My Mother is a Hurricane

by

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Introduction: The Hurricane and The Story

I type “The Lower Ninth Ward, Louisiana” into Google Earth and scroll the date back until it reads “August 30, 2005.” For a moment, the screen is just a pixelated blur of blues, greens, yellows, and browns. When it focuses, I am looking at expansive blue. The neat lines of the Industrial Canal, which stretches from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River, are now the jagged white edges of a suspended wave. The houses of the Upper Ninth Ward to the southwest of the canal and the houses of the Lower Ninth Ward to the southeast point in every direction, unmoored from the grid of their streets. There are days that come before this date and days that come after, each with its own image. I flip the date to today, October 27, 2013, and then back again, watching the water come and go. I hold down the zoom button until my computer starts humming with the effort and all I can see are large chunks of color on the screen. I can’t get any closer. This is my image of Hurricane Katrina.

While the visual data of Google Earth, stored along with every other day for the last ten years, allows me to see the event of Hurricane Katrina, I cannot imagine it. A Californian, I worry about earthquakes but have never cracked open the emergency supply trunk in my backyard. I can picture the chaos before a natural disaster: cars fill the highways and empty shelves line the grocery stores. I can picture the havoc after a natural disaster: houses ripped apart, trees uprooted, the streets flooded. But I cannot know the sound of an unforgiving torrent of wind and water

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1 Google only released Google Earth to the public two months before Hurricane Katrina, after acquiring it from Keyhole Inc., a company funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA): before that June 28, 2005, little detail exists beyond the basic contours of land, water, green: “Keyhole Inc.” Find the Best. http://technology-acquisitions.findthebest.com/l/15/Keyhole-Inc
against my windows or know the fear that everything I love and understand could be taken away from me in a couple of hours: I cannot access the event itself. The talk about Hurricane Katrina, the news reports, the statistics, the photographs, further separate me, allowing me to classify the occurrence neatly under the heading of these familiar narratives –allowing me to forget. The goal of this essay is to empower a different story about Hurricane Katrina, one that will make it forever raw and relevant.

My primary text is Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones*, a 2011 National Book Award Winner, which depicts the localized story of one family’s experience of living through Hurricane Katrina. The goal of my thesis is to show my readers the role that literature plays in articulating and shaping a dynamic relationship between human beings and the earth. By focusing upon *Salvage the Bones*, I propose that literary fiction is particularly adept at re-imagining and redefining this relationship. I will argue that Ward’s rendering of Hurricane Katrina, its specificity and power, demonstrates a use of language that expresses a human experience that still manages to allow this event to be chaotic and devastating, barely containable in words.

What are the most common narratives about Hurricane Katrina and how does our language limit what can be said and imagined? Two narratives emerge –one ecological and the other sociological. The first: due to our unsustainable reliance on fossil fuels and extractive practices, the earth’s climate is changing, its destructive capacity elevating the need for better technology and more forceful storm preparedness. The second: the divisions of land and urban neighborhoods drawn across racial and socioeconomic lines have made poorer, minority communities
disproportionately exposed to natural catastrophes. Additional conversations exist that bridge the distance between these two (e.g., that of environmental justice), but primarily they are polarized: either the event was human caused with ecological effects or else it was caused by nature with human effects. Clear from this juxtaposition is a larger binary between the human and the natural that pervades our language and our thought. Yet, a hurricane wreaks havoc on both nature and society, challenging our predetermined discourses to fully capture the causes and effects of Hurricane Katrina. I will show how Ward’s language in *Salvage the Bones* addresses both of these realms of thought at the same time, uniting them to tell one story.

Feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood, in her piece *Nature in the Active Voice*, delineates the prevalence of this nature/society binary in science and even environmentalism and frames the language of fiction as the medium best suited for the work of environmental ethics. Plumwood names a series of interrelated dualisms that have emerged in Western society that have resulted from the “reductionism” of science: the input from our minds is credible and that from our bodies is not; human beings can craft a sensible reality and nature cannot (Plumwood, 37). Nature thus becomes the “dead matter” that can be conquered by any set of ideas including those in environmentalism, religion, and science. Within conservationism, Plumwood delineates the two lines of thought that have emerged: shallow ecology, which claims that natural resources exist solely for human use, and deep ecology, which insists upon their inherent value. Plumwood claims that both assume a distinction between humans and nature that must be reimagined: by setting “nature” apart, it becomes possible to dominate it. Plumwood introduces these limitations of
environmentalism to exemplify how even a field that attempts to protect and advocate for the natural world struggles linguistically to consider it a regenerative, autonomous, self-creative force. She advocates for language capable of restoring agency to inanimate, nonhuman, things: fiction, she argues, can acknowledge and begin to grapple with all that we do not know about the functioning of the world we live in and its various inhabitants. But Plumwood is foremost a philosopher --what did this project look like when taken on by a novelist, creative non-fiction writer, poet, or a literary critic?

In order to unpack Salvage the Bones, I had to delve deeply into literary criticism, to zoom in at the micro-level in order to see how Ward unites a narrative of human beings and nature in one fictional world. My analysis focuses on how Ward defies the conventions of various literary devices in order to break the nature/society binary. Particularly, I explore metaphor, personification, and prosopopoeia, all of which Ward challenges and remakes with meticulous craft in order to give both the persons and the hurricane agency in her text. A comparison with William Faulkner As I Lay Dying, which Ward explicitly names as an inspiration to her work, serves to illuminate aspects of her linguistic choices.

This essay provides a lens through which to look at Salvage the Bones and to show how the stories that we tell of ourselves and our world can help us to reimagine and redefine a more sustainable environmental ethic. One way to define a new relationship with the earth is to reconsider the language that we use and to reimagine our questions, rather than to limit ourselves to those that preexist. I will try to do this
text justice with my choice of questions and by analyzing the rich and inspired answers I found within its pages

**Plot Summary**: everything you need to know about *Salvage the Bones*:

The novel does not begin with a street address, a city, or a year. It does not begin with the word “Katrina.” Throughout the twelve chapters of the text, which each chronicles a single day in the lives of the characters, the hurricane builds as an “absent presence” unnamed until chapter six and unseen until chapter eleven. The narrative opens with a single family, living on a property set upon the fictional yet distinct landscape of rural Mississippi. Esch Baptiste, 15, lives with her three brothers and her Daddy “in this gap in the woods” her grandfather “cleared and built on that we now call the Pit” (1). The father plays a small role in the story that Esch tells, but it is his voice that introduces and develops the parallel narrative of the growing hurricane in the Gulf: “The storm, it has a name now. Like the worst, she’s a woman. Katrina” (124). With bottle in hand, her father has his children filling jugs of water, storing the cabinets with Top Ramen, reinforcing the windows. But they are used to storms and obey the bark of his sporadic orders without any sense of urgency. Instead, the missing center of the family, their deceased mother, governs the memories and the actions of these characters. Throughout the novel, Ward interweaves the narrative of the loss of the biological mother, who died giving birth, with the Hurricane’s building force. In the climactic scene of the storm’s devastation, Ward collapses the figures of these two mothers, rendering the storm human and the mother a force of destruction and creation. Three tropes –mothering, building, and
knowing—provide flesh to the plot and illustrate how Ward crafts a story both of human beings and the natural world.

