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Book Review

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THE UNKNOWN ENVIRONMENTALIST A biography of George Bird Grinnell

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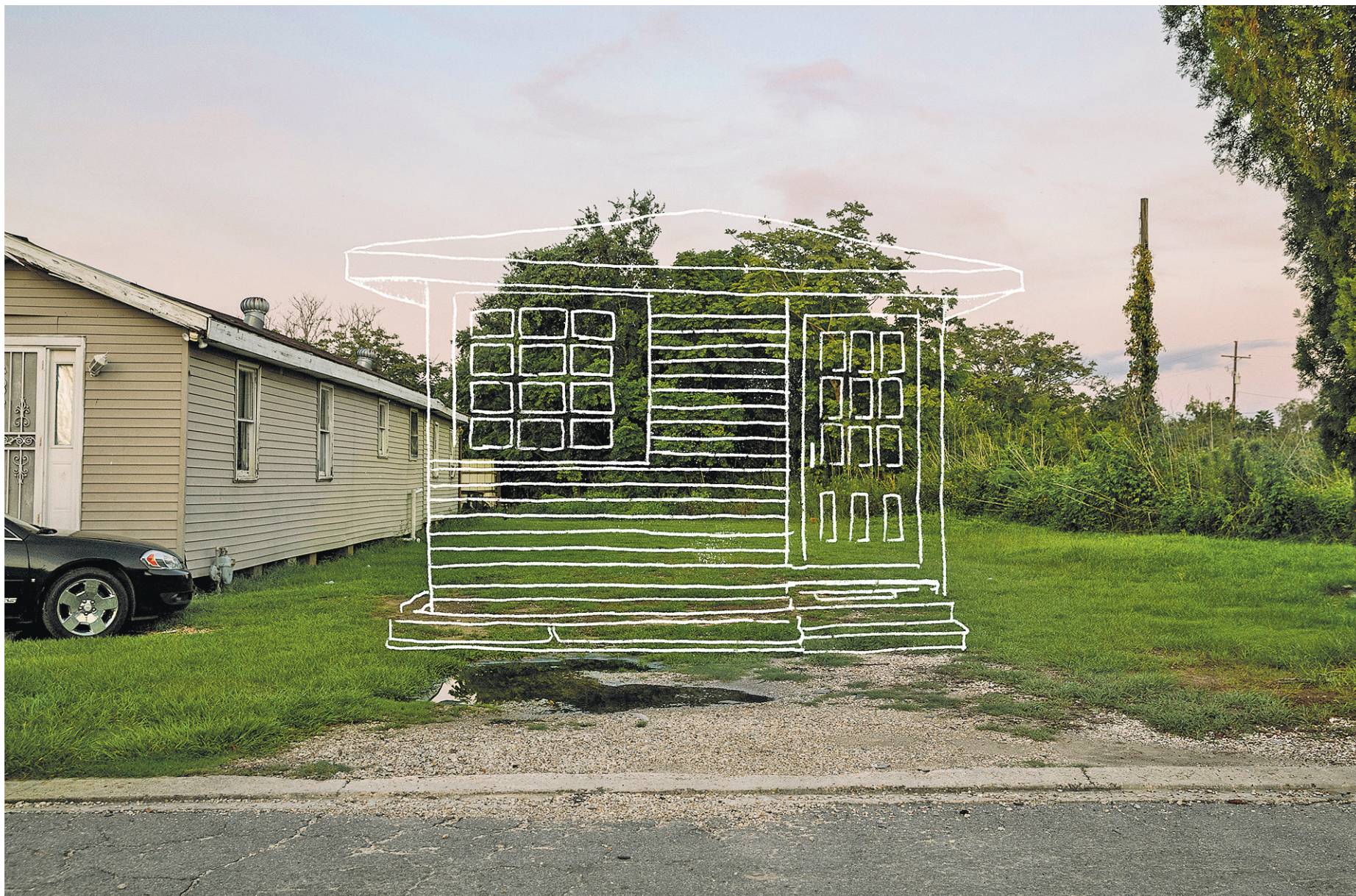


