



The River

By Laurel Moffatt

Not long ago, I went to the Mississippi River. To see it, but also to listen. It's the body of water that looms largest in my mind. I've since moved and settled down near a saltwater body on the other side of the world. But it's the Mississippi that surfaces whenever water comes to mind.

I knew, growing up near this river, that it was a mighty thing, not to be trifled with. It was something that demanded respect. What else do you owe a thing that can both divide a continent and bring you directly into its heart? That can both float a ship and sink it?

In order to see the river in Baton Rouge, you must first deal with the levee. This is the thing you meet before there can be any meeting of the river. And when you're downtown, you can't avoid it. The city ends abruptly at a long stretch of a low hill. From the street you can't see what is on the other side of the rise. All that you've met with on the last street of downtown is the long, hulking shoulder of the levee. It runs for blocks, miles.

The steps leading up to the top of the levee are a ziggurat of concrete interspersed with water fountains. There's the faint smell of chlorine. The water sits and runs between shallow pools on the streetside of the levee, as if



to remind the city of the relevance of water to this place, of what lies on the other side. Buy this is water as distraction, artifice.

I walked up the steps to the top of the levee, and stood on the paved path that runs along its top for several miles. And it was there that I came face-to-face with what lay on the other side of the levee as decoration, levee as recreation, the reason for the true job of the levee as buttress: The Mississippi.

People have been building levees in Louisiana ever since European settlement of the area began. The levees of the early 18th century were put in place to prevent the flooding of New Orleans, a strategic jewel on the map of New France. Over time levees dotted the banks of the river to protect not only the city, but also the plantations of settlers and their lucrative crops. The levees were a defence against the river, protection for the returns on the investment of money and time in this place. The original levees were 3 feet high. From the top of the 50-foot high levee that runs through downtown, this now seems laughable. Like a pile of sand next to a mountain. I'd be inclined to build a bigger sandcastle at the beach.

With each flood the levees were built higher, made longer. Dots of levees were strung together into lines. Lines lengthened into walls. The walls of the levees rose. And as the levees rose, the river, constrained in its width, made up the difference in height and speed with every flood. Ever since the



first levees were built, ever since the first person decided to move some dirt to affect the flow of water, floodwaters have only risen. The levee system of the Mississippi now rivals in length the Great Wall of China. And the enemy? It would appear to be the river itself.

The temptation to tame any wild thing is strong in many, if not most of us. We do it all the time. It feels natural to take a tree and trim it, to plough a field or pave it. To box in, control, domesticate. The fiercer the beast, the more tempting it can be to tame it. After all, if you manage such a feat, then you can take a photo of a once-wild thing and frame it and show it off to friends. You can lay its skin on your floor, and mount its head on your wall and say, 'See this beast? This terror? I have tamed it. It is mine. It does what I say.' That is, until the moment comes when it slips the collar, breaks the chain, rears up and flattens everything with its roar. There are some things that will not be tamed because they cannot be tamed.

The river side slope of the levee ended at a thin, stony, strip of batture at the water's edge. Weeds and litter mingled in the stones. I stood at the edge of the river and listened to it. I could see the pattern the current made on the surface of the water, but I could not hear the river. The river didn't make a sound, or rather I couldn't hear it above the sound of the industry of the river.

The port of Baton Rouge sent out a constant, grinding pulse, interspersed with the clanging of metal on metal as though it was powered by



a machine heart with valves of steel and veins of iron. The traffic on the bridge over the river growled with deep static, in time with the beat of car tires on the seams of the road. Tug boats pushed barges along the river, the drone of their engines a constant thread through the pulse of the machine heart and the rumble of traffic from the bridge.

A breeze picked up. I could see the effect of its fingers on the surface of the water as it took tiny licks. There was the scuttle of leaves on the levee bank. The pulse beat on. Tinny music floated from the deck of the USS Kidd moored nearby. There was so much noise on the river, but none of it was the river.

Elsewhere in Baton Rouge there is a block of land that was once a shopping mall. When I was a kid, it was The Mall, kind of like the Mississippi was The River. There was only one. But when I drove by there was no mall there anymore. There was nothing of it left, just vast emptiness and a lone, multi-story concrete structure, which sat unfinished. A hulking square, like a stand alone parking garage, but not for cars. My brother told me that Amazon had bought the mall, torn it down and was building in its place a processing centre. A building for robots and humans to fulfil the many orders of a human population in need of this thing or that, either now or as soon as robotically-possible.



It is hard to imagine that there was once a mall there, there are no traces of it. What is harder still to imagine is what was there before that. But my brother remembers.

Before it was a half-built Amazon processing centre, it was a shopping mall. And before it was a mall, it was an empty plot of land, a field, of trees and brambles, of blackberry bushes, of birds and squirrels, and a boy, my brother, crawling through the underbrush, eating berries. I imagine his lips and fingers stained with blackberry juice.

Something is gained by the taming of the land or the river, but with the gain comes loss, and I don't mean simply loss in terms of money spent. And I don't just mean the loss of a building, or the loss of the field of trees and bushes, brambles and blackberries, although it is all of that too. The loss is also something far more interior, invisible. It is the loss of our ability to be at the mercy of something other than ourselves and our own choices in both time and place. To pick a blackberry in summer, and find none in winter and know that both the having and the not having are part of what it means to enjoy a blackberry.

As I stood at the edge of where the river meets the levee, the river looked tame, safe, supine. But I wasn't at all sure it actually was. As every flood attests, the river will have its way. All efforts to contain it, to make it to



our will, may work for a time, but only ever for a time. In the end, if we think we can control it, conquer it, we're fooling ourselves.

What will happen to the river? Only God knows. It's no great distance to move from the river to the God who made the river. It takes barely a step. A slight shift of mind, a look askance and there he is. He is always there. With his robe filling the alluvial basin, spilling over every levee like it fills the temple in those strange visions of Isaiah in the 8th century BCE.

It began to rain and droplets pocked the river's face. A pelican hovered above the face of the river, riding the wind. I laughed when I saw it. Such a strange creature, who in its strangeness, and in the updraft under its wings and the gullet of its mouth, cries out that God is holy and the whole earth is crammed with his glory. The bird came to rest on the surface of the water, like he belonged. Like he was made to be carried by the river. And in that moment I knew; all my levees will fail. I cannot control God. I may as well worship him.

Links:

Required reading:

- John McPhee's piece, "Atchafalaya", published in the February 23, 1987 of the *New Yorker*:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1987/02/23/atchafalaya>



The following articles are also helpful for learning about how levees work, specifically the levees along the Mississippi River:

- *The Atlantic*:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/05/what-weve-done-to-the-mississippi-river-an-explainer/239058/>

- *National Public Radio*:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/21/610945127/levees-make-mississippi-river-floods-worse-but-we-keep-building-them>

- *Scientific American*:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-problem-with-levees/>

Here's Amazon's announcement about the opening of its robotic fulfilment centre in Baton Rouge:

<https://press.aboutamazon.com/news-releases/news-release-details/amazon-announces-new-robotics-fulfillment-center-baton-rouge>

And, for how this relates to the demolition of the old mall:

https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_a0cc5d9c-ceb9-11eb-9125-23a12b4242a3.html

And, for the reference to the hem of God's robe filling the temple in Isaiah 6:1-2:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%206:1-2&version=NIVUK>