

VFS Episode #11: Standing in the rising water [publishes March 27, 2020]

Credits:

Host and creator: Lewis Raven Wallace

Producer: Ramona Martinez

Music: Dogbotic and Podington Bear

Logo and Kickstarter art: Billy Dee

Special thanks: Scalawag Magazine

LINKS:

[COVID-19 Mutual Aid Fund for LGBTQI+ BIPOC Folks](#)

[“Neighbors helping neighbors: a list of coronavirus mutual aid efforts in the South,”](#) by Carly Berlin, Scalawag Magazine, March 20, 2020

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven Wallace (University of Chicago Press, 2019)

[Mutual Aid 101](#) by Mariame Kaba and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

[“Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid & How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus”](#) Democracy Now! March 20, 2020)

[“How the Pandemic Will End”](#) by Ed Yong, The Atlantic, March 25, 2020

[Chicago COVID-19 Hardship and Help Page](#), on transformative spaces blog by Kelly Hayes

[“I’m Asking Nicely: Rent Freeze Now.”](#) by Jamie Hood, Teen Vogue, March 25, 2020

Music credits:

- **Linen** by Podington Bear
- **Gnossienne 3** by Podington Bear
- **Gnossienne 4** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky

TRANSCRIPT:

Lewis Raven Wallace: Hey folks...this is Lewis, just checking in. How...are you? You okay? So much has changed since we last talked...In general, this show The View from Somewhere doesn't do news reporting ourselves...we talk *about* the news and how folks are reporting it. But all of our realities are very different right now, so we are working up a special episode that takes on some pandemic-specific questions and issues. I expect it will actually be weirdly positive—about things journalists are doing right,

and things we can all do to encourage solidarity and mutual aid in times of crisis. There's a lot of amazing and important journalism happening right now. So: That will be out soon, although soon might feel like forever, judging from the way time has felt recently. For now I have a few things I wanted to share with you and also just wanted to let you know we're still here...

The first thing is a thought, or more like a feeling. I have an essay out this week from Scalawag Magazine about possibility. About how in this moment, we can and must actually claim an expanded sense of imagination and what is possible. Obviously, conditions on the ground right now are really bad...people are out of work, people are getting sick, and things are verging on chaos in our healthcare system and social order overall. But there's also suddenly all this free stuff, and we're seeing stops on evictions, prisoners being released, food being given away. Someone pointed out to me this week that Duke Energy, the big bad power company in our area, is ceasing to shut off people's electricity for nonpayment. Basically, all the things our communities needed but were told were impossible...it appears they are possible when more people recognize the crisis that's already there, and recognize the need for mutual aid and collectivity as a response. Even fucking Duke Energy is nothing without...people.

So, on that note, I just wanted to provide a personal note of encouragement to all of you, because I trust that you are already doing your part to support your own communities and to imagine and manifest a better world. This happens at every level, our relationships, the stories we tell, our small daily actions. And I really want to highlight that it's not just about what you do physically... our imaginations, our ideas, and our care for one another matter SO MUCH in moments of potentially revolutionary change. I am hopeful that our networks of activated people ready to live into a world of solidarity and mutual aid will rise up in this moment and show *everyone* that this world is possible.

Here's a quote I have always loved from poet Muriel Rukeyser, from her 1949 book *The Life of Poetry*.

"Now we turn to memory, we search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our arms in such a moment. If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them." -Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 1949

<<MUSIC: **Linen by Podington Bear**>>

Today's show links on view from somewhere dot com will also provide connections to mutual aid networks and ways to plug in or to get help and support that you may need right now.

Okay, now on to the second segment of today's short show—a reading from my book *The View from Somewhere*, the final passage. I recorded it awhile ago and it just felt so relevant, as I'm listening to these COVID-19 newscasts and especially the press conferences which...holy shit y'all.

<<MUSIC: **Gnossienne 3 by Podington Bear**>>

Excerpt from The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity: Recently I had a dream full of rising water. I was on a ship with my dad and a whole lot of other people, and the ship hit an iceberg. The water was cold and high, and the ship was sinking, like the Titanic. There was a way out, which involved scrambling across the deck of the ship to the bow, jumping onto lifeboats. But as it started to tip and go down, the bow extending upward, lots of people were still caught below deck. There were dozens of children down there, and we knew it. My father and I realized we could save ourselves by following everyone, scrambling and jumping, but instead we headed back down to help. Right as we approached the door to go below the deck, an automated metal gate started to come down. Someone was locking the kids inside the ship to drown. In my dream, my father and I ran toward the gate, wedging our bodies between the gate and the floor and screaming. We tried to hold it open, but we weren't strong enough. Then I woke up.

