

*THE
YELLOW
HOUSE*

Sarah M. Broom



c orsair

First published in the US in 2019 by Grove Atlantic
First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Corsair

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © 2019 by Sarah M. Broom

The moral right of the author has been asserted.
All rights reserved.

Kei Miller, excerpt from *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carcenet Press Ltd); Peter Turchi, excerpt from *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* (Trinity University Press); excerpt from *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, translated by Maria Jolas, copyright © 1958 by Presses Universitaires de France, translation copyright © 1964 by Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved; Tracy K. Smith, excerpt from “Ash” from *Wade in the Water*. Originally from the *New Yorker* (November 23, 2015). Copyright © 2015, 2018 by Tracy K. Smith. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc. on behalf of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, graywolfpress.org; LeAlan Jones, Public Domain; Yance Ford, excerpt from the film *Strong Island*; John Milton, excerpt from *Paradise Lost*. Public Domain; Unified New Orleans Plan, Public Domain; Lil Wayne, excerpt from AllHipHop.com interview in early 2006; Adrienne Rich, the lines from “Diving into the Wreck”. Copyright © 2016 by the Adrienne Rich Literary Trust. Copyright © 1973 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., from *Collected Poems: 1950–2012* by Adrienne Rich. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc; Joan Didion, excerpt from “In the Islands” from *The White Album* by Joan Didion. Copyright © 1979 by Joan Didion. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Sam Hamill, excerpt from *Narrow Road to the Interior: And Other Writings* (Shambhala Classics).

*Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright holders.
If there are any inadvertent omissions we apologise to those concerned, and
ask that you contact us so that we can correct any oversight as soon as possible.*

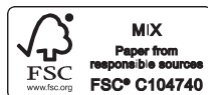
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

HBK ISBN: 978-1-4721-5557-3
TPB ISBN: 978-1-4721-5558-0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Corsair are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Corsair
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

for three women, with love and heart



Amelia "Lolo"



Auntie Elaine



Ivory Mae

From high up, fifteen thousand feet above, where the aerial photographs are taken, 4121 Wilson Avenue, the address I know best, is a minuscule point, a scab of green. In satellite images shot from higher still, my former street dissolves into the toe of Louisiana's boot. From this vantage point, our address, now mite size, would appear to sit in the Gulf of Mexico. Distance lends perspective, but it can also shade, misinterpret. From these great heights, my brother Carl would not be seen.

Carl, who is also my brother Rabbit, sits his days and nights away at 4121 Wilson Avenue at least five times a week after working his maintenance job at NASA or when he is not fishing or near to the water where he loves to be. Four thousand fifteen days past the Water, beyond all news cycles known to man, still sits a skinny man in shorts, white socks pulled up to his kneecaps, one gold picture frame around his front tooth.

Sometimes you can find Carl alone on our lot, poised on an ice chest, searching the view, as if for a sign, as if for a wonder. Or else, seated at a pecan-colored dining table with intricately carved legs, holding court. The table where Carl sometimes sits is on the spot where our living room used to be but where instead of floor there is green grass trying to grow.

See Carl gesturing with a long arm, if he feels like it, wearing dark shades even if it is night. See Rabbit with his legs crossed at the ankle, a long-legged man, knotted up.

I can see him there now, in my mind's eye, silent and holding a beer. Babysitting ruins. But that is not his language or sentiment; he would never betray the Yellow House like that.

Carl often finds company on Wilson Avenue where he keeps watch. Friends will arrive and pop their trunks, revealing coolers containing spirits on ice. "Help yourself, baby," they will say. If someone has to pee, they do it in what used to be our den. Or they use the bright-blue porta potty sitting at the back of the yard, where the shed once was. Now, this

plastic, vertical bathroom is the only structure on the lot. Written on its front in white block letters on black background: city of new orleans.

I have stacked twelve or thirteen history-telling books about New Orleans. *Beautiful Crescent; New Orleans, Yesterday and Today; New Orleans as It Was; New Orleans: The Place and the People; Fabulous New Orleans; New Orleans: A Guide to America's Most Interesting City*. So on and so forth. I have thumbed through each of these, past voluminous sections about the French Quarter, the Garden District, and St. Charles Avenue, in search of the area of the city where I grew up, New Orleans East. Mentions are rare and spare, afterthoughts. There are no guided tours to this part of the city, except for the disaster bus tours that became an industry after Hurricane Katrina, carting visitors around, pointing out the great destruction of neighborhoods that were never known or set foot in before the Water, except by their residents.

