

ROBERT REED

OUR PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU

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Weather stories have filled science fiction recently. From John Barnes' novel *Mother of Storms* to Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather*, the changing climate of these United States and, indeed, the world has riveted us.

Today it's a German crew, one blond under the camera and the other shoving his microphone at faces, slowing work that never moves fast enough. With a grating tone of false pity, the reporter asks how we are coping with this latest tragedy. Eight centimeters last night, ten or twelve upriver, and do we know that the latest estimate is for a crest almost a meter higher than our levee?

He

acts exceedingly confident. about his math, and milled beneath everything. Did he come here this morning hoping to find us washed away? Or maybe he wants us to

give up, to let the levee fail for him, his camera able to catch the angry brown

water charging down our streets. Just like in Tylertown. The CNN crew got that bit of video, and everyone in the world has seen it at least twenty times.

Six-plus billion people have seen my sister's house vanish under the flood, and

it's been under ever since. Two months ever since.. You've seen it. That little

white house on the right? With rose bushes and the big blue spruce? Sure you have....

Anyway, the Germans are working their way toward me. I've slept four hours in the last fifty, living on sweet rolls and ibuprofen, and I'm so tired that I'm shaking. A big strong guy by design, but these sandbags weigh tons and tons.

And

my mood is past lousy. I'm sick of cameras and the rain, and I'm sick of being worried, and suddenly it occurs to me that I don't have to answer anyone's questions. I don't have to be the noble, suffering flood victim. If I want, I could throw one of these sandbags into the asshole's chest. I could. And besides, I'm thinking, isn't that a clearer answer than anything words can manage?

Only I don't get my chance, as it happens.

What happens is that this fellow two up from me -- about the quietest, littlest

guy on the levee -- detonates when asked, "How do you feel?" He doesn't bother throwing a sandbag using fists instead, screaming and putting a few good shots into the German's astonished face. It's lovely, Perfect. Sweet. Then I help pull

them apart, the German making a fast retreat...and afterward it seems as if everyone on the levee is working harder. Faster. Honesty is everywhere, thicker

than river water, and it feels as if it's us against the world. Don't ask me how, but it does.

The rains began last year, but not like this. A record September, but a reasonable record. Then a wet October, a cold dry November, and three months of

crippling snow and ice. A winter to remember, we heard. Then a spring thaw

that
made people around the country notice us. Mountainous ice jams pooled the runoff. The Grand River was plugged up for a week, the Interstate closed and white slabs of ice bulldozing their way through several towns. But the coverage
was only national at its height, and then only for a few days. Nobody was killed
until an elderly couple drove through barricades and onto a flooded stretch of highway. I watched that drama on television. Live. It was more exciting than any
TV fiction, I'll confess. Scuba divers dropped from a helicopter, perching on the sunken cat's roof. Genuine heroes, they wrestled the limp bodies out of the
cold foam, and only then did I feel a little guilty. I was enjoying the spectacle. Strangers had died, but I felt superior. I was warm and dry, safe inside my own house, and some wicked little part of me enjoyed the tragedy, even
wishing for more of the same.

We lose our levee before dark. It's not our sandbags that fail, nor our backs. It's the meat of the levee itself, months of saturation leaving it soft and pliable, and porous. Two, three, then four places give way from below, water boiling up, nothing left to do but retreat and curse the luck of it. For just an
instant, I consider slipping off to see my house one last time. It's back from the river, on slightly higher ground, and maybe there's hope. For the ten thousandth time, I entertain the image of building a private barricade, saving my property with a single superhuman effort. But one of the painful lessons in a
disaster -- the lesson that comes as a surprise -- is how weak and ineffectual each of us can seem. The difference between human and superhuman is about two rows of sandbags. Which is rarely enough, I've learned. Time after time after time.

In the end, we're trucked to high ground and a refugee camp. Rain begins again,
light for the moment. Half a dozen video crews record our stiff climbs out of the trucks. CNN is here, of course. And ANBC. Plus a Japanese crew, and a Russian one. And the Brazilians. Plus a group I don't recognize. Dark little Asians...Indians, maybe?

