

# THE TATTOO

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# Burn book scorches the soul

By SAMANTHA PEREZ  
The Tattoo

Monday, Dec. 12, 5:16 p.m.,  
Ponchatoula, Louisiana

We found out about it today. It spread like wildfire during lunch, wildfire on prairie grass, burning fast. By the end of school, all of us knew ... knew about the Burn Book.

The book had been made for gossip's sake, to write things about students that the others did not like. It had been made by a group of underclassmen, a few students who had been attending St. Thomas before the hurricane.

I don't know whether or not it was meant as a joke. Some things like this are, and then are later blown wildly out of proportion. I really don't know, and part of me has to wonder if what they wrote was even meant to be serious at all.

Whatever their intent, their words are serious now. Serious and real and burning like the wildfire. We found out about it today, this burning, burning Burn Book. A group of younger students wrote it, and we found it. In it, they wrote that they wished all of us from St. Bernard had stayed in our homes during the hurricane, stayed there to drown.

Once the floodwaters are gone, the land's too dry. Wildfire starts and spreads too quickly. That's why there are fights in high schools now, brawls between displaced students and regular students. That's why there are Burn Books and hatred in classes. Segregation and detestation.

My new friends at St. Thomas Aquinas Diocesan Regional High School are nice to me. I do not sit with them at lunch or go places with them outside of school, but they do nothing to me and I do nothing to them. I have no problems with any of them, and we joke around and laugh like friends should.

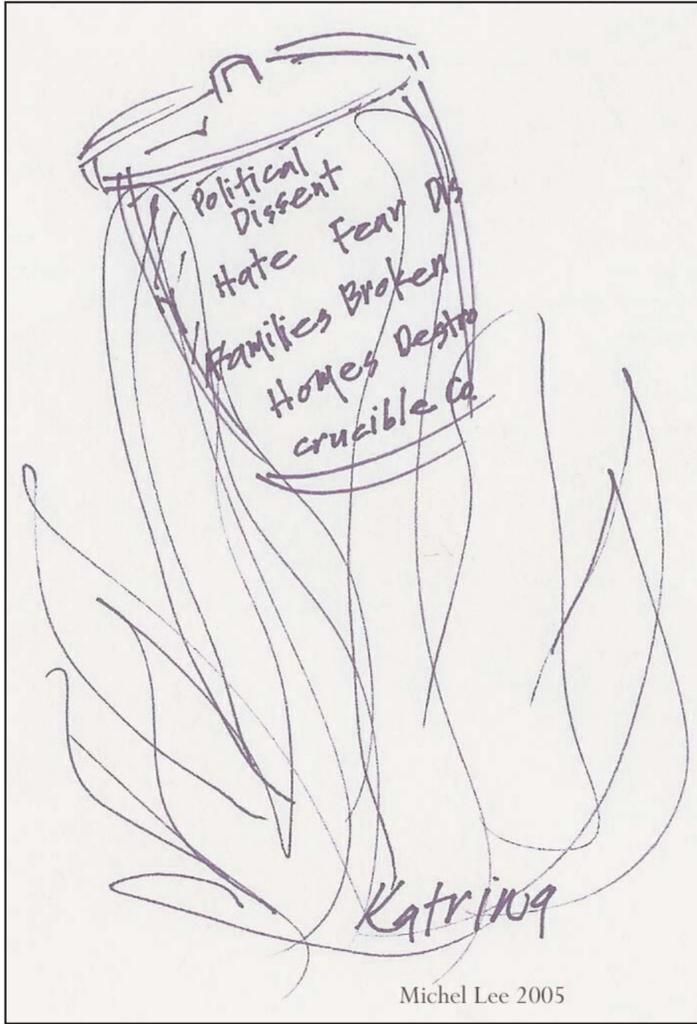
St. Thomas is not a bad place. The students are nice, and the teachers are nice. I do not dread going to class, like I did at LSMSA. I have made new friends, as well as kept my old ones. I respect the other students' seniority over someone who came in mid-year, like myself. Mostly, I am just trying to get by and keep on moving along.

Still, I do not understand how people can be so naïve, and it bothers me knowing that a group of students sat around and wrote words that burn: *To stay in our homes and drown...*

Do they know people who really did drown in the hurricane? I do. How can they not understand?

We did not ask to come to St. Thomas, to become students of a strange school in a strange town. We did not ask to become St. Thomas students any more than we asked for a hurricane to destroy our homes.

But we are here. A hurricane did come, and we are students of St. Thomas, a strange school in a strange town. We did not ask for this — none of us did. But we are here, just as there are students in strange towns in Texas and Mississippi and Alabama, far from the



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in the end.

The blunt truth of the matter is that some of us did stay in our homes for the hurricane, and the sights and smells experienced by those people can never be understood by anyone else. I left, but there are many people who did not, people who stayed and watched with their own two eyes the floodwaters rise and rise, dousing the wildfire in New Orleans, only to leave other places too dry. New fires started in new towns.