Imagine that the streets are dead quiet, and you lived on those dead quiet streets, and there is nothing left of anything you once owned. Those rare survivors who are still present on the scene, working in those skeletal byways, are dressed in blue disposable jumpsuits and wearing face masks to avoid being burned by the black mold that is everywhere in their homes, climbing up the walls, forming slippery abstract figures underfoot. While this is going on and you are wondering whether you will find remains of anything that you ever loved, tourists are passing by in an air-conditioned bus snapping images of your personal destruction. There is something affirming, I can see, in the acknowledgment by the tourists of the horrendous destructive act, but it still might feel like invasion. And anyway, I do not believe the tour buses ever made it to the street where I grew up.

In one of these piled books that describes the suburbs, New Orleans East is not included, but Jefferson Parish, which lies outside city bounds, and several cemeteries are. Cemeteries, as far as I know, cannot be counted as actual neighborhoods even though local lore describes aboveground tombs as houses of the dead.

On a detailed city map once given to me by Avis Rent a Car, the French Quarter has been shaded in light turquoise, magnified in a box at the bottom of the page. New Orleans East is cut off, a point beyond, a blank space on someone's mental map. This is perhaps a practical matter. New Orleans East is fifty times the size of the French Quarter, one-fourth of the city's developed surface. Properly mapped, it might swallow the page whole.

What the Avis map does not tell you is that to travel the seven miles from the French Quarter to the Yellow House in which I grew up, you would take Interstate 10 heading east. When this portion of the interstate opened in 1968, hundreds of great oaks along Claiborne Avenue, the black shopping district for my mother and grandmother, had been chopped down, their roots evicted. One hundred fifty-five houses were demolished to make way.

Driving the interstate, you will know that you are on track when you see signs indicating Vieux Carré final exit, but do not get off. Stay on.

After another four miles, you will arrive at the bridge we call the High Rise for the dramatic arc it makes over the Industrial Canal that connects the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain but exiles eastern New Orleans from the rest of the city. Being at the top of the High Rise feels like resting on the verge of discovery, but the descent is cruel and steep.

Exit suddenly at Chef Menteur, a four-lane highway built on an ancient high ridge once traversed by Native American tribes but that now carries cars all the way to Florida or Texas. Chef Menteur bifurcates the short, industrialized end of Wilson Avenue, where I grew up, from the longer residential end of mostly brick houses and of my former elementary school, originally named Jefferson Davis after the Confederate president before becoming Ernest Morial after the first black mayor of New Orleans. It is nameless now—a field of green grass bounded by a chain-link fence.

Even as I write this, I am troubled again by what it meant for us—me and my eleven siblings—to have to cross Chef Menteur Highway, which

was then and is now a sea of prostitution with cars pulling over, sometimes partway onto the sidewalk, creeping alongside you even if you were only a child on an errand; these were mostly men in cars, making deals.

Cars could drag you down Chef Menteur without realizing it, as one dragged my sister Karen when she was eight years old. Drivers in speeding cars self-destructed on this highway. Alvin, my childhood friend, would die in this way. Someone could grab and abduct you while you stood there on Chef Menteur's neutral ground, as we call medians. Or see you standing there when you did not want to be seen, as I would not, many years into young womanhood, when I avoided showing people the place where I lived. When I think of Chef Menteur Highway and of being cut off—from the other side of the street, from the city center, plain cut off—I think of all of this.

Chef Menteur was named after either a Choctaw Indian chief or a governor who lied too much. The name, translated from French, means “chief liar.” This is the poetry of New Orleans names. That city hall sits on a street named lost. Perdido.

Once you have exited onto Chef Menteur, drive one mile in the far-right lane. Along the way you will pass a Chevron gas station, an auto parts store, and blank billboards advertising nothing at all. You will find yourself in what has been described in articles and books appearing in the eighties and nineties as the “true land of no return,” afflicted with “overgrown yards, outdated billboards,” where “weary 1960s-era commercial architecture commingle with cyclone-fenced lots . . . and mundane 1970s residential architecture.” Where “a general malaise hangs over.”

You will pass run-down apartment complexes on your left and on your right, in areas that used to be called the Grove, the Goose, and the Gap, where growing up, my brothers made allegiances and enemies and where a bullet grazed my brother Darryl's face in the middle of a school dance. You will pass an emptied-out building that used to be a bank where Mom and I visited the drive-through and where the teller passed lollipops with the deposit slip. You will go by Causey's Country Kitchen,

the soul food restaurant where, after the Water, a luxury bus from the parking lot lodged itself into the lunch counter.