In the first scene of *Salvage the Bones* the family’s pit-bull China establishes the theme of motherhood: she is giving birth in the shed. Esch’s family gathers, all together for a rare moment, under a bare burning light bulb on a starless night to watch the dog sweating and barking and becoming a mother. This evokes the death of their own mother who died seven years before while giving birth in their house to Junior, the youngest brother. Esch, the narrator, recounts: “Daddy said that Randall and Skeetah and me came fast, that Mama had all of us in her bed, under her own burning bulb, so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same. It didn’t work that way” (2). Under the Pit’s “bare bulbs”--a description that renders the family’s environment both stark and vibrant, lifeless and alive--this is how motherhood works: with birth comes death. While the dog China is still giving birth, Esch puts words to the cycle of life: “Now China is giving like she once took away, bestowing where she once stole” (1). Accordingly China bookends the novel: while the family manages to move to higher ground, China disappears into the rushing brown waters of the hurricane. China, her brother Skeetah’s prize fighting dog, has spent the plot birthing and snapping at her own puppies, shredding apart other pit-bulls in fights and protecting the family. Her whiteness counters the red of the Pit’s soil, the blackness of Ward’s characters, but she is much more than a point of contrast within a binary of color and race. China is rawness and truth, brutish and pure—and as maternal and destructive as Hurricane Katrina. There are many mother figures in Ward’s text and each exerts her own devastating will to create and destroy.
The loss of her biological mother haunts Esch, as well as each of her brothers. Esch allows her mother to bleed into her present narrative: “Randall crouches down to Junior, and he tells him how Mama taught us to find eggs. Look but don’t look, she said. They’ll find you. You gotta wander and they’ll come. She’d leaned over like me like a dog…Whatever color the mama is, that’s what color the egg is” (Ward, 199). As the hurricane grows nearer, the memories of the mother intensify: she becomes a part of everything. With an absent father who does little parenting, each of the siblings assumes a different mothering role in the family. The eldest brother Randall is tall and plays basketball in the Pit with a regular host of neighborhood boys: he washes the clothes and feeds his siblings when his father is drinking. Skeetah, only a few years younger, is fiercer and it is his prized and beloved fighting dog that gives birth to the puppies in the shed: his every action is to protect China and the puppies that have been well-bred to win the family much needed funds. Esch, the only girl, is just as quick and wild as her brothers: however, throughout the plot she contends with motherhood as the shame of her own secret and unwanted pregnancy. When China dies at the end of the novel however, once the hurricane has come and passed, Esch finally accepts and steps into her role, she says: “She will know I am a mother” (258). Junior, the baby of the family, has to tug upon the clothes and limbs of his older siblings just to be noticed and to be fed: he is the only character that does not take on a mothering role. His birth caused her death and he, having never experienced her love, cannot step in to fill this absence in his family.

The Pit that Ward’s characters call home is a landscape that endures their constant projects of making and unmaking. In the heat of August, Esch and her
brothers spend their days outside—they race through the woods surrounding their	house to steal cow wormer from a neighbor, hunt squirrels and roast them over a fire
pit, swim in the water collected in the hole their grandparents dug out of the soil and
“sold for money” (14). The Pit’s landscape is both fiercely natural and also littered
with crumbling man-made things—a “makeshift kennel,” “old disconnected truck
bed,” “rustsed over cow bath Daddy had salvaged from the junkyard where he scraps
metal,” “the backseats of junk cars,” “the old RV Daddy bought for cheap from some
man at the gas stations” (3, 5, 14). The siblings are constantly building up and tearing
down these materials. The land, the Pit, is theirs to know and to make use of: as
Esch’s father strips down wood from their grandparent’s house to reinforce their own
house, Skeetah salvages the same wood to strengthen the shed for his dog China.
Whether made from wood or clay however, the hurricane tears apart every aspect of
the Pit’s idiosyncratic setting.

The third prevalent theme of Salvage the Bones that ties this particular family
to the events of Hurricane Katrina is that of “knowing.” Throughout the novel, the
gathering hurricane gradually overtakes the landscape—there is more wind, more
heat—and Ward introduces a variety of analogies involving water and salt. The storm
builds slowly in the thickening air, as it does in the sticky sweat of her characters.
Knowing is remade into a new way of interacting. Esch and her family know one
another primarily through touch rather than words or sight. Esch recalls how her
mother used to come wake her and her brothers up for school by touching “us on our
backs first”; now her father stands in the hall way and yells at them to wake up: “he
wouldn’t touch us” (115). Ward harkens back to this first relationship with the mother
throughout the novel to describe how Randall touches Junior, how Skeetah touches China, how Esch touches the boys she sleeps with and her own full belly. Esch’s relationship with her closest brother, Skeetah, develops a duality between touch and sight. Since Esch started sleeping with Randall’s older friends and Skeetah bought China, they have grown apart: “And now I wonder what Skeetah’s seen… What does he know about lovers?” (33). Esch never tells Skeetah that she is pregnant with his friend’s child, but she is afraid that somehow he has “seen” it: she knows that he knows. Esch grows self-conscious after he stares at her body in the bathroom and decides to finally look at herself in the mirror in order “to see beyond my hands for eyes.” She will not give Skeetah another chance to see “…until none of us have any choices about what can be seen, what can be avoided, what is blind, and what will turn us into stone” (88). Just as the inevitability of Esch’s motherhood, the hurricane leaves them no choice and no escape. In the face of this oncoming storm, Ward positions touch and physicality, as knowledge and salvation for her characters, while sight can be denied, can be blind.

