

The Wrong Side of the Wall



Grant McMillan

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Artist's Note

For the first ten years of my life, my family spent every summer and Christmas at my grandparents' house in Braithwaite, Louisiana. We never referred to the location as "Braithwaite." To us, it always was and still remains, simply, "Mimi & Paw-Paw's house." The first reason for this speech quirk is that for us, my grandparents' land felt like its own pocket universe; as children have a habit of doing, my brother, sister, and I let ourselves roam free, filling this one small space with the entirety of our imaginations without feeling the need to geographically contextualize our sacred space.

The second reason why we didn't use the area's actual name is simply because Braithwaite isn't a "real" town. It is an unincorporated stretch of rural land in Plaquemines Parish that runs along a bend in the Mississippi just fifteen miles south of New Orleans. This region is known, primarily, for its citrus farms—when it is known at all. As of 2020, the recorded population of Braithwaite was 1,128, less than half of its high of 2,401 in 2000. My grandparents were a part of this number for most of their lives, up until Hurricane Isaac in 2012.

This collection comprises fifteen photo-poems. The photos and text are designed to be viewed side by side as they reflect and illuminate each other. I took this batch of photos on a family trip to visit my grandmother and some cousins for Christmas in 2019. Although none of them live in Braithwaite anymore, my uncle still maintains the old family orange grove and vegetable patch. This trip was the first time I had seen what little Isaac had left of the house. More photos from this project can be viewed on my personal website at grantgmcmillan.com.

Finally, I do not speak for the people of Braithwaite. As the following photo-poems suggest, this place was never my home. As much as the land held and still holds my imagination, I am an outsider looking in, mourning a home that never belonged to me. When I set out to make this collection, the question I wanted to answer was whether or not the Braithwaite of my recollections still existed, not in a literal sense, but in a personal sense for me, a visitor, writer, photographer, and perhaps most of all, a grandson.



for Paw-Paw

*I keep trying
to find it again,
this feeling;
find it in a place
that no longer exists
except in what I
can recall,
which is why I am
writing now,
because I hope
that I can find
enough fragments
to remember.*

1. December 28, 2019



1. Braithwaite, 1999

A ten-hour drive in an old minivan
packed with two parents,
three kids,
our first dog—
the youngest member
of the family,
just younger than me.

Mama passes us Cheez-Its
at the rest stop.
Madeleine sits at a picnic table
while Jeffrey wriggles his feet
in St. Augustine grass,
breathes deep and says

Ahhhhhh, there's that stale Louisiana air.

The way a child teases,
to hide a wishful want,
a fondness
for that stale air—
that mix of ferry engine smoke
and grey-clay crawfish holes,
canals lined with stormwater;
the sucking squelch of my feet
through muddy grass
between rows of orange trees
and vegetables
and Mimi & Paw-Paw waving
at the front door
waiting to carry our bags inside,
to help us make our home
for the summer,

and the sickly
too-sweet flesh
of unpicked fruit
fallen early on the ground
and the clover field abuzz
with yellow jackets
and the trees,
green all over
with little dots of orange
specking through.

❧

2. December 28, 2019



2. June, 1999

The tribubble-bongo from the kiddie meal
at the Burger King in Belle Chasse, or maybe it was Taco Bell,

putter-putts
under tub-water,
at my grandparents' house
and brews bubbles
for each twist I give
the plastic propeller.
There's a little latch
on the underside
that pops open
for putting purple pellets;
soon the tub fills
with deep blue waters
of Naboo.

Outside the movie theatre, Nanny Rosie says
the Gungans live in bayous too—that's why they are the last to fall.

When invaders from space bushwhack their forests,
they hide in the waters at the center of their world.



3. December 28, 2019



3. Summer, 2000

Vigil masses end
with a prayer to
Our Lady of Prompt Succor:

*Oh Holy Mother, intercede for us that we may be
spared this hurricane season... protect our
homes from all disasters of nature. Our Lady of Prompt
Succor, hasten to our aid.*

But that Cajun drawl sounds like
 Our Lady of Prawm Sucka
and we giggle
at the extra oomf
in the lectern's voice
as that last vowel bursts forth
like the clack
of a judge's gavel,
adding emphasis.
In my head
I call them
Hurricane People,
a child's teasings.

