the false prophet George Jones and Jezebel Dolly Parton perished in the reckless waters.

Though city workers who came into contact with the sewage sea were issued Hepatitis B shots, I gleefully walked barefoot through the fetid swamp of Jackson Street, flanked by laughing children floating in the filthy wake. I tempted petulance and disease with nothing stronger than a recent tetanus shot and belief that the greatest predictor of illness is a willingness to panic.

I am one of the rummagers who looked over molded trash piles lining the streets. I knew better than to appropriate a sludge-saturated sofa or collection of decaying encyclopedias propped beside garbage bags of wilting belongings. I just wanted to see what was less loved.

The attic holds our family albums, grandma's crochet doilies, and father's college football trophies, but the basement houses something substandard: a bland overview of a not-so-ideal life. Our basements are diaries documenting the sad futons of our single years, the plaid starter furnishings with cushions upturned for spare change, and every

issue of a magazine that once echoed our essential connection to some ethereal “cool” but now lurks in a corner as a silly shadow of an old glorified self.

The streets of Oshkosh are lined with precious, polluted, hard-to-throw-away junk. I am prematurely and unnecessarily nostalgic for what was lost in the overflowing basements around town. All that perished were the future yard sales of our yesteryear, but so much of my real resume as a human being is encoded in that crap.

We like to think the calligraphied diplomas of our ancestors or betrothed antiques define who we are, but it is the black garbage bag rot sitting on the curb that probably offers the most anthropologically honest evidence of our lives.

What did I lose in the flood? Clothes that I could squeeze into when I was eighteen, Russian novels that clearly represent a time when depression was romanticized rather than dealt with seasonally, and a photograph of myself when I was twenty-two, sure-faced and defiant, that looks like the mug of a stranger. The rippling water marks make it more authentic and foreign, like a Victorian daguerreotype. The elements have added a necessary stain to memory.

I am sure there will be ordinances passed and regulations issued to punish and prepare homeowners for the next errant natural disaster. In a way, this will be societally responsible, but socially stifling. Unmarked boxes filled with archival mysteries are meant to be ravaged by flood waters. We are forced to face the smallness of our essential beings. The disposable tchotchkes of our past, the brick-a-brac of our youthful indiscretions, are best left on the curb.

The flood has cleaned up who we once were. Every cheap chair and pathetic painting that defined you ten years ago has been graciously swept away by the elements. With all the evidence destroyed, you can finally start over as the current incarnation of the person you are. If nothing else, this clean slate proves that an interventionist God can be benevolent.