RAIN

BY YVONNE LOVELL

I. It was a hurricane. Charlie. To be exact a “tropical cyclone” that strengthened into a hurricane over the Eastern Caribbean Sea. It struck the island of Jamaica on August 17, 1951 leaving 154 persons dead and 20,000 homeless. It was the deadliest of the Atlantic hurricane season and the worst hurricane disaster in the first half of the 20th century. I was three years old. It seems it rained forever. But I have no memory of time—not the day, not the hour of the day. I do remember it as if it were daytime, though it appeared somewhat dark outside. Not moody dark, nor scary dark, just dark from the lack of sunshine.

My earliest memory is being a small girl standing indoors looking out at the rain through a window high above her reach. But in my mind's eye, the rain seems more like translucent beads slowly gliding down the window panes. As I watch, it becomes like liquid glass coating the windows.

I was by the time of the hurricane, living with Aunt Matty. I remember we lived in Matil da’s Corner, now in the heart of the Liguanea suburban commercial district. I grew up hearing that Matilda’s Corner got its name from my *great grand* aunt, Matilda Joseph (Aunt Matty). Or so I was told. The house was old and there was a veranda. I cannot see where I slept, not the kitchen, not even a bathroom. But toilets would have been outside. I see a small house-like building toward the end of the lot, at the gateway.

I remember a thicket of tropical plants forming a fence through which no one could see. We didn’t use this way to go out. We took another pathway leading toward an opening at the other end of our small parcel of land. This wasn’t a literal gate either, but rather a visual cue that beyond this point only family was permitted to enter. The house seems isolated, at that far end of

the dirt lane which hid an explosion of tenements.

II. My mother was beloved by Aunt Matty, her mother's aunt. The story goes, she was a talented student and an athlete. But mostly she had an opinion! Like most students of her time secondary education was costly and nearly out of reach for poor families. But my grandmother intended for my mother's education to continue—she would attend *commercial school.* But she was instead, redirected by school officials into a program designed for jobs in the hotel industry. As my mother saw it they creamed from the talent pool, choosing only *fair-skinned* girls and those from families with money or influence. By her thinking they left in place the very caste system the program was designed to change. She was hurt. She told them so, and to her mother's horror she was dismissed from the program. With no ready prospects in sight my mother became restless. But soon she set her eyes on adventure, which came in the form of the great migration of Jamaicans to the United Kingdom (UK). I was four years old.

Arriving on December 6, 1952, my mother was among the first waves of British Caribbean people to emigrate to the UK after World War II. She sailed the same troop carrier, the Empire Windrush that was the first ship to arrive in Britain with Caribbean immigrants nearly four years earlier. Their arrival—a response to Britain's post-war reconstruction and recruitment for labor shortages in hospital services, met with resistance. (Migration Policy Institute, 2010) Still it was a period of extraordinary population growth in England and the beginning of the modern British multiracial society. These Caribbean migrants with their children and family members who followed, became known as the Windrush Generation.

I knew nothing of my father. I was left in the care of my aunt, my mother's older sister who worked in a hotel too far away to get back home each night. And still not quite school age, Aunt

Matty was the adult who cared for me. She was a woman without a husband or children; she had lost both—her son from rheumatic fever.

My own experience with malaria had inclined me for years to run high fevers. When the fevers came, they would start with swollen glands and I would shiver with cold in spite of the tropical weather. I can imagine her fright seeing me shiver in bed with a high fever. It would be then she would find a blanket or a chenille bedspread to wrap my thin body. Such a blanket or bedspread, my mother would have sent in a "parcel" from England. To my mother's generation these parcels were a down payment on their debt for emigrating and leaving children behind. These remittances displayed the personal sacrifices they made to fill them with goodies and meet the high expectations of the entire family back home. But I imagine for my mother and great aunt, these parcels also were a reminder of a void—an unfulfilled desire to have their children with them.

III. I hear silence in the rain. But rain is not silent. Still, I can hear its silence. It is uneasy. It pours over me, pointing to a memory deep within me. Rain haunts me. I find little solace in it—the way most people seem to have cozy memories of campfire treats or snuggling under the covers during a good heavy rain. No memories of fear of the lightning and thunder as a child, of hiding under a bed; no, not me. The notion of reading away a rainy day because it is a delightful experience is foreign to me. It is haunting because it is silent and therein lies the unknown, the unspoken. The rain is foreboding.