We've all wondered what we would do in the worst conditions—war, disaster, slavery, prison. Would we be empathic and kind, protective and suspicious? Would we stand up to tyrannical authority or back down, maybe to protect ourselves or our children? Would we protest if it were our children locked in the bottom of the ship? Who would we be, faced with the most limited of choices? Would we stand to the side, looking on as people died? What if it was our job to be a journalist, and that job instructed us to stand to the side?

When the climate changes—politically or otherwise—we come to see ourselves anew. I remember Hurricane Katrina like it was yesterday. I was in Texas in a cheap motel, healing from a surgery when the storm hit. I was pumped up on Percocet, reading Truman Capote and watching the TV news, an unfamiliar treat to me. I remember seeing the newscasters standing waist-deep in the water, the detritus of people's homes and livelihoods floating by. I watched as one of those newscasters broke down in tears, trying to rattle off the numbers of homes underwater, the numbers of people evacuated, the numbers of dead bodies out there floating, in a disaster that was preventable and human-made. I remember clearly the images that emerged later of President George W. Bush flying over New Orleans in Air Force One, never touching down to see the human suffering. At the motel where I was staying, stranded people showed up from the Gulf Coast for long stays.

<<MUSIC: Gnossienne 4 by Podington Bear>>

I wondered what I would have done if I were caught in that rising water, if it were my job to tell that story? Could I have stood there in the revolting floodwater full of toxins and talked clearly, dispassionately, like Korva Coleman giving the day's headlines? I imagine myself, the NPR newscaster I'd once hoped to be, standing in the Louisiana humidity, soaked through and telling it straight: It was a Category 5 hurricane. Thousands displaced. Hundreds dead. Here is the temperature. It smells like a dead body. The Dow is up, the S&P 500 is up. Let's do the numbers: The costs of property damage are in the billions. The levees broke in over fifty places. One thousand eight hundred thirty-three dead, four hundred thousand displaced. A dog's body is floating by now, next to a torn-off trailer door.

At the time, 2005 was the warmest year on record, but the record keeps being updated. Years later, reporters stopped having to “balance” stories about climate change with climate deniers. I imagine the climate like that rising water, testing our empathy as we grit our teeth and give the news: It’s hotter still this year, and hotter again. We’re hearing reports of flooding and wildfires. We’re hearing reports of drought and displacement. Let’s do the numbers: twenty-five million to one billion people could be displaced by climate change by 2050, one study finds.

How do we balance a story about the sixth extinction, the end of the world? How do we make ourselves human again, after turning the whole world into an object, holding it at a distance, telling its stories without letting our voices crack? If I’m standing in the rising water, am I too close to the story? What does it mean to show vulnerability when you’re the one after the truth, the one gathering the facts?

Stories shape reality and suggest possibility. They can spark curiosity or foreclose it, drowning us in facts and figures. It is possible to make the world new through stories, but it’s also possible to create a world we don’t want. During Hurricane Katrina, a lot of the reporting focused on “looters” and violence, turned away from stories about dozens and then thousands of deaths, dozens and then thousands of people helping each other survive. I imagine myself on the NPR newscast, voice cracking. Nearly two thousand people died here. I’m standing in this water. Hundreds of thousands still displaced.

It smells like sewage and death. There is a dog’s body, a trailer door floating past. There’s someone on her way to help; there’s someone on that roof, yelling. What can we do to make this picture different? How can we stop the water rising, hold open the gates so no one is trapped inside? In my little fantasy, my newscaster job doesn’t last long, but it’s okay. I really don’t have time to wait around for the climate to change.

<<MUSIC: Tango Mécanique (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky>>

Lewis: Alright folks. That’s it for today. If you want to read my whole book, you can still get it, but not directly from the distributor—the University of Chicago distribution center is shut down due to coronavirus. Support local sellers by searching for it on AbeBooks dot com, or get an e-book wherever you get your e-books. We’ll be back soon with a special episode where we revisit coverage of the AIDS crisis in light of coronavirus; discuss how some rad community-based journalists are covering coronavirus; and ask what key stories still aren’t being told.

Get in touch with me on twitter at lewispants, or on our website, view from somewhere dot com where there are also links and resources for mutual aid. This podcast is produced by me, Lewis Raven Wallace, along with Ramona Martinez, and distributed by Critical Frequency. Our in-house artist is Billy Dee, and our theme music is by Dogbotic. The View from Somewhere is made possible by our Kickstarter supporters—we’re so grateful. Stay safe out there, friends, and we’ll be back with more soon!