

English 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Barbara Stuart

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Michael H. Schulson

The Flood

by Michael Schulson

The Amazon came to Chattanooga in May, a brown sheet of water that sprawled under flat gray skies. In between sky and river, we Chattanoogaans stood and we watched: watched the rain fall endlessly, watched the forest grow unbearably lush, and watched the waters rise silently. Strange whirlpools moved across the surface of the deep, and entire trees floated along among rafts of twigs and trash. It rained more, and the river lapped at the top of its banks and began to spill over the lips of the great concrete dams, until finally it burst through, crashing over walls, turning roads to rivers, brushing the bottoms of bridges, and coming higher, still higher, chocolate waters threading their way through flat bottomland forest. And still: it rained.

Parked cars succumbed to roaring creeks, and the riverside McMansions at Heritage Landing experienced the Tennessee Valley's heritage of disasters (cf. Kingston's coal ash. The tornado of '96. The Civil War). Wetlands reclaimed the boardwalk at the local Nature Center, and factory owners watched nervously as the wilderness encroached on Manufacturers Road. It was, by all accounts, an economic disaster. "Eighteen million dollars in flood damage," crowed the TVA, and businesses had to close, and houses had to be evacuated, and the activity of the city had to redirect itself, like a river surging around a dam. It was not, fortunately, a full-blown tragedy, for no one died except for the homeless man who drowned downtown.

Naturally, we kids loved the flood. I was lucky, for although I did not live by the water, I went to a school that was not only on the river's bank, but was on a peninsula, with an inlet on two sides and the river channel on the third. From our riparian perch, the view of the impending disaster was spectacular. Each day that it rained, our center of attention shifted, pulled away from the mundane rhythms of middle school life by the gravity of the swelling river. During times like that, conversation is easy. We chattered about dams and river levels, wondered if any buildings would be flooded, made Bible-belt jokes about Noah's Ark, and guessed whether soccer practice would be canceled as the field became a swamp. Trying to cross the creek a group of students waded over the partially submerged bridge. Drenched with sewage-laden water, they were hosed down and scolded, and we spent a pleasant afternoon wondering about the *E. coli* cases and exciting mutations that could result from exposure to such filthy water.

After class one day, we went down to the water and beheld the flood. There we were, a handful of little men in our neat red polo shirts (tucked in) and khaki pants (regulation cut, belted), standing at the end of a road where the asphalt merged with the water and faded blackly in its depth. To our left was the wild chop of the river proper and before us was water flowing over the creek's concrete bridge. Beyond that were the athletic fields, goalposts abandoned in the middle of a newborn lake like haunting gateways of indeterminate meaning.

The next day the water came within a yard of the sixth-grade building, and school was cancelled. Uniforms hung limp in closets as we rejoiced in the freedom the flood had brought us. And then—miracles upon miracles!—the rain stopped. That evening, my family, all four of us, made a pilgrimage to the river. Standing on Chattanooga's pedestrian bridge (site of two lynchings), we surveyed the damage, and talked to neighbors, and mingled with what seemed like half of Chattanooga. "It was like a party on the bridge when it finally stopped raining" my

mother recorded in her photo album, next to a family picture of all four of us smiling in front of a diluvian vista. And why not smile, for the flood had ended and the water was receding. Beneath dry skies, Chattanooga came together and, solemnly, celebrated.

From the bridge one could see miles of destruction. On one side was a flooded park, where grass swayed like strange seaweed and submerged sidewalks stood out like veins beneath skin. On the other side was Heritage Landing, the neat rows of soggy houses not quite dissolved in the primal stream. Across the bridge, one could see the downtown rising out of the water. It was there, just a few hours earlier, that police had discovered the flood's lone fatality, drowned in 6 to 8 feet of water. It's easy to imagine him, the bloated body clothed in tattered garments, floating among the refuse past lampposts and abandoned buildings, his final hours unseen, his final breath taking in nothing but tepid water. This was the flood, these sunken houses, the dead man floating, the cars wrecked and businesses submerged. And the rain had stopped, the flood was ending—and it was this, of course, that we celebrated.

But I was a child then, and children are honest. I know that when I stared down at Heritage Landing, much as I tried to muster sympathy, I felt little more than amazement. I know how I thrilled in the surreal familiarity of the alien landscape. And I know how I completely forgot (or never knew) that a man had been killed until I sat down, years later, to write and remember.

I suspect that I was not alone in my childish wonder. In the face of catastrophe, we are all like children, for childhood is a series of catastrophes, of grand and inexplicable phenomena that reshape our conceptions each day. With time, events resolve themselves into patterns, losing their luster—except, of course, when those patterns are dissolved by the rising waters of catastrophe, and we become like children once again.

Like children—shameless, sinless—we revel in destruction. Chaos is magnetic. I know: I am a Civil War buff, reading lists of casualty statistics, entranced by the carnage and madness that took place at the Battles for Chattanooga just miles from my doorstep. I track hurricanes, secretly wishing they'd make landfall, secretly crestfallen when their strength declines. And when the river flooded, a part of me regretted that those sturdy dams restrained the worst of the water, that the river did not keep rising until we were all forced to yield, to finally yield, to the endlessly swelling waters. Chaos is magnetic. We are all, young and old, drawn like children toward its wonders.

That evening on the bridge (where crowds once swirled around hanging black bodies), we did not come together because the rain had stopped. We celebrated because it had rained. The flood had come, and we loved it.

The flood left. Soon only mud and damage remained as the river returned to its proper channel, flowing tamely down the middle of Chattanooga. And now, as an adult, older and tamed myself, I am left to see two floods. I see an economic disaster, the loss of a life, the wrecked properties of homeowners and businessmen. But I see as well the true flood of my memories, the flood of wonders—the land transformed, the goalposts standing in the swamp, gateways to a world that was wild and Amazonian and beautiful. And through it all there is the river, the river that flows through my childhood, controlled but never fully tamed, silent, impenetrable, strange whirlpools moving on the surface of the deep.

Notes and Sources

For information about the flood's lone fatality and the specific timeline of the flood, I referred to an archived CNN article: <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WEATHER/05/09/otsc.brooks/index.html>

“18 million dollars in damage”—figure cited from a TVA report about flood damage, accessed at <http://www.tva.gov/river/neighbors/feb07/flood.htm>

Information about the lynchings of Ed Johnson and Alfred Blount on the Walnut Street Bridge may be found at <http://www.darkfiber.com/tomb/johnson/>. This fascinating website was prepared for the centennial commemoration of Ed Johnson's death. I urge you to follow this link if you are from Chattanooga or have an interest in Southern history.

As always, the photo albums of Rachel Schulson were an invaluable resource.