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No Place Like Home

By Angela Flournoy

WHEN SARAH M. BROOM was in high school, she and her mother briefly attended a revivalist megachurch near their New Orleans home, the kind where people got “drunk on the Holy Spirit” and burned with “Holy Ghost Fire.” The youngest of 12 siblings, Broom spent her childhood on the hunt for an adequate mode of self-express-

sion. She took to the practice of speaking in tongues. “The only control was in letting go,” she writes. “When you gave yourself over to it, it came bubbling out from you, this foreign language you did not need to study for, that was specific to you and your tongue, and that you did not know you spoke — until you did.” As an adult, Broom continued to seek the place and language that felt most like home to her, and it wasn’t until

THE YELLOW HOUSE

By Sarah M. Broom

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she returned to New Orleans, with its particular cadence and history and sins, that she found it.

This journey is one aspect of Broom’s extraordinary, engrossing debut, “The Yellow House,” but Broom recognizes that she needs to find the language to tell an even more expansive story. She pushes past the baseline expectations of memoir as a genre to create an entertaining and

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inventive amalgamation of literary forms. Part oral history, part urban history, part celebration of a bygone way of life, “The Yellow House” is a full indictment of the greed, discrimination, indifference and poor city planning that led her family’s home to be wiped off the map. It is an instantly essential text, examining the past, present and possible future of the city of New Orleans, and of America writ large.

New Orleans East, where Broom grew up, is an area “50 times the size of the French Quarter,” yet nowhere to be found on most tourist maps. Her neighborhood, centered on the short end of a street cut off from the rest of the city by a raging thoroughfare, is a familiar sort for many black folks in this country: comprising the scraps of real estate whites have passed over or fled. We witness the street through the eyes of Broom’s 11 older siblings, who saw it transform from integrated and residential to segregated and “light industrial” over the years beginning in the ’60s. Broom leaves the street and New Orleans behind in the late ’90s.

The city demolished the house less than a year after Hurricane Katrina, the only prior notice having been, in an act of civic absurdity, mailed to its address. “Remembering is a chair that it is hard to sit still in,” Broom writes. “The Yellow House” is a conscious act of abiding in such memories in order to create a textual record where the physical one no longer exists.

Broom is our guide, but not the sort who holds readers’ hands, uninterested as she is in tidy transitions between one type of writing and another. The through line is her thought process, her frequent questioning: “When you come from a mythologized place, as I do, who are you in that story?” she asks while living for a year in the French Quarter after a lifetime of merely shuttling through it for work. “Why do I sometimes feel that I do not have the right to the story of the city I come from?” she asks after signing the contract for this book and embarking on the research to write it. One question posed in the center of the book — “How to resurrect a house with words?” — trembles beneath the surface of every page, like the ripple of a stone dropped in water.

Broom searches for her own answers, undertaking what she calls “investigations” via archives and interviews and living. She claims that her favorite place to be is “on the verge of discovery,” and because she is skilled at making each inquiry feel urgent, this quickly becomes the reader’s favorite place as well.

Similar to the writer Gayl Jones, who in works like the novel “Corregidora” uses her characters’ dialogue to create a subtext

of knotted history, Broom allows us to infer what might lie in the silences between the words her family members speak to her, during what must have amounted to whole days’ worth of recorded interviews. Here is Broom’s mother, Ivory Mae, remembering her own darker-skinned mother: “She wasn’t black to me. She was my mama and my mama wasn’t black. Looked to me like they was trying to make my mama like the black people I didn’t like.”

The interviews also yield unforgettable scenes. As the waters rose during the worst of Hurricane Katrina, Broom’s older brother Carl, who also goes by Rabbit, stood in an attic with a meat cleaver, a gun and his two Pekingese dogs, Mindy and Tiger. Carl hacked his way out onto the roof, and the three were eventually ferried to dry land. “Mindy and them wasn’t on no leash,” he recalls. “I had some Adidas tennis on, but they was so tight. I took the shoestrings off and made leashes.”

