

## Gathering moss: Acclaimed author on teaching at Tulane, making NOLA home

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***Editor's note: This piece is a personal essay by Tulane professor Thomas Beller. It appeared first in the September 2018 issue of [Tulanian](#).***

### **One night 10 years ago on Canal Street**

I am on Canal Street in my car late at night. Or perhaps it's not late. But it's dark. Even on Canal and Rampart streets, at the edge of the French Quarter, the darkness of New Orleans at night seems, to me, to be of a character and depth with which I am not familiar. I have just moved down to New Orleans from New York City to start teaching at Tulane, but I am without my wife and daughter, or any of my possessions except my car. Even the car, a used Audi A4, seems unfamiliar to me,

having been driven down from New York City by a New Orleans local named Donna, with whom I shared a drink after she delivered the car. She is a French Quarter resident and tells me stories about how Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are adjusting to their new neighborhood. Jolie had wandered into a bar the other day and sat there for a couple of hours talking to everyone, she said. Donna's voice is wispy and melodic — I guess you could say dreamy — and seems to contain information about my new city that goes beyond the words she is saying. I think of that dreamy-sounding voice a few days later when I am on the Claiborne Avenue overpass, near the Superdome, and a car on the otherwise empty road drifts out of its lane and almost hits me. I honk the horn, feel aggrieved, but a moment later, as I pull up beside the reckless driver at the red light, I see the window lowering and a woman at the wheel. She says, "I'm sorry. I'm just so tired," in a way that is so genuine and civilized that all the driver venom — the most insane-making kind — that I was about to deliver, mostly through a glare, but perhaps with a few words to back it up, evaporates on contact with her remark. Her voice had the same wispy, melodic, almost childish quality as Donna's.

Now I am making a right on Rampart Street off Canal, there are no cars on either side or behind me, and I move slowly so I can look around. It is a dark, forlorn corner of the city. The Saenger Theatre, across the street, is shuttered and mute. Suddenly, the whole scene is lit by flashing blue lights. I look in the rearview mirror, see the police car and pull over to let it pass. To my amazement, it pulls in behind me. I wonder if it is possible to get a ticket for driving too slowly.

The officer is a burly African-American who explains that I had made a right turn from the center lane. I tell him I hadn't realized this and offer that I just moved here to teach at Tulane and still don't know my way around — lobbying as much as possible, in other words, to be given a break on the ticket.

*"What do you do at Tulane?" he asks.*

*"I'm a professor," I say.*

*"What do you teach?"*

*"Creative writing."*

*"Interesting."*

*"It is?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because I've been working on a novel."*

*"Really? What's it about?"*

*"Hard to say."*

*"Do you have a character?" I ask.*

*"I don't really have a character," he says, "but I have a voice."*

I am suddenly very interested in this guy. I want to know about the voice. In the ensuing bit of conversation, I more or less offer to look at his work should he ever want to show it to me. I want to report that I gave him my business card but I don't think I even had a business card from Tulane at that point. At any rate, he had my license and knew my name. But I never heard from him. I have no idea if the voice was ever matched to a character on the page, or if the pages ever amounted to a manuscript, let alone a book. But I think about this guy, sometimes. I think about the way he looked wistfully down dark and empty Rampart Street and sighed after he told me about the book, as though his character was supposed to meet him on this very corner but was, once again, a no-show.

He didn't give me a ticket.

### **One night 10 years ago on State Street**

My first weeks in New Orleans were spent alone in a space that I now know to have been one side of a camelback shotgun, a modest-enough sounding description of real estate. To my eyes, it was a palace. Every time I entered it I felt elated that I could live in such a place for the first minute, but by the time I made it to the kitchen, in the back, I began to feel a bit strange. Part of what unnerved me was its scale — something like 2,000 square feet on two floors with a front porch and a patio in the back for about what a studio apartment on 11th Street in New York City had cost — but mostly the problem was that it was empty. There is something strange about living in an apartment with absolutely nothing in it besides you and some clothes and your laptop. Eventually, I bought a lamp and a towel and a pillow

and set up a little nest for myself to sleep for the two nights a week I was in town. I was flying back to New York City every week to be with my wife and baby while we waited for Worldwide Moving to deliver our possessions. Like, for example, a bed.

It wasn't unreasonable for my wife to want to hold off coming down with the baby until we had something to sleep on, but her wariness extended to the perimeter of the reasonable, and maybe just beyond it. She kept insisting, for example, that there could be a hurricane.

"Of course there could be a hurricane," I said. "But we can't organize our lives around the possibility."

"I just don't want to go down there and have to fly right back up," she said.