IV. It didn't rain the day I emigrated to the United States, landing in Miami on October 13, 1969. I strolled through the airport halls looking at the store window displays during my long

layover. The plane had arrived late—very late, and my connecting flight was to be rescheduled for Chicago and, then another onto Berrien Springs in Michigan the next morning. My enrollment at Andrews University was remarkable for its details in my planning. But my preparation for emigrating to a country with winters stopped at, *"You know, it snows up there!"* I had never considered the nature of winter weather, the nuances of the temperature over months and weeks even days much less between seasons. The dreariness, the gray and shortened days.

I did not own a single item of warm clothing on my arrival—not a pair of corduroys or even sweaters. My entire wardrobe consisted of short sleeved-dresses of linen or cotton and very short in length. And the sunny Miami October day gave me no hints of the cold nor snow that awaited me on the ground of the Chicago O'Hare Airport. Still, a sudden awareness dawned on me; I should have a coat. I bought the short furry white coat, the one in the Miami airport and soon found myself stroking its fuzziness. But it covered too little of me.

V. Mack and I had just settled in for an evening in what I like to call his tree-house. Two, nearly three years had gone by since dinner that night. And, my work and personal life had devolved into chaos and tumult. I had returned to settle into a life I knew all too well—aloneness. Now it is dark as rain clouds seem to hover. I could hear the thunder in the distance. Before long it grew louder to which he says, "Let's go sit on the porch."

"Hmm, okay," I say reluctantly and we headed to the front porch.

This porch was more like a deck because it was built from treated wooden decking, cedar I think—the kind you assume would be used for the back of a house. This porch though, sat higher than any I've seen before. It had three levels, we went to the third. An old pine tree had

been left in its place with each porch wrapping itself around it, completely enveloping the tree. It was raining. The crackling sky also signaled that the lightning was coming. We didn't see it yet. It was pouring, the thunder roared and the crackling quickened as lightning dazzled across the sky. It was the kind of electrical storm common in Kentucky, the ones to which I had not grown accustomed. Lightning bolts always seemed to sizzle in place in the sky, urging you to hide my eyes! We sat and watched till the mood of the thunder turned dark but intermittently brightened from the lightning, which now seemed dangerously close. We heeded its warning as we contemplated retreating inside.

Mack tells me he had always wanted to sit outside in the rain just to watch the lightning up close. But we had to be crazy! And yet this rainy night has stayed with me as much as my first. Maybe it was because, for once I felt safe. I was not alone. A quiet picture of silence, this one is a perspective changed. Rain never seemed more tranquil.

VI. I live now in a place that gets no hurricanes, though the tornadoes in the Ohio Valley bring their own fright. A place where in a flash whole buildings and cars might be swooped up off the ground and then splattered down in teensy pieces. I don't vacation in hurricane prone places between July and November. Nevertheless hurricanes still frighten me.

In the summer of 2017 the rain—a hurricane—once again battered my psyche. Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Houston, Texas leaving destruction in its wake. The images of entire Houston families with their children and animals rescued in boats from the desolation reminded me of the Great Flood. To me, Hurricane Harvey was the very coming alive of the passage from the book Genesis in the Bible, "The waters prevailed and greatly increased on the earth, and the ark moved about on the surface of the waters." But as media images of the flood were beginning

to recede, Hurricane Irma threatened close family members living in Florida.

Rain still overwhelms me. In my mind, I conflate Hurricane Harvey with the Great Flood. I watch the news and see the rain, how it expands the rivers and puffs up the sea turning streets into open bays. I feel its uncontrollable nature in my gut and all around I see; I think, isolation.

VII. I seldom think about the silence of that stormy day of my childhood. I don't remember anyone coming to see if we had washed away. I cannot remember hunger or discomfort, and as a child, I did not understand abandonment. But I believe that the brain protects us from pain in ways that we do not understand. Yet new research suggests that painful memories are much more likely to be accurate when we remember them years later.

Decades have gone by and I do not think of the absent voices of my childhood— mother, father, aunt. There is hollowness in my silence. And aloneness lingers with me today. I watch images of the Texas storm wreckage, and I am immobilized. I don't know and can't think what to do. Everywhere the voices are loud—warnings to evacuate, challenges to rescue operations, the unattended needs of those with little or no means. Now, I crave silence from the rain. I do not respond to cries of help for victims. There's a part of me that wants to, but I simply stand in place. I hear my inner self whispering, *continue doing what you do, make your contribution where you are*. Still, I'm unsettled.