None of them speak to us. Maybe news of the fistfight has made its way through the ranks. Or maybe even the reporters realize that there aren't any new questions, and the old questions can't clarify what people around the world are
seeing. "A ten-thousand-year flood," I hear. "It's official." And I'm thinking:
What does that mean? Ten thousand years ago we were coming out of an ice age. Each millennium's weather is unique to itself. And if memory serves, aren't we in a new millennium? Maybe this will be ordinary weather for the next thousand years. Who knows? I know it's not some asshole from CNN, let me tell you.

From the edge of the camp, past the water-soaked tents and prefab shacks, we can
see down into the river bottom. We can see the advancing waters. My house is obscured by distance and the strengthening rains, and I'm grateful for the rain
now. I keep telling myself that everything of real worth has been removed. Even
my major appliances have been pulled out and stored. So why the hell do I feel

so lousy?

The Indian crew comes over and sets up.

Only they aren't Indians, I learn. Someone bends close and says, "They're from Bangladesh." Then he repeats himself, for emphasis. "Bangladesh. You know? Where it floods like this every year?"

In accented English, I hear the word, "Tragedy."

The small dark men seem to understand better than the rest, although it doesn't stop them from doing their jobs. Their cameras beam home images of destruction and despair, as if to prove to their pitiful homeland that even rich Americans can experience Nature's horrible extremes.

March was wet, but April made March seem dry. In memory.

Then came May, which was easily worse. I remember a puffy-faced weatherman reporting afterward that we had three arguably blue-sky days in all of May. We'd already exceeded our average annual totals in precipitation. But June stayed just as cheerless, just as strange, the jet stream deciding to come over our heads, steady as a highway, delivering Pacific moisture to a band of six midwestern states, every night beginning and ending with barrages of heavy rain and hail and wind and more wind.

My sister's house was lost in June, little warning given. Her family escaped with the proverbial clothes on their backs, and when I last talked to her, she was trying to live with her in-laws in Greendale. Seven people in a trailer, a marriage straining like...well, like every levee image you can devise...and all she said was, "If only the rain would stop. That's all I want. Why is that too much to want?"

At some point -- I don't know exactly when -- I began to watch every weather forecast with an obsessiveness and a growing frustration. Waking in the middle of the night, I'd flip on my bedroom television and turn to the Weather Channel, waiting for that glimpse of the radar with its map and neat colors and the time-lapse sense of motion. Great glowering red storms would form, then march along until mid-morning. Then the summer sun would lift the humidity, new clouds forming, the sticky remnants of last night's storms seeding fresh ones, the pattern scarcely changing from night to night.

Our city's levee was the best, we heard. Tall and thick, and tough. And our city administrators treated doubters with scorn, as if doubt itself could undermine all the good Federal dollars that went into the long embankment.

By July, the pattern was clear. The worst of the rains fell on a narrow band just upstream from us. Our climate made tropical people wilt. The upstream towns had drowned, and the giant reservoir downstream from us was filled to overflowing. Then it did overflow, the Army Corps of Engineers having no choice but to release the excess water, letting it slide over the top in order to

save
their fragile earthen dam.

By then the world was watching us. The Midwest in general, but us specifically.

Our dramas were featured on every news program, in practically every nation. News teams were dispatched, thousands of technicians and reporters helping to absorb the scarce hotel and motel rooms. For all the reasons people watch tragedies, we were watched. Never before had so many cameras showed so much disaster and to such a large audience. I've heard it claimed that the Third World, full of superstitious people, particularly enjoys the dramatics: These floods are judgments from the gods. Americans have been rich and happy for too long goes the logic. Too much success leads to misfortune. In other words, we deserve our suffering. I know I feel that way sometimes. I'm not the most religious man, but I keep looking at my life, at my failures, wondering why the

Lord is spending so much time and effort trying to drown poor me.

Back in July, someone hired an American Indian -- an official shaman -- to come and try to dispel the rain clouds with dancing and chants. It was considered an

amusing story in New York City; but locally, without exception, people found themselves hoping for the best. Even committed skeptics waited eagerly for some

change in the jet stream; and for a couple days without warning, it did swing north, leaving us out from under the worst of the storms. But one Indian wasn't

enough, it seemed. That high altitude river of air returned, and August -- normally a dry and hot cleansing month -- began with tornados and a three inch downpour.

