

Remember to Listen

by Paige Zubel

Everyone is kind now that the world is falling apart and we're forgetting what being held feels like. This is how we should always behave—smile and ask questions and listen genuinely to strangers. It takes the world ending to listen genuinely to strangers. And then the world will stop ending, then we'll begin again, hit resume, leave our homes, and forget the lessons we learned.

When Houston was underwater we would always listen kindly to strangers. One neighbor had a canoe and we'd paddle it down the lake that 24 hours before had been a street. Hurricane season was baby squirrel season and we'd run up and down the blocks with shoeboxes full of straw and put the baby squirrels with eyes still screwed shut into the shoeboxes. We'd sit in the park, this loud group of bored teenagers with nothing else to do, and feed the baby squirrels milk from plastic syringes from the Walmart around the corner. We'd cut down fallen trees and make bonfires and grill our freezers full of meat, and pass down the line Styrofoam plates stacked with ribs and pulled pork. We wore tank tops and boxers because the air conditioning didn't work. We sweat together and we smiled. We confided in candlelight. And then the power would come back on, and we wouldn't talk to each other again.

The last time Houston was underwater, I was 1,500 miles away, three stories in the sky. I watched through the news, through facebook, through FaceTime, my city sink into the sea. Harvey. My parents put my grandfather on an air mattress and swam him a mile to higher ground. My mom had a backpack and in that backpack was only a carton of cigarettes and a handle of vodka—what a woman. My grandfather is frail and believes in god fervently (but only for the past ten years of his life) and doesn't like help and honestly doesn't really like people. He resents losing control. He is always losing control. But in the middle of a hurricane, maybe he realized he could never be in control, not of this, not right now, so he relented. My parents put him on an air mattress and crossed his arms over his chest around a rope and put a hat over his face to block the sun and they swam him a mile to higher ground. People thought my grandfather was dead. They thought my parents were swimming the dead away from the sea.

In my neighborhood, there are now pits in the earth where there used to be homes. And where there are still homes, the homes are now up on stilts, like they're trying to run away, like they know the sea will someday come back even if the inhabitants are too naïve to acknowledge it. We somehow imbue our creations with far more awareness than we will ever have. If only we could remember to listen.