

On Matthew, Conroy, and Other Forces of Nature

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 18 October 2016 12:05 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 October 2016 05:06



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For this issue, I had planned to write about *A Lowcountry Heart*, the wondrous new collection of essays by the late Pat Conroy. (After almost six months, that phrase still looks outrageous to me in print. “The late Pat Conroy.” Every fiber of my being resists that sequence of words.)

This compilation of never-before-published letters, speeches, journal entries and blog musings is making its debut this weekend at the inaugural Pat Conroy Literary Festival here in Beaufort, and it seemed like a natural column topic.

But then came Matthew. And our escape to Alabama. And the neighbor’s giant water oak that crash-landed in our backyard, taking our shed and our deck and a corner of our roof down with it. Oh, how the earth must have trembled when it fell. How the sound must have split the air, even in the roar of that furious storm. How glad I am we weren’t here to feel the thud in our bones. Had that moss-bearded behemoth landed a few feet from where it did, our little house in Pigeon Point would now be history. Had we decided to stay instead of go, one (or more) of us

might be history, too.

I have lots of friends who *did* stay. Riders on the storm. What can I say? I gravitate toward ornery rebels. I'm not sure whose Matthew Experience was more harrowing
– theirs or mine.

I jest. They win. But that late Friday night/early Saturday morning was no picnic for me, either, as I lay in bed beside a peacefully slumbering husband – traitor! – glued to my smart phone, reeling between weariness, worry, agitation and deep panic. Facebook allowed (forced?) me to weather the storm vicariously through my crazy-reckless-brave-bodacious friends and neighbors who, for various reasons – which I am *not* judging! – decided to stick around and stick it out.

I couldn't look away from my phone and I sure couldn't sleep. Hundreds of miles from Beaufort, safe and sound in my parents' house on the banks of the Tennessee River, I wanted to be with my Lowcountry storm riders. I *needed* to be. I couldn't let them go through it alone. A *hurricane*
? Certainly not!

So I careened around Facebook, from timeline to timeline to timeline. I read about how loud it was out there. Some said the storm "screamed" and "screeched." Others said it was more like a freight train right on top of them. I knew it when the power went out for most folks. (Around 4:30 am, I think?) Heard about the "green flashes" as transformers exploded. One friend described the water rising up the front steps of her house, where she was hunkered down with her aging parents, and into her backyard from the marsh. "We are completely surrounded," she wrote, "and it's still rising." My heart stopped in my chest. "It's getting really scary out there," wrote another friend. "I am totally freaking out," wrote another.

So was I. Totally. And still my husband slept.

The next day was a tragi-comedy of errors for us exiles in Alabama. A friend texted me a couple of pics of our house around 9 am, taken from the street. "Your neighborhood's a mess, but your house looks good. I can't see any structural damage," she wrote. (Or something like

that. I'm paraphrasing like crazy.) Whew! What a relief. My sister, also a refugee, got similar news about her house in Charleston, and now we could enjoy our family reunion! My storm-riding friends were safe, our houses were sound, and the worst was over. Time to get this party started!

Famous last words, right?

A couple of hours later, another friend texted to say our neighbor's tree had fallen across our backyard, and looked like it had "clipped the corner" of our roof. Well, okay. This was worse than our original report, but still not so bad. Our friend hadn't gotten a very good picture – said she couldn't get into our yard with that tree – and the one she sent looked fairly tame. Just a bit of gutter hanging off the roof, it seemed. We continued to count ourselves lucky.

But later that afternoon, our *Lowcountry Weekly* colleague Amanda and her husband Scott – a police officer who knows how to climb around natural disaster areas and not die – sent us photographs that revealed a much more serious situation. The most gargantuan tree you can possibly imagine was sprawled across our backyard – filling it up in every direction – completely crushing our deck and our shed. (Actually, "shed" isn't quite the right word. It's a nice outbuilding – with power and a window and even a cute window

box

– that's painted and trimmed like a miniature version of our house. It

was

all that, anyway. Now it's mostly rubble.)

But even those pictures didn't convey the apocalyptic scenario we returned to a couple

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[here](#), And so very Conroy.

[Baptist Ramenberger](#)