Review Article

Braving the Storm
A Brief Review

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The universe of meanings that Osundare presents in *City Without People* begins to expand from the book’s cover designed by Kerrie Kemperman. From here the reader is ushered into those simplex–complex manoeuverings that have come to delineate Osundare’s ‘songs of the marketplace’. With the word ‘City’ floating forlornly in the upper part of the cover, ‘Without’ (right in the middle of) the dark, soft, sober New Orleans and the ‘People’ appearing below—seemingly submerged in the yawning mouth of the hungry waters—there is an overall image of destructive downpour that is invoked in the broken calligraphy of these key title-words. The reader is struck by these graphic meanings before anything else.

Divided into five sections, the volume progresses sequentially as a poetic narrative of the different phases of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, in which the poet (a visiting professor at the University of New Orleans) and his wife almost lost their lives. Titled “Water, Water! …,” the first section boldly indicates the book’s thematic filiations with Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Importantly, this section chronicles how the hurricane disaster started but also remarkably foreshadows the stylistic strategies and the nature of the accessible, prose-like language that Osundare is to favour throughout the book. Three lines from the second stanza of the first poem, “The Lake Came to My House” lend credence to this:
Then, the pit pat pat pat bing bang bing
Of the hooves of the trampling rain
My shuddering roof, my wounded house.

These three lines, taken together, respectively present the reader with the onomatopoeia, anthropomorphism, and pathetic fallacy that are carried over into the second section of the book, “After the Flood,” which dwells on post-Katrina scars and how these amplify the political dimensions of the tragedy. The main statement that Osundare makes in this section is that New Orleans is a forgotten city on the map of American government’s attention. In “This Time Last Year” particularly, this subject-matter seems to reach a climax of condemnation:

All because the levees broke
At the faintest hint of Katrina’s stroke
The footless wall that government built
Collapsed apace with the foulest guilt

They sent men and women to the farthest moon
For elusive gift and fairy boon
All over the globe their troops are found
But here at home our woes abound.

What is implied in the above, beneath the simple surface of the broadside-like rhymes, is complex and multilayered. For instance, while the deictic ‘they’ sets up a picture of the wide gap that exists between the American government and New Orleanians, ‘home’ and ‘we’ confirm the poet’s ultimate acceptance of exile and the sharing of suffering with the local denizens.

Neither of these themes makes it across to the third section, “The Language of Pain”; this, unlike the second section, which narrates the communal, deals more with the poet’s personal pain after the onslaught of the hurricane. The narrowing of focus from the communal to the personal and directly experiential is justifiable structurally and existentially, but, unfortunately, this is the least satisfying part of the book. Some of the eleven poems here feel redundant, for the simple reason that they are thematically static. Poems such as “The Weeping Book,” “Mares of Night,” “Losses (1),” “Losses (2),” “With the Nib of a Borrowed Pen,” “Lesson,” “Katrina Taught Me,” “Solace,” and “Katrina Snapshots” all convey the poet’s deep and understandable sense of deprivation con-