Years after
the house is gone,
Mimi calls
to ask about flooding
when a hurricane
brushes the coast
of South Carolina.
I tell her
that my apartment
is five hours inland
where rain is good
for the garden,

and I wonder
why these Hurricane People
can't seem to understand—

as if I think rain and gardens
are things farmers from Braithwaite
don't already know.

❧

4. December 28, 2019



4. Summer, 2000

Three-day power outage
while a tropical storm
sits over us,
dense, fat
clouds dripping.
We have blank TVs
and dark bathtimes,
but we still splash
in ditches,
run along canals.
Our toes seek crawfish
among the soup
of grass and mud.
We catch three,
one small red body
for each of us.
They swim in circles
along the bottom
of our plastic bucket.

All the while
the orange trees bending
but never breaking,
never relinquishing their fruit—
why should we hide when
patches of clover
rise like little islands
in the wet field?

When the water
recedes and the
lights flick
back on,
and the clover
rejoins the grass,
we release the
three crawfish,
little Hurricane People,
back to the waters
at the center of their world.



5. December 28, 2019



5. Summer, 2002

The pool of shade
 over the front driveway,
 shade so precious in August
 when the temperature
 and humidity
 both brush a hundred;
And the pink squirtgun
 I tuck among the
 exposed roots
 of one of the trees that frame
 the house;
And the little green
 mace-like seeds
 that Madeleine grabs
 off the ground
 to throw as a return volley
 when I jump out
 from behind the trunk,
 my pink squirtgun
 blasting water;
And the sound
 of our laughter
 and shrieks muffled
 by the branches,
 enclosed in this precious
 pool of shade and seeds,
 ever-green;
And the database
 I will search
 years later
 when the trees
 are long gone,
 looking
 for a name;
And list item #132,
 Southern White Cedars:
 trees that thrive in wetlands,
 trees that lay shallow roots
 making them vulnerable to storms.

6. December 28, 2019



6. *Christmas, 2004*

A fine layer of white
sprinkled over
the orange trees,
half an inch, if that.
The first white Christmas
of my life.
I pack snowslush
with pink, stinging fingers.

The puddles I track inside,
and the TV room,
where I play
on a computer
all afternoon.

Our Christmas tree
sitting in the corner,
string lights bouncing
off ancient, chipped ornaments,
every branch dappled in
trinkets.

Benny Grunch & The Bunch
singing *Santa Used to Live Right Here*
between each news segment,
its chorus like an overture.

This is the last
white Christmas I'll see
until I move fifteen years later
to North Dakota,
where I swap hurricanes
for blizzards
and summer storms
for stories of
spring ice-melt.

This new home,
1,550 miles to the north,
straight up
and a little to the left.



7. December 28, 2019



7. August 23, 2005

Katrina gathering,
a 100mph cyclone
in the gulf,
the eighteenth category three
storm to breach
New Orleans.
Mimi & Paw-Paw
driving ten hours
to South Carolina
for shelter.
Mississippi swells
covering eighty percent of the city.
Grey-water squatting
in the ninth ward,
wresting ownership.
The storm skirting
the edge of Braithwaite,
sparing parts.
My godmother's house
washing away.
FEMA running out
of trailers.
AP News calling
black residents
looters and
1,800 people
dying.

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8. December 28, 2019



8. Summer, 2010

Great-uncle Vincent
at 105,
looking at photos
of his wife
who he's missed
for over thirty years.

His voice
a rasp born
of Sicilian
sun and dirt
and long hours
tending vegetables
and Atlantic Ocean spray
while sailing to America
at twenty to dub
Braithwaite the new
old country.

Ice cream eaten
from a paper cup
in the trailer,
where Vincent has lived
since Katrina,
his rasp
telling Mimi
about
missing his wife and
wondering if God has forgotten him.



9. December 28, 2019



9. *Winter, 2007*

Flood gates, levees,
pumping stations,
and the twenty-six foot wall
that skirts the edge
of Braithwaite,
drawing a boundary;
\$14.6 billion
in protections
from the Army Corps
to fortify the city
against wilder waters.

A Braithwaite resident
tells channel 8 news
the government must
have forgotten them,
that now they are all
living on the
wrong side of the wall.
But it's been two years
since FEMA ran out
of trailers, and
no one is watching.

