

THE FLOOD OF '09

Stefanie Freele

A FEW, the type who own rubber boots and full-body rain-gear, like Lawrence and John, stay. Hell, it's the ten-year flood zone. They knew the bursting river would raise unlocked garage doors and set floatables free. Refrigerators tip, careen, and dump possessions. Anything wood floats.

Gary is dead across the street in the hearse with foggy windows and a busted transmission. John notices that Lawrence has been looking at it daily from their bedroom window. Even though the hearse is on slightly higher ground, no way for a tow truck to get through, River Road closed over a week ago.

The neighbor rents to men from the city who come to Guerneville to pass. John only met Gary once, just after the last man died. Gary was too ill to speak and full of tubes. But John noticed a glint in Gary's eye, a sort of honor and fight. The same look John looks for in Lawrence as Lawrence gets sicker.

John moved their cars up the hill in time just before their driveway went under. The Drake Road intersection is deeper than one thinks, and every flood, taillights disappear in the murk. A slight rise in the road makes the difference from having to gut sheetrock or just spraying and airing out a garage. They know how much flood-mud stinks in the weeks after.

To get Lawrence out of the house and away from the sight of Gary's hearse, John takes them canoeing around the neighborhood. They find cats stranded in water-surrounded trees, opossums clinging to chimneys, bugs gathered on everything that floats. John makes sure Lawrence stays dry. To stretch their legs, they climb out and walk onto a roof.

It's tempting to scavenge wandering Adirondack chairs. Lawrence films a piano rushing under the bridge, half submerged and tilted as if played by the invisible mad Mozart. John thinks how he will watch that film by himself someday and remember this moment. Downed trees in great clumps tumble in the deafening surge of the river. Carports drift away. Picnic tables, bottles by the hundreds, plastic pieces in every color, life vests, paddles, all the accoutrements of river living, speed toward the sea.

Flash
Fiction Online



*The Drake Road intersection
is deeper than one thinks,
and every flood,
taillights disappear in the murk.*

It's rained since Christmas. That, after an unusually wet November. The sky is dark and angry, like an unforgiving God. Attached below the bridge, the black snake of the broken power line bobs atop crests.

It is dusk. John launches rotting wood from old planter boxes off the deck into the wet gloom. This isn't their first flood, but it is the only time in twenty-six years living a block from the Russian that the shadowy water has risen enough to lap at the base of the house's piers, inching upward by the hour. Soon, Gary will be drenched too.

Lawrence says "Poor Gary," while a floating oak limb adheres itself to the hearse's windshield wipers. Soon a white paint bucket wedges itself. More twigs, branches, and a half-inflated pink child's inner tube collectively make a barge bridging the almost-submerged hearse to a redwood tree. "It just seems so disrespectful."

Lawrence adjusts his yellow rain hat so droplets don't ride down his neck. Despite standing in the cold, he is sweating. "We could let him out, let him float."

"Seems better than drowning." John starts to wade across.

"I wasn't serious."

John pushes aside pieces of siding and soggy cardboard, and just as he reaches for the car door, he loses balance and splashes sideways. Cold wetness oozes over the rims of his hip boots.

Lawrence calls from behind. "I'm not laughing."

John scans the darkening sky. "Anyone watching?" Three jabs with a solid oak branch and the wide window breaks. "It has to look like he swam out on his own."

Lawrence is shivering. "Hurry, it's his last trip."

It is easy to get Gary out of the window, he floats out, small and twig-like, emaciated, wearing a soggy velour jumpsuit. "I'm going to take him out to the current."

Lawrence teases. "I'm making raspberry pie and a roast tonight. A garden salad with fresh beets."

John eases the body past a broken carport. Knowing there isn't much in the cabinets left, he says, "I thought I said I

John scans the darkening sky.

"Anyone watching?"

*Three jabs with a solid oak branch
and the wide window breaks.*

*"It has to look like
he swam out on his own."*

wanted lamb, something simple.” He points to where the garden used to be, “I’ll go diving for parsley and onion.”

John can see that Lawrence is leaning weakly against their awning under the constant pelt from the heavens. While holding the dead man’s foot on his shoulder, John half drags and half swims past the disappearing eaves of the river-front homes, past the riparian tips of bay trees and toward the boisterous current. Gary’s body swings sideways joining the flow, like he wants to get on with it.

Even though John doesn’t want to swim back home by himself, he lets go so Gary can proudly join a log covered in salamanders, a rectangle of white Styrofoam and a grubby beach ball, bouncing and bubbling all on their way toward the mouth where they’ll roar into the ocean and with the waves smash against rocks. 🌀

STEFANIE FREELE



Stefanie Freele was born and raised in Wisconsin and currently lives on a river in the Northwest US. As this bio was written in December 2008, she is the 2008 Fish Fellowship “Writer-In-Residence” for SmokeLong Quarterly and has recently been added to the SmokeLong Quarterly editorial staff. Stefanie’s short story collection Feeding Strays will be published by Lost Horse Press in September.

She has a MFA in fiction from the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts: Whidbey Writers Workshop in Washington.

This is her second publication in Flash Fiction Online. Her first was “James Brown Is Alive And Doing Laundry In South Lake Tahoe” in January 2008.

*Story copyright © 2009, Stefanie Freele.
All rights reserved.*

Photo courtesy of the US Geological Survey.

*This story was published as
FLASH 2009/01 #2 on Flash Fiction Online
(flashfictiononline.com).*