**1 Dead in the Attic by Chris Rose** (from a collection of daily columns by a New Orleans Times-Picayune journalist written in the months following Katrina.)

*Eliot Kamenitz/The Times-Picayune*Rescue workers' scribbled code records a grim tally at 2214 St. Roch Ave. in New Orleans, Nov. 9, 2005.

I live on The Island, where much has the appearance of Life Goes On. Gas stations, bars, pizza joints, joggers, strollers, dogs, churches, shoppers, neighbors, even garage sales.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Sometimes trash and mail service, sometimes not. It sets to mind a modicum of complacency that maybe everything is all right.

But I have this terrible habit of getting into my car every two or three days and driving into the Valley Down Below, that vast wasteland below sea level that was my city, and it's mind-blowing A) how vast it is and B) how wasted it is.

My wife questions the wisdom of my frequent forays into the massive expanse of blown-apart lives and property that local street maps used to call Gentilly, Lakeview, the East and the Lower 9th. She fears that it contributes to my unhappiness and general instability and I suspect she is right.

Perhaps I should just stay on the stretch of safe, dry land Uptown where we live and try to move on, focus on pleasant things, quit making myself miserable, quit reliving all those terrible things we saw on TV that first week.

That's advice I wish I could follow, but I can't. I am compelled for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. And so I drive.

I drive around and try to figure out those Byzantine markings and symbols that the cops and the National Guard spray-painted on all the houses around here, cryptic communications that tell the story of who or what was or wasn't inside the house when the floodwater rose to the ceiling.

In some cases, there's no interpretation needed. There's one I pass on St. Roch Avenue in the 8th Ward at least once a week. It says: "1 dead in attic."

That certainly sums up the situation. No mystery there.

It's spray-painted there on the front of the house and it probably will remain spray-painted there for weeks, months, maybe years, a perpetual reminder of the untimely passing of a citizen, a resident, a New Orleanian.

One of us.

You'd think some numerical coding could have conveyed this information on this house, so that I -- we all -- wouldn't have to drive by places like this every day and be reminded: "1 dead in attic."

I have seen plenty of houses in worse shape than the one where 1 Dead in Attic used to live, houses in Gentilly and the Lower 9th that yield the most chilling visual displays in town: low-rider shotgun rooftops with holes that were hacked away from the inside with an ax, leaving small, splintered openings through which people sought escape.

Imagine if your life came to that point, and remained there, on display, all over town for us to see, day after day.

Amazingly, those rooftops are the stories with happy endings. I mean, they got out, right?

But where are they now? Do you think they have trouble sleeping at night?

The occasional rooftops still have painted messages: "HELP US." I guess they had paint cans in their attic. And an ax, like Margaret Orr and Aaron Broussard always told us we should have if we weren't going to evacuate.

Some people thought Orr and Broussard were crazy. Alarmists. Extremists. Well, maybe they are crazy. But they were right.

Perhaps 1 Dead in Attic should have heeded this advice. But judging from the ages on the state's official victims list, he or she was probably up in years. And stubborn. And unafraid. And now a statistic.

I wonder who eventually came and took 1 Dead in Attic away. Who knows? Hell, with the way things run around here -- I wonder if anyone has come to take 1 Dead in Attic away.

And who claimed him or her? Who grieved over 1 Dead in Attic and who buried 1 Dead in Attic?

Was there anyone with him or her at the end and what was the last thing they said to each other? How did 1 Dead in Attic spend the last weekend in August of the year 2005?

What were their plans? Maybe dinner at Mandich on St. Claude? Maybe a Labor Day family reunion in City Park -- one of those raucous picnics where everybody wears matching T-shirts to mark the occasion and they rent a DJ and a SpaceWalk and a couple of guys actually get there the night before to secure a good, shady spot?

I wonder if I ever met 1 Dead in Attic. Maybe in the course of my job or maybe at a Saints game or maybe we once stood next to each other at a Mardi Gras parade or maybe we once flipped each other off in a traffic jam.

1 Dead in Attic could have been my mail carrier, a waitress at my favorite restaurant or the guy who burglarized my house a couple years ago. Who knows?

My wife, she's right. I've got to quit just randomly driving around. This can't be helping anything.

But I can't stop. I return to the Valley Down Below over and over, looking for signs of progress in all that muck, some sign that things are getting better, that things are improving, that we don't all have to live in a state of abeyance forever but -- you know what?

I just don't see them there.

I mean, in the 8th Ward, tucked down there behind St. Roch Cemetery, life looks pretty much like it did when the floodwater first receded 10 weeks ago, with lots of cars pointing this way and that, kids' yard toys caked in mire, portraits of despair, desolation and loss. And hatchet holes in rooftops.

But there's something I've discovered about the 8th Ward in this strange exercise of mine: Apparently, a lot of Mardi Gras Indians are from there. Or were from there; I'm not sure what the proper terminology is.

On several desolate streets that I drive down, I see where some folks have returned to a few of the homes and they haven't bothered to put their furniture and appliances out on the curb -- what's the point, really? -- but they have retrieved their tattered and muddy Indian suits and sequins and feathers and they have nailed them to the fronts of their houses.

The colors of these displays is startling because everything else in the 8th is gray. The streets, the walls, the cars, even the trees. Just gray.

So the oranges and blues and greens of the Indian costumes are something beautiful to behold, like the first flowers to bloom after the fallout. I don't know what the significance of these displays is, but they hold a mystical fascination for me.

They haunt me, almost as much as the spray paint on the front of a house that says 1 Dead in Attic. They look like ghosts hanging there. They are reminders of something. Something very New Orleans.

Do these memorials mean these guys -- the Indians -- are coming back? I mean, they have to, don't they? Where else could they do what they do?

And -- maybe this is a strange time to ask -- but who are these guys, anyway? Why do they do what they do with all those feathers and beads that take so much time and money to make? What's with all the Big Chief and Spy Boy role-playing?

As many times as I have reveled in their rhythmic, poetic and sometimes borderline absurd revelry in the streets of our city, I now realize that if you asked me to explain the origins and meaning of the Mardi Gras Indians -- I couldn't do it.

I have no clue. And that makes me wish I'd been paying more attention for the past 20 years. I could have learned something.

I could have learned something about a people whose history is now but a sepia mist over back-of-town streets and neighborhoods that nobody's ever heard of and where nobody lives and nothing ever happens anymore; a freeze frame still life in the air, a story of what we once were.