I look out
from the rear window
of the new minivan
as we pass through
the wall's floodgate,
and I wonder if it
is meant to keep water
in or out.
It will take
five years for Isaac
to answer.

10. December 28, 2019



10. January 3, 2012

A .410 blast
to a rabbit's skull.
It twitches then stills.
Cousin Jared nails
it to a tree,
cuts a slit around
the middle,
strains as he pulls
fur from bone
while we talk
about high school
and test scores.
Meat goes in a freezer bag
for Uncle Vincent.
Little cousin Dru
watches from
behind an orange tree.

Four years later
I shoot a turkey
on a friend's property
back home in South Carolina.

Two years after
that I quit my job,
go back to school for
English, and stop eating animals.

I realize I've never heard
a Cajun say the word "vegan."
I guess I don't see
Louisiana much anymore.



11. December 28, 2019



11. September, 2012

Braithwaite,
the home that never was
mine—it wasn't.
I was a visitor,
I know that.

But the orange trees,
canal water,
crawfish holes,
my first white Christmas,
a tree, a house,
this whole house
dappled in light
and color
and smells
I am afraid
I am learning
to forget.

Uncle Don standing
in his childhood
bedroom, leaning
on his sledgehammer
head ducked,
crying.
Rotted drywall
sloughs away
like the flesh
of a satsuma
fallen to the earth.



12. December 28, 2019



12. October, 2012

The three-bedroom
house Mimi
& Paw-Paw
buy in South Carolina.

The redbird
that smacks against
the kitchen window
where Mimi finds it,
crumpled.

Paw-Paw dies in his sleep.

The funeral home
where I eat
chocolate donuts
while Uncle Don
hugs each of us, tells us
it's okay to cry,
his face held high.

The concrete drawers
where Cajuns
bury their dead,
above ground
where floods can't reach.

Mimi wails at the casket.

She moves
back to Louisiana
within a year,
and I realize now
I have no memories
of Paw-Paw
in that house,

or none I can remember.
And just last night
I dreamt of Paw-Paw
asking me to drive him
to his new home
but I couldn't remember
where they buried him,
couldn't remember
which side of the wall.



13. December 28, 2019



13. December 28, 2019

Little Dru,
big enough to sit
in the passenger seat
and talk about middle school
and wanting to come up north
to Clemson
for college
while we exit the ferry
and drive into
Braithwaite.

The remains
of Mimi & Paw-Paw's house
which I see for the first time
since Isaac.
A photo of Dru
standing in his dad's childhood bedroom
drywall gone,
ceiling exposed.

I ask if he knows whose
room this was.
He says no,
and I delete the photo.

Outside, Dru
shows me how to cut
cauliflower at the base,
and we fill our box
with vegetables
and lemons
and oranges,
to take back in time
for New Year's dinner.

He reminds me
satsumas have soft
flesh and to twist
the stem, so I pull
the way I used to,
but had forgot.



14. December 28, 2019



14. August 26, 2021

Ida gathering
a 150mph cyclone
in the gulf,
the strongest storm
to breach Louisiana
since 1856.

Mimi staying
with Uncle Don
who had COVID
last month,
and wishing the
power would come back
so she can go home.

Grey-water squatting
over Braithwaite,
stores running out of stock.

The sign a St. Bernard
resident posts outside
a grocery store
on the other side
of the wall,
telling Braithwaite
residents to *stay out!*
calling them
assholes and
river rats.

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15. October 14, 2021



15. October 14, 2021

The floodwall
that skirts
the edge
of East Grand Forks,
drawing a boundary;
\$171 million in protections
from the Army Corps
to fortify the town
against the Red River.

The Old North End
neighborhood
sloughed away
in the 1997 flood;
demolished houses
bought out from under
230 families and replaced
with a park
where RVs sit
on the floodplain,
which holds no memory.

The rivers flowing on;
I walk home and spoon
leftover redbeans
in a bowl and set
store-bought fruit
on the side.

Every orange I peel
smells like Braithwaite.





Grant McMillan is a second year English PhD student. He grew up in the foothills region of the Carolinas where he developed a deep love of landscape and place.

Find more of Grant's photography at grantgmcmillan.com