Similarly to the way that her characters know one another, Ward shows how the physical experience of their environment informs them of the hurricane. Esch watches the coverage with her father on the TV as a weatherwoman points to a map, “…but the television is so old and the resolution so bad that the map looks like concrete, and the storm, an oil stain” (135). Thus, sight is deceptive, rendered physical and confined to manmade constructions “like concrete” and “an oil stain.” Esch narrates her father’s concern in the first chapter, “‘This year’s different,’ Daddy said as he sat on the back of his trunk. For a moment he looked not-drunk.
‘News is right: every week it’s a new storm. Ain’t never been this bad… Makes my bones hurt… I can feel them coming’”(7). Esch’s father knows in his bones that the news is right – his body, rather than the words of weathermen and scientists, informs his opinion that his landscape is threatened. Ward’s characters understand events based on direct physical input from their surroundings rather than from abstract, outside sources. Just as mothers and land are rendered both human and natural throughout the novel, Ward positions human beings also capable of transcending this dualism: despite our governmental and scientific reports, the narratives in the media and now in the history books, there is perhaps a new and more direct way that we can know the story of Hurricane Katrina.
Textual Analysis

Introduction:

How could I analyze Ward’s language to understand how, specifically, she told a story of Hurricane Katrina that depicted a world neither exclusively human nor natural? Even upon the first reading of Salvage the Bones, Ward’s reader senses an unusual pace to her language. Words do not behave as they should. The same words – e.g. roofs, blood, dogs, squirrels, water, clotheslines, mud, fish, Top Ramen, Pine trees, spiders, fingers, bones—appear repeatedly throughout the novel, each time articulated in a different relationship with the words around them. As an individual metaphor, simile, personification, the comparisons are poetic, descriptive – yet there were hundreds, each borrowing words and concepts from one another. A few samples relate the feel of Ward’s language:

- The blood smells like wet hot earth after summer rain (47).
- A hand slaps the door wetly, and the man is there, his fingers trailing red like fishing line (34).
- I snatch my hand from him, and it slides like a wet fish (72).
- [Blood] pinked and spread over his skin like a jellyfish (Ward, 132).
- The blood pools in valleys between the knuckles, rolls to waterfalls between his fingers (208).
- He walks between the thumb and the pointer finger of the house, it clenches, and he is gone (Ward, 193).

Above, Ward positions blood and hands in many different contexts with the words wet and fish. Fingers trail like “fishing line,” hands slide like “a wet fish,” and a hand slaps the door “wetly.” Blood smells like “wet earth” and blood pinked like a
“jellyfish.” Ward also puts them together: blood pools “between the knuckles… between the fingers.” And Ward puts them in strange relationships with other words, for example: “the pointer finger of the house.” Is there a connection between hands, blood, fish and wet that the reader should follow? Is Ward intentionally making it impossible to determine one?

Literary devices assume a logical difference between words, but Ward seemed to be challenging—rather than making—distinctions between concepts and categories such as nature vs. culture, animate vs. inanimate, person vs. thing. I re-examined her language—what distinguished the land from the houses from the water from the persons in Ward’s text? They blended. Although upon this first reading it appeared that Ward was leveling her fictional world, breaking down the boundaries between human beings and the natural world by blurring epistemological categories, her project was not in fact one of deconstructing and discrediting words. In an interview for the National Book Foundation, Ward discusses her own experience of living through Hurricane Katrina and relates her true inspiration to write Salvage the Bones:

That storm silenced me for two and a half years. I watched it unmake the world, rip away the landscape, scatter so many people in my community. To know that the world I loved, my home, could be taken away from me in a matter of hours, was devastating. What did my writing matter? And then, I saw signs of hope. Signs that said that the sense of belonging I’d felt at home
could return as people returned after the storm and began to rebuild. I realized
we were survivors, and that was worth writing about.\(^2\)

While Ward’s silence in the wake of the hurricane alludes to the failure of
words to describe or rationalize its impacts, the problem points to her need for
reconstruction. With language, Ward seeks to construct a new world that can make
sense of, can incorporate, can contextualize Hurricane Katrina. Because in order to
name the unnamable, to describe what was destroyed for her family and those around
her, she needed to empower human beings —with the strength of her language—in
order to render this incredible, inexplicable force of destruction.