Closer to our street, you will see Natal's Supermarket, which is really only a corner store, where Mom sent me as a kid to buy "liver cheese" for one dollar a pound. Years later, a graduate student at Berkeley, I would discover that the liver cheese we paid practically nothing for was dressed up, called *pâté*, and cost nine dollars a pound.

At the light where Wilson Avenue intersects Chef, turn right at the foundation that once held a tire shop that used to be a laundromat where my older siblings survived Hurricane Betsy in 1965.

After you make that right turn onto the short end of Wilson Avenue, look left and you will see an empty lot where the gas station used to be and where Mr. Spanata from Italy built his family's compound. Gone now. Next door to that is the cottage where Ms. Schmidt from uptown lived before my siblings Michael and Karen and Byron rented it, at different times, but where no one lives now.

Next door to that (all the houses on the short end except for one were on the left side of the street) is a concrete slab representing the house where the Davis family lived before getting fed up with the short end of Wilson and moving elsewhere.

Then you will come upon Ms. Octavia's cream-colored shotgun house that now belongs to her granddaughter Rachelle—the only remaining legal inhabitant of the street—before finally arriving at what used to be our Yellow House.

My mother, Ivory Mae, bought this house in 1961 when she was nineteen years old. It was her first and only house. Within its walls, my mother made her world. Twelve children passed through its doors: descendants of Ivory Mae Broom and her first husband, Edward Webb; of Ivory Mae Broom and Simon Broom; and of Simon Broom and his first wife, Carrie Broom. We are Simon Jr., Deborah, Valeria, Eddie, Michael, Darryl, Carl, Karen, Troy, Byron, Lynette, and Sarah. We span the generations, born to every decade, beginning in the forties. I arrived ten hours before the eighties.

When you are babyest in a family with eleven older points of view, eleven disparate rallying cries, eleven demanding and pay-attention-to-me voices—all variations of the communal story—developing your own becomes a matter of survival. There can be, in this scenario, no neutral ground.

Yet feelings of transgression linger, the conviction that by writing down the history of the people who have come before me—who, in a way, compose me—I have upended the natural order of things.

When I call my eldest brother, Simon, at his home in North Carolina to explain all the things I want to know and why, he expresses worry that by writing this all down here, I will disrupt, unravel, and tear down everything the Broom family has ever built. He would like, now, to live in the future and forget about the past. “There is a lot we have subconsciously agreed that we don’t want to know,” he tells me. When he asks about my project, I am imprecise, lofty, saying I am writing about “architecture and belonging and space.”

“It is a problem when you are talking too much,” he says. I take his sentence down in my notebook at the moment he says it, just as he says it. I have not added a single word. Nor have I taken anything away.

In New Orleans, we tell direction by where we are in relation to the Mississippi River, in relation to water. Our house was bounded by water. The Mississippi snaked three miles to the back of us. Less than a mile away, west and south, were the Industrial Canal and its interlinking Intracoastal Waterway. Lake Pontchartrain sat two miles north. To the far east lay the Rigolets, a strait connecting Lake Pontchartrain to Lake Borgne, a brackish lagoon that opens into the Gulf of Mexico. We were surrounded by boats, barges, and trains; ingresses and egresses—a stone’s throw from the Old Road, which is what we called Old Gentilly Road. My father, Simon Broom, took the Old Road to his job at NASA. Later, my brother Carl took the Old Road to his job at NASA. Same road, same maintenance job, different men. But the road is impassable now because at a certain point, illegal tire and trash dumps block the way. The train tracks perched

above the Old Road were laid in the 1870s for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, trains that passed almost nightly in my growing up. Their clacking and roar were the sounds outside my window as I tried to sleep. The Old Road could, if clear, lead you to the Michoud neighborhood, where Vietnamese immigrants settled after the Vietnam War; or to Resthaven cemetery, where my best childhood friend, Alvin, is buried; or to NASA's manufacturing plant, where rocket boosters were built for the Apollo space mission but where Hollywood fantasies are conjured now, its unused acres frequently leased as movie sets.

By bringing you here, to the Yellow House, I have gone against my learnings. *You know this house not all that comfortable for other people*, my mother was always saying.

Before it was the Yellow House, the only house I knew, it was a green house, the house my eleven siblings knew. The facts of the world before me inform, give shape and context to my own life. The Yellow House was witness to our lives. When it fell down, something in me burst. My mother is always saying, *Begin as you want to end*. But my beginning precedes me. Absences allow us one power over them: They do not speak a word. We say of them what we want. Still, they hover, pointing fingers at our backs. No place to go now but into deepground.