So, some students wish that we had stayed in our homes to drown, drown along with our possessions and our normalcy? Well, it's too bad for them. Because we are here. We are living, and we will keep on going because that is what we need to do.

And, every morning, we will wake up with strange walls bearing down on us, in a strange bed, in a strange town. Every morning, we drive to a new job or a new school in a new town. We did not ask for this life, this gypsy existence, but it's the fate we are living.

Very few at St. Thomas feel the way those students do. Most are friendly and welcoming, but there's always a certain edge at first, a certain wariness, because, I think, in the subtle lining of the matter, there's the hidden fact that we are some place where we do not belong.

Tuesday, Dec. 13, 8:32 p.m.,  
Ponchatoula, Louisiana

Walking into a good bookstore is a deeply moving religious experience. I know this because of the smells, the rich blend of aromas coming from the crisp, unread pages and the warm cappuccino of the coffee shop. If peace of mind had a smell, this would be it.

I found such a bookstore in Hammond, tucked away beside the grocery store, and today, I walked in, opened the door to step out of the cold and into peace of mind.

Early this morning, the principal of St. Thomas spoke on the intercom about the events of yesterday concerning the Burn Book some of the students wrote. He was furious, and said that the parents of the students would be called and that disciplinary action would be taken. He went on and on about the things we displaced students are living through, that the other students with homes and normalcy would not be able to understand. There are some things in life that cannot be understood fully without experiencing them with one's own eyes, own ears.

I have to wonder, how many St. Thomas students could have walked

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into their house before the streets were cleared in St. Bernard, walked in through the hole in the back where their door used to stand? How many St. Thomas students could have cleared out their own bedroom by

their own selves, to see the belongings once precious to them lying broken and mold-covered on the floor? My

friends and I have grown up so much in so little time. We aren't kids anymore. We have adult cares and adult worries. We are older than before.

The principal said that he would show a videotape to anyone who wanted to watch it. The video tape was of the damage and destruction Hurricane Katrina left behind, of our homes and schools and old lives.

When I walked into the bookstore, it was comforting to smell that lovely scent of paper and coffee. That was something that hasn't changed in my life. That smell of peace still exists. It wasn't flooded away like everything else, and I am glad for that.

So many parts of my life have changed and are continuing to change daily. As I look back on the things that have happened just since the hurricane, I am amazed at how much my life has been altered and how much I have experienced.

I do not know how many people read what I write and can understand what it is like to look at things once precious, now completely ruined, and be forced to throw them all away. My books, my stories on disks sprawled across the floor. Drawings I made in kindergarten, and clay figures I made for my mom. I found those things on the floor, and I picked them up. I picked the belongings precious to me off my muddy, brown carpet and I threw them into a garbage bag.

I picked up childhood and threw it away.

I knelt on the floor in the bookstore today, beside some of my old favorite books. The smell didn't fade, and I fanned the pages of the books so that the aroma was even stronger. I breathed it in, and I sat there on the carpet that was not muddy to look at books like I used to own.

When I left and walked out of the store, the cold air hit me again and the warm smell left me. But now, I know where the bookstore is. Bookstores don't sell Burn Books that wish us gone. Fights break out in high schools in Texas, between the old students and the displaced ones. Fistfights and brawls, catfights and gossip. We did not ask to be here, and I know most of us would do anything to find a way back.

I don't like thinking of going back, even though I know St. Bernard is in my blood. I don't like thinking back. I move forward now. Looking back on things brings regrets, like wishing that I had jumped on the sofa more often or wishing that I had watched *The Jungle Book* just one more time. I move forward, and when I start to look back and regret, I know now where to find peace of mind.

# Ready or not, here comes Christmas

Sunday, Dec. 18, 12:34 p.m.,  
Ponchatoula, Louisiana

Too fast. Everything is moving too fast. I want time to slow down, just for a moment, so that I can have a chance to just think about everything that is happening.

Since the month the hurricane hit, I have lost my house and lived in a hotel, dorm room, and camper. I have enrolled in three different schools, had three different American History teachers, and slept in six different beds. *Six* different beds.

My friend told me that Christmas is in a week. One week. I laughed because I thought he was joking, speaking crazy talk. That was until I looked at my phone and added 7 to 18. That equals 25, and Christmas is on day 25. Christmas is in one week.

This isn't like any Christmas I've ever had before. There aren't any decorations. I'm not running around, screaming Christmas carols, and embarrassing my friends.

We don't have any room for a real tree, so instead we have a tiny 17-inch one from Target. We keep it on the table, but I don't like it because it takes too much room when we are trying to eat.

Maybe it's different for other displaced families with houses. Maybe it's just my family. I don't know. This Christmas isn't like anything we've had before. My dad won't be home; he'll be in St. Bernard working. I don't know where we will be going for Christmas Day, probably only to my grandparents' house trailer again, to see them and spend time with them.

