

Uncle Joe drowned in his apartment. I like to think that the Jesus Prayer helped him as he died — or maybe Keats, or something else he'd come across in his reading or his wayfaring.

There was a point, during the disaster, when everybody thought that the hurricane had passed and the worst was over. Then the levees broke — not from storm surge, engineers now think, but because the soil beneath the concrete walls was too weak. Nobody was there to help when the water started rising — a foot a minute in some places, I've been told.

Joe might well have been asleep when he felt Lake Pontchartrain lapping at his bed. I don't know. There would have been no electricity, but maybe he had a flashlight that he turned on and beamed around his room. It couldn't have taken him long to gauge his chances: He'd recently broken his hip and had limited mobility. Perhaps he was a bit dazed from painkillers. It was too late to crawl across the flooded floor. *My horizontal life is over*, he might have thought. *My vertical life is about to begin*.

And maybe then he recited the Jesus Prayer.

I like to think he didn't flail and cry out, both because it's too painful to imagine and because he wasn't that kind of man. I prefer to think he floated as long as he could, and then, when there was no more air to take into his lungs, he closed

his eyes and breathed in water. There was a sense of suffocation and panic, followed by peace.

It could have happened — and probably did happen — otherwise. I expect he wasn't ready to die (who is?) and fought against his fate, despite his age, despite the Jesus Prayer, despite his almost Buddhist belief (though he would never have called it that) in the way each moment can be an eternity if we approach it without expectation or regret. But I like to think of him facing death as he did life: with dignity. Perhaps he wondered if he would be seeing his sister, my mother, again. She was a devout Catholic until the very end, when she died with six of her seven kids gathered around her oxygen tent. I don't know if Joe attended Mass on Sundays; it wasn't something the two of us talked about. But I believe that, like me, he had an unspoken faith in New Orleans, city of our dreams and nightmares, city of Lent and Mardi Gras, of discipline and dissipation. I loved that city, where I was brought up and where Joe lived for eighty-four years, and I had faith that, wherever I went in the world, I could always return to its dilapidated glory.

I see now that disaster was always, is always, a heartbeat away. ■

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## Slide

MARK SMITH-SOTO

In Venezuela, which means "Little Venice": thousands  
Snuffed, mud-choked. Corpse after corpse, dug up  
To be reburied, waits for a name. A mild impatience  
Marks the morning hours, the medical jeeps, the kids  
With picks, the smeared survivors staring. Television  
Doesn't know how to blink: a tumbled wall, a dog,  
A hand and elbow remarkably whole and clean,

All pour into its open drain without clogging the flow.  
And I too am capable of taking it all — five thousand  
Miles away, each detail fits behind my forehead, where  
I can find a word for it. And though my body knows  
The black weight mud must bring, it has forgotten  
Tears. Or buried them so deep they can't be found,  
Way down below the heart, somewhere in there.