Sixty-two inches by then, which is twice our yearly norm.

Reservoirs full. Fields and downtowns underwater. Every old record made ridiculous, and the nervous and sullen weatherpeople admitted finally that there

was no end in sight. Computer models and common sense were no help, it seemed. Perhaps by September things would slacken, they would say. Maybe, maybe. We could always hope.

It rains into the night, hard and then harder.

When I was a boy, I loved rain. Now just the idea of water falling from the sky

seems horrible to me. I close my eyes and dream of deserts. Sand is a beautiful

concept, particularly when it's baked dry and capable of burning flesh, and I dream of lying naked beneath a fierce blue-blue sky, letting myself broil.

Then I wake and sit up, aching through and through.

I'm sharing a prefab shack with a couple dozen other people, most of them awake

and watching a portable battery-powered TV. The news has a new drama building. The reservoir downstream of us -- a tremendous inland sea built by the once god-like Corps -- is being assaulted by runoff and its own intense storms. The thunder we hear is just the tip of it. By some predictions, ten inches of cold fresh water will fall in the next hours. And the Corps' spokesman doesn't seem convinced by his optimistic statements. "Ten inches is within our tolerance," he

claims, words slurring from a lack of sleep, or maybe a love of drink. "The dam is solid. The excess will drain over the spillway. Yes, there's going to be flooding downstream. We can't prevent flooding now. But the reservoir will stay where it is, unless --"

"Unless?" the reporter interrupts.

Did I say unless? he seems to think. He pauses, collecting himself, then tells the world, "A strong wind could be dangerous. If it was big enough, and if it blew from the northwest for a long time...it could start to erode the dam...I suppose..."

"You aren't sure?"

"It's unlikely," says the spokesman, suddenly confident. "It would have to blow at just the right angle...the wrong angle, I mean --"

"How unlikely is unlikely?"

"I wouldn't know how to calculate such a tiny number." The tired, possibly drunken face seems unable to calculate anything just now. "Really, I don't think there's much else I can tell you."

That concludes the interview, and the reporter says, "Well, our prayers are with you."

Meaning what? I ask myself.

We hope the rains stop? Or is he saying We hope you don't look like an idiot in the morning?

I remember one night -- a sleepless thundering Weather Channel night --when I watched one of the multitude of documentaries produced in the last months. Why is weather so difficult to forecast? One grinning meteorologist spoke of chaos and butterflies. No, not butterflies. Butterfly effects, wasn't it? He told me how tiny, tiny events can precipitate into weather fronts and typhoons. Or have no effect, for that matter. No amount of calculating power can predict which tiny events will have what impact. And to illustrate, the grinning man waved his hand in the air, saying, "For all I know, this is making a disturbance that will circle the globe and flatten Tulsa with a tornado. Though it probably won't. Almost certainly won't." A shrug of his shoulders. Doing what kinds of harm? "Minuscule events can lead to massive consequences. That much we do know." A flash of teeth. "Isn't that interesting to consider?"

Moments after the interview ends, as if with some cosmic signal, we hear the wind begin to rise. To strengthen.

It flows sideways over our shack, making the walls and roof creak and shift. Its direction is obvious. Ominous. And not too much later, every network interrupts

its late-night programming to bring news from the reservoir. Camera crews are sprinkled along the dam's crest. Already the waves are striking at the rock-faced shoreline, each larger than the one before it, foam and compressed air clawing at the rocks, then reaching higher, finding softer materials already weakened by months of pressure and angry water.

I don't want this to happen. I want it to stop.

Yet what does one opinion have behind it? Nothing, that's what. And besides, am

I at risk? This is like watching those old people drowning last spring: a gruesome part of me is thrilled, wondering how it will look, millions and billions of gallons racing downstream in a great apocalyptic wall, mud and cities carried along with the dead....

That's what happens now.

As we watch--as the world sits spellbound -- those wind-driven waves find a deadly flaw. Earth slumps, then vanishes. The CNN crew watches a new channel being created, a new spillway equaling the first spillway, then exceeding it.

In a matter of minutes, the dam is ruined. Useless.

The camera crew retreats, in panic, leaving their equipment to fend for itself.