So my first weeks at Tulane in the fall of 2008 involved my flying down on an empty plane and spending two nights in my empty empire on State Street sleeping on my towel. Then I flew back to New York on an empty plane. And then one day the airport was so packed with people it was like the fall of Saigon. My flight was booked and there was a crowd on standby. A hurricane had entered the gulf. Gustav. It hit New Orleans. I watched it all on TV in New York, an accidental evacuee. This hurricane's distinguishing feature, in hindsight, was that there was a mandatory evacuation, and it was chaotic. I have a vivid memory of seeing a body of water lapping against and then overtopping — but gently, and just a little — the new walls that had been built at the 17th Street Canal, the very place that had collapsed during Katrina. It was a strange sensation. On one hand, I had nothing more to lose than a towel and a pillow. On the other hand, this was the scene of my immediate future. How far into the distance I didn't know. But now I do, 10 years later.

The commuting continued for almost another whole month because Worldwide Moving insisted the hurricane had made the requirement that they deliver our stuff within two weeks null and void. At first, I was understanding, then I was less understanding, then I was upset. And then I settled into a kind of pleasurable war against a guy named Aaron who ran the company out of a little office in Florida. You could put together a whole anthology of stories composed of baroque experiences with moving companies. Mine involved a single-minded harassment of Aaron by phone, fax, email, but mostly phone. I left a lot of messages. Like Saul Bellow's Herzog, I felt a kind of liberation in going a little crazy, and the liberation took the form of monologues on the voicemail of Worldwide Moving.

“Aaron, I am living alone in a white room with nothing in it,” is how one began. “What do you call a person who lives alone in a white room? No padding, but still. What do you call such a person? Crazy! Aaron, you call such a person a crazy person! My possessions must be delivered or this condition will only get worse!”

It was during this time that I had my strange encounter with the policeman on State Street. He saw me walking haphazardly up the middle of the State Street at night and pulled the cruiser to the side of the road. He got out, summoned me over.

I lifted my eyes from the ground and explained to him as best I could that I had lost my wallet and was looking for it.

The officer was a white guy, burly, ginger hair in a center part. From his perspective, I was a large male walking in an agitated manner down the middle of the block, a bit unsteady, and this man was babbling something to him and declining to obey his request. So he restated it more forcefully, taking his hand off his hip and stepping into the street as though to say, “You come here, or I am coming there.”

I cannot quote exactly what he said to me, but I remember the sudden chill I felt at realizing that I pissed off a cop. I am aware of a certain perversity in a white guy in Uptown New Orleans in 2008 expressing fear of a police officer, but it occurred to me that I seemed either crazy or drunk.

I went over to him and started to explain. I was living in an empty apartment that is so large it was disorienting, I said. I was commuting to and from New Orleans every week. I had embarked on a trip to Whole Foods with my wallet on the roof of my car. Now I was worried it had fallen off the roof while I was driving. I was looking for it on the route between my place on State Street and Whole Foods, etc.

He didn't disbelieve me, exactly, but it was necessary for me to explain this for a while. Then he let me go on my way. The legacy of this event might have been the threat in his voice for that one moment, or it might have been the memory of me scanning the streets looking for my wallet, consumed by a panic that was exacerbated by the very act of looking, since who finds themselves in such positions other than crazy people or those who are too disorganized to be trusted with a wife and baby? But the legacy is that at some point, a police cruiser pulled behind me. It was the same cop. He asked if I had found it and when I said no, he said he would keep an eye out. And then 15 minutes later he was back again, behind me, now with the big police spotlight mounted on the side of his car, lighting up the street, rolling

along behind me. We must have spent 10 minutes, maybe more, moving slowly down the street like this, me and my new buddy, looking in vain. In the end I went back home, trekked the considerable distance from the front door through the parlor room, the dining room, the living room, down the short hallway, past the bathroom, and into the kitchen, where my wallet was sitting on the kitchen counter.

### **The moss of civilization**

I recently read an article in the *London Review of Books* that talked about how automation and the coming digitization of the economy were problematic for civilization. For all the ways the new technology would save time and money, it argued, it would also uproot many longstanding relationships in the workplace — the presence of secretaries and clerical staff, for example — that, however inefficient, nevertheless have the ancillary benefit of a certain warmth in human relations that are maintained over time. One reads arguments about the downside of our digital world all the time and this one didn't strike me as exceptional, except that it was weird to hear the word "secretary." Then I realized that the article was published in 1994 and it became much more interesting.

One line stood out, and I will quote from memory even if it's a bit off: The moss of civilization takes time to gather, and it needs a stable foundation on which to grow.

What he meant, I think, was that structures and systems that could be improved from an efficiency point of view have merits that are hard to perceive if all you are thinking about is efficiency, but these merits — the warmth of human interaction, or the way that places, however imperfect, gather meaning and significance over time — are valuable. Maybe invaluable. Which is like calling an artwork priceless — it doesn't mean it has no value, just the opposite. You couldn't match its value with money.

I have lived with this image for a few months, and though it doesn't pertain in any direct way to New Orleans or my time here, I can't help but ponder it in that light. There is a season for everything. A time to be born and a time to die. And a time to live in New Orleans. And to feel that a world that once seemed empty of anything familiar has become populated by people and places that have meaning.

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The Escape Artist, a *biography that won the New York City Book Award for Biography/Memoir*. He is a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker's Culture Desk*, *The New York Times* and *Travel + Leisure magazine*.

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