

# In Someone Else's Home

BY JONATHAN CALLARD

My friends are at Burning Man, playing on the playa

I'm lying here on someone else's bed, house sitting  
Surfing channels on someone else's TV

I'm seeing white—President Bush flanked by other white men, senators and governors in shirt sleeves, strangely silent. The president, gesturing strongly, rolling up his sleeves, speaking of compassion, clapping relief workers and victims on the back—in Mississippi and Alabama, that is. His only appearance in New Orleans is at the airport. "I'm getting ready to fly out of here, but I want everyone to know I won't forget what I saw," he said.

I'm seeing black—members of the Congressional Black Caucus, striding up to the podium at the National Press Club in Washington, quoting Matthew ("I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty, you gave me drink...Lord, when did we do those things for you? ... When you did those things for others, you did them to me.") "I'm ashamed of America," said the congresswoman from Detroit, eyes flashing. People had sat in a sports stadium for days without food, water, sanitation. Unacceptable, she said.

Bill O'Reilly, trying to calm down a frantic Geraldo surrounded by white New Orleans police officers and black people. "I feel safe," Geraldo told Bill, "because the people here are angry with the government, they're not angry with me. But there are no cops at all besides the ones next to me, none as far as the eye can see" And Bill O'Reilly, saying, "Stay with us, Geraldo," but Geraldo has paced his way off the screen. And O'Reilly turns to me lying on the bed and says, "There's another storm brewing, and it's about race and Hurricane Katrina. Stay tuned..." and a picture of blacks waving cardboard signs in distress comes on, and then blaring rock music, and then a commercial.

I'm seeing Kanye West the rapper, standing next to a pasty nervous Mike Meyers in his dutch boy haircut, Kanye speaking from his solar plexus, eyes roving, "away from the script," NBC said later of his off the cuff remarks during a public service infomercial. Kanye talking about his people down south, about looting and why he would loot if he was there.

I'm seeing the Reverend Jesse Jackson Jr. talking about absorption, as if all the people stranded in the Superdome were molecules of water, and America needed to be a sponge. There are no refugees, he said, his words clipped. There are American citizens.

And a black woman holding her baby with a tiny microphone dangling around her neck and an earpiece in her ear, an ambulance behind her, standing and answering questions from Larry King on a split-screen image, and she is crying, not answering his question about who she is missing, which is funny because the crawl screen says exactly who she is missing: her brother, her sister, her mother, the baby's father. And she doesn't answer, and tears roll down and the words roll left to right, and Larry doesn't know what to say, except "I know how you feel," which he doesn't.

I rode the Hyde Street cable car today

And drunk people hung off the car, laughing and speaking too loudly

We passed torsos wearing Victoria's Secret  
And Baccarat glass for sale  
And Swensen's Ice Cream on Union and Hyde,  
With lines out the door, fathers holding babies on their shoulders,  
Eyeing the flavors behind the counter  
An Indian summer night in San Francisco  
And the running cable under the ground pulling us up another hill

Worlds away from water and sewage and helicopters and presidents rolling up sleeves, and the woman governor of Louisiana choking back tears, and the mayor of New Orleans raising his voice, saying it was time for people to get their "asses down here" to help, that he didn't want to hear another press conference, he wanted action.

I lie in this bed and the sheets feel too hot, and the cat smells, and I think of dead cats floating down rivers past roofs and abandoned cars.

I've got friends playing on the playa  
At Burning Man

And a president saying he's satisfied with the government's response, he's not satisfied with the results  
Like it's a stock option he played on the market but the bull didn't cooperate

I could give blood, or give money to the Red Cross.

I could remember that the displaced people paid taxes so that some of their children and brothers and sisters could go to war against a tiny dictator in the cradle of civilization, between the rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates, where last week somewhere 1000 people plunged to their death on a bridge, and the numbers numb me.

I could be reminded of the rising sea when it roars against rocky cliffs or wooden piers, of riptide river currents under the surface that pull magnetically against the land, sucking pieces of earth away, and we can't see where they go.

I could be reminded of the tides of humans barely hanging on, crusted like barnacles on a rock—and that was before they lost their housing, their brother, their mother.

When the ocean rises, when the levee breaks, we never know what gets torn away. What gets battered underneath.

My friends are in the desert, at Burning Man, playing on the playa.

I'm in someone else's home, and the waters are rising.

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