



Photo by Robert K. Wallace

On the Floodwall, March 12, 2011

(river at 54 feet and rising)

by Robert K. Wallace

Drawn to the river by the high water,
I was first surprised to see the Party Boat
higher than O'Fallon, turbulent brown
water through which fifteen barges
higher than the Party Boat are being
pushed upstream by the huge white
tug boat that finally fills the foot
of the street whose traffic light turns green.

Approaching the floodwall path, I look over
at last summer's sunflower porch,
now so empty I wonder if the house
has been sold. Similarly bare is the
Confederate flag house, the flag itself
either blown away or down for winter.
A black cat pads from the bare fence
to the parked SUV, whose burly owner
now walks out to claim his space.

At the neck of the wall the Party Boat
is way out in the river, its descending
ramp underwater nearly all the way
to the unseen shore, tops of the
telephone poles barely above the
rising waters, only one corner
left of the parking lot as the river road
and sloping grass sink out of sight.

Out in the river, far from the shore,
 as if by magic, a dirt island
 is now surrounded by water
 on all sides, perched on its steep
 downriver edge a Caterpillar tractor
 abandoned like a baby's toy,
 a shaper of the future ubiquitous
 city rendered ridiculous, having
 made a sandpile on which none can play.

The barge beyond the sandpile charges
 upstream as I walk in the same direction,
 people coming and going in the afternoon light,
 a woman, child, and tiny dog on the wall
 above the party house, itself still
 in winter hibernation mode, no signs
 of life either there or in the back
 of the willow-tree house, beneath
 hanging branches barely yellow-green.

Smoothly, still, running upriver, the
 tug pushes these fifteen barges—
 high, light, and empty—through the
 floodwater as if its surging current
 provided no resistance, a stark,
 healthy contrast to the abandoned
 tractor on the artificial mound
 trucked in by developers who will
 build upon the riverbank now unseen
 their own extreme excrescence.

Joggers, walkers, and bikers are
 filling this path to see the rushing
 waters rise against the wall that
 protects Dayton's citizens from
 the river its residents will no
 longer see, even from this path,
 once the development is built:
 condos, hotels, and old folks homes,
 "with a lovely mix of modern amenities,"
 they say, wi-fi everywhere,
 blocking the old city and its protective
 wall from a public river view.

Walking still with the tug boat, I reach
 my usual turnaround bench, the boat
 and barge filling the full turn of the river
 toward the Marina across from Rose Church,
 seen through the screen of cottonwood trees,
 the only trees still standing on the edge

of the shore, graceful trunks
 how holding against the rushing water
 that subsumes the whole width of the
 riverside bank from here to there.

How many floods, one wonders, have
 these cottonwoods endured, all their
 companions along a mile-long shore
 ripped away one weekend two years ago?
 Lonely enough as shoreline sentinels,
 they are now near heroic in their
 resistance to forces they've see before,
 their picturesque stability against
 the tug's empty cargo making my day.

Turning, finally, as the tug turns the corner,
 pulling my hat tight against the glare
 of the sun and surprising bursts of wind,
 I walk the public path home in a bath
 of beauty, human and natural,
 the female joggers who passed me
 one way now coming back the other,
 bikers, couples, kids and dogs,
 moving with or against me along
 the curve of the wall, all of us
 glittering in the face of the sun
 on the flooded waters, the tiara-
 topped tower a landmark at every turn.

Against the glare of the sun and
 the glory of the water the
 aforementioned tractor hardly
 matters now, the long inshore flank
 of its island of dirt now beautiful
 for the seam running through it,
 a fault line symbolic of man's
 overarching greed and short-sighted
 need to outdo nature, this the day
 of the devastating quake and tsunami
 in Japan, more prepared than we would be.

Closer in on the Party Boat
 the gangway to oblivion is
 even stranger in this glittering light.
 Looking toward Cincy's now-completed
 tower, I see something as noble and firm
 as that tugboat headed up-river,
 a vertical sliver of man's aspiration
 strong enough to stand as an anchor
 from any part of this undulating wall,

its already famous Lady Di tiara
 today glorified by bright silver glints
 across the whole breadth of this sunstruck river.

Turning the corner at the neck of the wall
 the silver surge is like molten metal
 on all sides of the cottonwoods
 far out in the river from what remains
 of Bellevue Beach Park, the dancing
 metallic glitter broken only by
 the solid black of the trees'
 dark shadows cast in my direction
 by the bright sun on the high water.

Reluctant to leave, I walk up and off
 the path, only to see a nice
 surprise on the sunflower porch,
 two guys I'd never seen unscreened
 in the summer, now out in the open
 air, taking in this special day,
 standing on a chairless porch
 above a bare front yard, more
 accessible than I'd ever seen them.

"You planning to plant sunflowers again?"

I ask.

"Yep. Sure are."

"Your friend up in Bellevue said something
 last fall about bamboo. You thinking of that,
 too?"

"Sure are. That's bamboo *there*," pointing
 to scrawny shoots near the gate of the fence.

"Will it grow all along the fence from there?"

"Sure will. Up and out."

"I love how you guys are screened in here,
 in the summer, watching the world go by.

Today you been to see the river?"

"Yes, pretty soon it will be up here
 close enough to do some fishin'."

"You fish?"

"Sure do."

"What's your favorite eatin' fish?"

"Croppie."

"Pond turtle."

"See you this summer. But then I guess maybe
 I won't, with all that'll be growin'."