These days, the question of who should be allowed to tell a story, whether fictional or fact-based, seems to hang in the air around many a work of literature. That Broom is a New Orleans native will automatically put some readers at ease, those who think authority is inextricably linked to biography; but that would be selling Broom’s craftsmanship short. The true test of her worthiness is her empathy and focused attention. She is a responsible historian, granting her subjects the grace of multiple examinations over the years. Her brother Darryl, drug addicted and desperate for money, frightens her as a teenager in the ’90s to the point that she doesn’t recall looking him directly in the eye. Years later we meet him again, the sobered-up head of a delightfully mundane Arizona household, his only daughter named after his wary, observant youngest sister.

The person who sustains the most considered attention is Broom’s mother, Ivory Mae, the twice-widowed steward of the crumbling yellow house itself. “My voice is not a distinguished voice,” Ivory insists, but her words and actions buoy “The Yellow House,” holding up to the light those moments Broom was too young or unwilling to witness firsthand. “I was a little pathetic at first,” Ivory Mae admits of her early widowed years, “I needed to make myself know things.” She sets to this task with fervor, going to night school for her G.E.D. and a nursing credential so that she can fill the role of breadwinner suddenly thrust upon her. If Broom’s arc in this memoir is that of coming of age and consciousness, Ivory Mae’s is of doggedly persevering as her circumstances shift.



Sarah M. Broom

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Ivory Mae tries mightily to keep the house in good condition, sewing curtains and valances to hide the disrepair, but the house is a “belligerent unyielding child”: Rats and lizards find their way inside, linoleum peels prematurely and areas under the sink grow slick with mold. “This house not all that comfortable for other people,” becomes Ivory’s standard rejoinder when the kids try to host sleepovers. This seesawing between stubborn pride in the home she bought herself and “slow creeping” shame for the poverty that prevents her from improving it makes the nature of its demolition, without her consent, one of the book’s central tragedies.

Ivory’s second husband, Simon Broom, died when their youngest daughter was 6 months old. “My father is six pictures,” she writes, photos she takes with her as she travels from Texas to Berkeley to as far as Burundi in an effort to understand where and how she fits in the world. A riveting, heartbreaking scene toward the book’s ending dramatizes Broom’s attempts to find additional physical evidence of him in

city archives: “Part of me was afraid to see him alive. . . . In the world of dead parents, logic fails.”

Broom’s deadpan humor comes through clearest in her descriptions of herself. On the now-vanished supermarket she visited as a child: “one of my favorite places to act a fool.” On the tenuous position of authority granted to her by her siblings’ children, some of whom are older than she is: “I am these people’s Auntie even though I am still peeing in the bed.” These moments, coupled with the singular, unvarnished voices of her family members, coalesce to form a lesson on how to keep a necessarily heavy book feeling limber.

“Calling places by what they originally were, especially when the landscape is marred, is one way to fight erasure,” Broom writes. There are black and Latino neighborhoods from Detroit to Los Angeles where refusing to call a place by a new name is the last line of defense, but what happened in New Orleans East is more than the result of housing segregation, white divestment or the hyper-capitalist, winner-takes-all land grab that we call gentrification. “The Yellow House” is among other things a climate-change narrative, the book suited to these last

days for taking action to prevent rising sea levels and other dire consequences of unfettered carbon emission.

Broom’s siblings, living in places like Vacaville, Calif., and Ozark, Ala., with no paths to come home, are part of the Katrina diaspora, and as extreme weather becomes the new normal, other diasporas have followed. The phrase “the Water” is the one she uses to refer to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent displacement, loss of life and livelihood. One can imagine a wider array of people soon adopting this language — “the Water” becoming a shorthand for all that is lost when nature defies the plans we’ve made for where and how we live.

Any book as kinetic and omnivorous as “The Yellow House” is bound to succeed more on some fronts than on others. It begins at the chronological beginning, with Broom tracing her mother’s lineage, which means the first section of the book is more removed and reportorial. This doesn’t seem like a liability until around Page 100, when Broom’s own voice and perspective vault the language into another dimension. But even this choice feels rooted in Broom’s aesthetic intentions. “The Yellow House” is a book that triumphs much as a jazz parade does: by coming loose when necessary, its parts sashaying independently down the street, but righting itself just in the nick of time, and teaching you a new way of enjoying it in the process. □

ANGELA FLOURNOY is the author of “The Turner House.”