Then I will come home into my little camper, where there is hardly any evidence of Christmas. I guess it doesn't matter. Not really. I bought a few little things for my friends for Christmas, but I don't get to see them often anymore. I have no idea when I will be able to give them their presents.

I hope soon. After all, Christmas is only a week away.

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place we all called home.

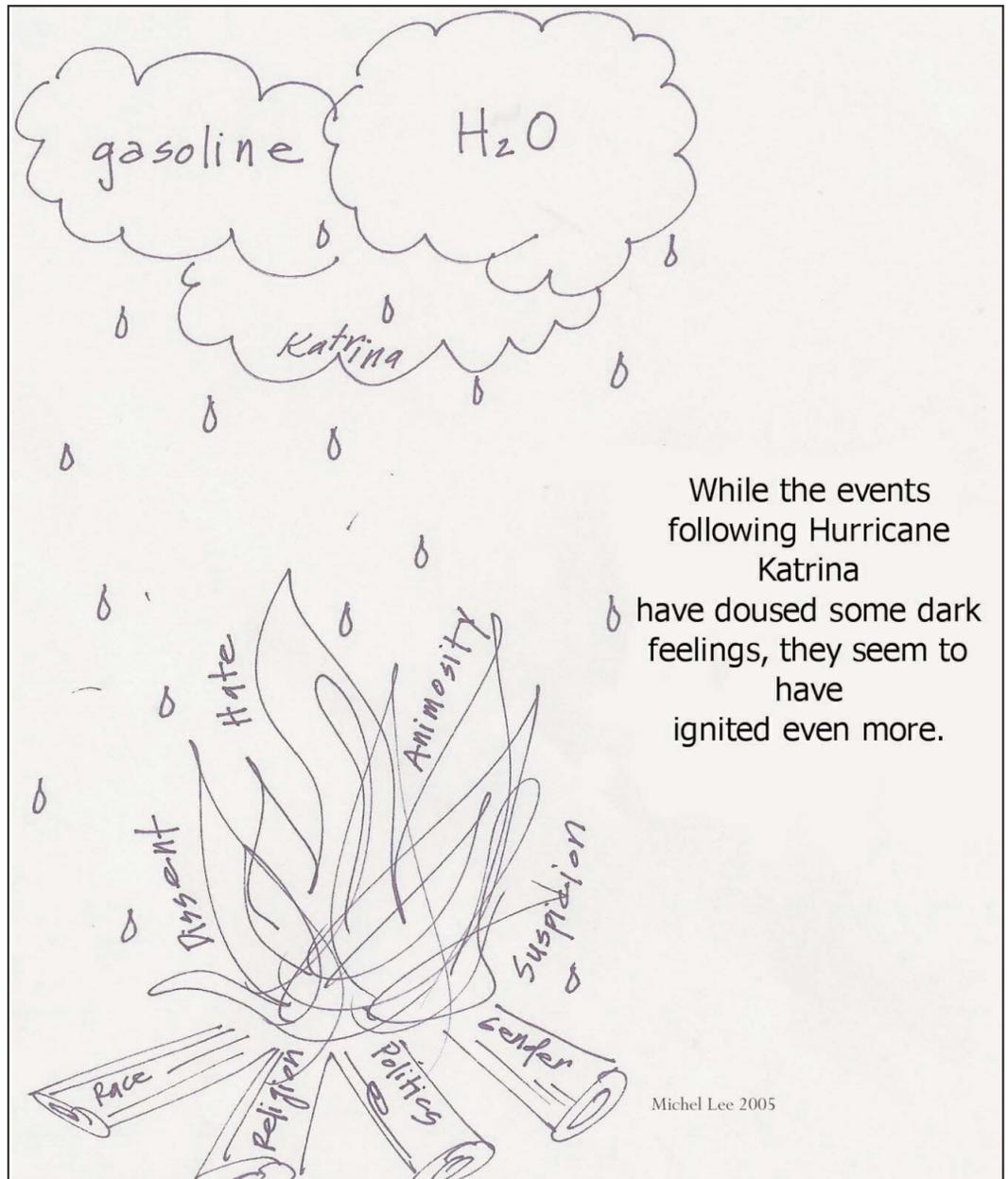
Every day, displaced students across the country wake up in the morning and get dressed in a house or an apartment or a camper that is not their home. Every day, these students are shuffled along to a new school in a new town, with new and strange faces around them. Normalcy has become a dream. I lost my morning routine, as did everyone else. I improvise in the mornings, and I manage to get by, just like everyone else. Scraping the edges, but coming through all right

## About the hurricane journals

Samantha Perez, a high school senior from St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, started chronicling life during and after Hurricane Katrina before the storm washed away her old life last August.

Her work is an honest look at what happens when a natural disaster tears through town and leaves nothing but rubble in its wake.

Read all of Perez' journals at [www.ReadTheTattoo.com](http://www.ReadTheTattoo.com) and keep watching, because more are in the works.



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