And before dawn, every city for a thousand miles downstream is being partially abandoned, and even New Orleans is filling sandbags.

In case.

The reporters abandon our camp before dawn, better mud needing their attentions.

The largest dam failure in history is certain to kill hundreds, possibly thousands. The Corps spokesman from last night is one of the first casualties.

A self-inflicted gunshot wound, we hear. And as I absorb the news, without warning, some inner voice says to me:

"He deserves death. It's his fault, after all."

But why?

"You know why."

Maybe it's exhaustion, but my answer feels reasonable. Maybe the months of worry and work have ruined me, tearing away a thousand years of civilization, but I can't help thinking that the answer couldn't be more obvious.

"Tiny events cause storms," I tell my shack companions. My fellow refugees. "What if? What if the human spirit can influence tiny events? What if six billion people can focus their attentions, their psychic energies -- call them whatever you want -- and that's how we can manipulate weather fronts and jet streams? What happens then?"

Nobody speaks.

Sleepless, half-dead faces gaze at me, nothing in them to read.

I give an impromptu lecture on chaos theory and butterfly wings, then conclude by asking, "When have so many people in so many places been able to think about one place? In real time, I mean. As events happen. I mean, if there is some magic -- call it magic -- then isn't this the time when we'd see it? The world is wired together, cameras everywhere. Maybe there's some way, some innate wish-fulfilling trick, that allows us to make the atmosphere move just so, bringing us this..."

I pause, all at once doubtful.

And I confess, "I'm nuts. I know."

But someone responds, "No, wait. What about last night's wind? It had to be a perfect wind. Isn't that what the Colonel said? And wasn't it just minutes later when it started blowing -- ?"

"Yeah," someone shouts. "That's how it was. It was."

I feel ashamed, my companions infected with my insanity. We're in the Dark Ages. We have fallen so far that we'll believe every unlikely and horrible set of half-ideas.

"They want us to drown," says someone.

"Who does?" whispers a skeptic.

But before names are mentioned, someone else offers, "They don't know they're doing it. How could they know?"

"So how do we protect ourselves?" asks someone in back. An enraged, crimson voice. "Suppose it's true. How can we stop people from doing this to us, intentionally or not?"

Except for the patter of rain on the roof, the silence is perfect.

I pray for reason, regretting my mouth. But what's one prayer against the will of multitudes?

An Irish journalist is found shot to death in a flooded sorghum field.

Two Nigerian cameramen are hung with their own coaxial cable, the incident interpreted as being racially motivated.

In one day, three different news vehicles are peppered with small arms fire.

And while I'm busy wondering about these terrible deeds, and am I in some way to blame, a bizarre new terrorist group bombs radar towers over a wide region, leaving the soggy heart of the nation blank, no way to determine the course and intensity of the latest storms.

Which aren't so bad, as it happens.

The truly bad news has moved downstream, taking most of the press with it. September begins with a week of uninterrupted sunshine. The lower Mississippi valley is submerged, but by October we've seen the last of our dirty waters

roll
off our streets and through the empty reservoir. We aren't dry, but the
concept
of dry ground can at least be imagined now. We can't hope for anything more.

Of course the murders were just murders, I tell myself.

Ugly but simple in their intent.

And who knows why people would dynamite radar installations? It has nothing to
do with me.

And yet.

I find myself thinking about the people in my shack and how they must have
spoken to friends and strangers, telling them of my idea. Ideas are like
butterfly wings. Small beginnings; catastrophic results. An idea like mine
could
flow through a population, seeking out the people most likely to believe in
it.
To act on it. To do what feels like the logical best course.

Make the world forget us.

Which it has, mostly.

A late-season hurricane strengthens, then takes aim at the Gulf Coast,
flooding
the remnants of New Orleans and shifting the Mississippi to a new channel in
western Louisiana.

Eighty-three acts of terrorism against reporters and weatherpeople may or may
not be linked with violence during last summer's floods.

"Frustrations are mounting," one CNN warrior reports to the world.

Armed guards standing around him.

What happens if the world realizes its power? I ask myself. Will humanity
shatter into opposing camps? Or seek revenge on its enemies? Or perhaps, just
perhaps, create an Eden, tepid and green?

I can remember when weather was a god unto itself.

Obeying no one.