



Source: Ellen Knickmeyer, 'Israel to block new refugees from Darfur', *Washington Post online*, 20/08/07.

Tags: [home](#), [desert](#), [refugees](#), [water](#)

Writer/s: [Emily Lundin](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

The boat glided through the movable carpet of green. Our guide's hunting dog barked from the helm, and the skiff veered left, heading directly for a leafless tree. I squeezed J's forearm. He winced and withdrew. As we thudded into the tree, water splashed over the lip, and our microcosm rocked into chaos. The dog went wild with yelping. 'I got a real treat for y'all!' Using our bodies as support, the guide moved across the boat. We scrambled, wild-eyed, toward the rudder to balance his shifting weight.

A month ago, on my way back home to this swamp city, I passed refugees heading in the opposite direction. They were going to the desert town to sleep on cots in a high school gym. Escaping to dry land is biblical, time-worn. I was in the desert attending university when the storm hit back home, so I guess I didn't qualify then as a refugee, nor now, as returning refugee.

The desert sky was like a blue bowl. It was every superlative and the widest icon of the most powerful —freedom, possibility, cornflower blue, and so on. But I found the bowl empty. Possibility isn't an open space, it's as crowded as a brain or a family tree. And family trees just reminded me of live oaks, uprooted and poisoned. And reminded me more of this one family who climbed in their attic to avoid the storm surge and drowned there, under the roof.

I wanted to go home: watermarked houses and spray-painted numbers on porches. Death was proof of life.

They say our city is like a bowl. But the bowl is full of bodies. Abandoned dogs float on rooftops. People can't climb up the sides. The swamp is the lip of the bowl. Our nation's army can't get in. Black people are stealing and killing. White people are starving and being raped. The president's eyes water in sympathy from his airplane. The parts about the bowl are true, though.

An old friend, D, invited me home to make a film about our underwater city. A car was in a swimming pool. Boats wedged into trees. His home was fine, in the oldest part of the city, and the water had receded, as it does in those impossible cities in the Old World, built on gathered logs. Someone told me that pets, like children, make a house a home. So I promised my boyfriend J that we'd get a dog if he'd leave Germany for at least a little while and help me back home.

In the desert, I could hardly think. Bunker-like buildings breathed on me. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't complete any of my classes. Even when I closed the door, the sun entered, like water or rats. There was never a shadow. Thoughts need hiding places to flourish, like mould.

D and I thought it'd be good to shoot part of the documentary in the swamp, and we needed a lively guide. I used the occasion of J's arrival to take a tour in a skiff. The guide asked rhetorically if we weren't from around

there. Explaining my origins would have come across as an argument.

I abandoned the anticipated topic of wetland preservation versus control. This woolly man was in charge, not me. He caught me staring at the black hair sprouting from his Hawaiian shirt. 'Lemme tell you about me. I leave three buttons unbuttoned, folks. Top button says to the ladies: tie me up, but don't tie me down. Second goes: please ask me about my two-finger rule...Third says: I don't mind hair and I like heading down there!' Screen-ready.

J's mouth opened. *Don't ask about the two finger rule*, I silently begged. He shifted his perpetual cigarette to thumb and index finger, mirroring our guide, and inhaled, then returned to the scenery. He smiled at the cypress knees and said they looked like mine. He got along well with the hunting dog, though he preferred German shepherds. 'I could never have one in my country because of all the associations, but maybe here?' The New World all over again, he almost said. 'You'll make a movie and I'll walk the dog. This is amazing. What fun!'

J said he loved this place because it represented the last vestiges of European tradition. I didn't get a chance to argue with that because the guide flicked his cig into the swamp and the dog yelped at that tree. And then that mini-crash and the promise of a surprise. He ordered J to hold the dog while he reached into a hole in the tree.

One, two, three, soft thuds in our skiff. 'Baby Nutrea,' he explained. 'Water rats. Mothers get as big as a dog.' He reached in the hole again for four, five, six, seven fist-sized bundles of wiry fur. 'Watch this.' He dropped them like riches and laughed so loud, the leafless trees felt hairy and close around us. 'Go!' yelled our guide, and the dog arched free of J, screaming like a tossed infant. He attacked the rodents with the force of an entire pack. The Nutrea scrambled unsuccessfully toward the boat's lip, rolling over each other, back in. The hound bit, then withdrew, killing them slowly. Their bodies were fountains of blood.

For the first time all day, I turned on the camera. Everything in me tightened. Blood splashed on my foot. The dog banged its head against my leg. I was solid; I'd get the shot. J's t-shirt was speckled with blood. The dog snarled, ripped open a Nutrea and dropped the beating, living thing at its master's feet. I moved to accommodate the composition: that clotted red, thick as family, smeared and dripping, Pollock-like, down the aluminum. My blue jeans and J's sneakers. The spotted dog, that tropical man.

I wanted to go home, but that was impossible. I was already there.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Emily Lundin.*