As I identified the strongest examples of Ward’s play with words, a common
theme prevailed. \textit{Houses}. Her depictions of these physical structures emerged
naturally in the text as sites of her most chaotic explorations of language. Hurricane
Katrina literally unmade these physical boundary layers, making known that the air,
wood, water, and sunlight inside and outside our houses are one in the same: her
violent will shattered the idea that these constructions could protect human beings
from a larger world. Subsequently, rather than stable structures, the houses in Ward’s
novel stand out as noticeably makeshift --sinking, forming, peeling, blossoming, and
disintegrating, revealing the more connected world that the hurricane has laid bare.
Section I will contextualize how Ward builds the instability of physical structures into
her narrative.

Ward however not only deteriorates physical structures thematically, she also
enacts this fragmentation in her figurative language, working throughout her novel to

http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2011_f_ward_interv.html#.UxjSGdV6N
undo the linguistic structures that erect a difference between human and natural terms. In particular, she focuses on “unmaking” three classic literary devices of metaphor, personification, and prosopopoeia. Chapters II, III, and IV will each take up one of these literary devices, focusing on the most unusual and creative depictions of houses in Ward’s text. These particular sites demonstrate how Ward reworks linguistic conventions, drawing new and unlikely connections between words. In order to render the chaos the hurricane wreaked on human order, Ward’s depiction of physical structures must defy the binary that language erects between a human interior and a natural exterior.
Chapter I: Houses, Building a Theme

Although the event of Hurricane Katrina was unprecedented, we can find a clear literary precedent for Salvage the Bones in William Faulkner’s 1930 novel, As I Lay Dying. On the surface, As I Lay Dying and Salvage the Bones share a plot about a family of brothers, one pregnant teenage sister, and a father, living in the rural south and wrestling with the recent death of a mother and wife. Both fictional families find refuge in the land that immediately surrounds their houses, in the fields and woods that dictate their daily lives. Just as the middle brother in As I Lay Dying, Jewel, works the neighbor’s land at night in order to buy himself a horse, the middle brother in Salvage the Bones, Skeetah, mows lawns for months in order to feed his pit-bull. The two father characters both struggle to contain their own grief to meet the needs of their children. Esch, getting ready for a long summer with her brothers, prepares for summer reading and comments: “After my ninth-grade year, we read As I Lay Dying, and I made an A because I answered the hardest question right: Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?” (4). While Ward draws more subtle allusions to Faulkner’s novel in plot and themes, working to root her own work in the literature of the southern landscape, this question raises the central concern of both Faulkner and Ward’s novels: how do the characters confront the loss of a mother? Both novels suggest that constructing houses—chicken coops, coffins, doghouses, and carriages—is central to the process of dealing with grief. What are these characters making? What are they putting inside?
In *As I Lay Dying*, the activity of building centers upon the character of the eldest son. The sound of Cash Bundren’s saw is a constant refrain in the background of the first chapters. While his mother Addie, lies dying in her bed, she can hear Cash building her coffin in the yard outside her window. The other characters hear the rhythm of his saw too. His brother Darl comments: “A good carpenter. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.
of the adze” (Faulkner, 5). Faulkner leaves spaces in his text for the reader to imagine the silence of the upbeat, while the repeated “chuck” makes the sound of downbeat. Cash’s sawing weaves into every character’s first chapter –which rotate perspectives—, reminding the reader of his constant work. Each family member has his or her own reaction to Addie’s death, to the void that she leaves behind. Cash takes solace in his building project, commenting on the coffin:

I made it on the bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.

7. A body is not square like a crosstie.


9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.

10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.

11. While in the natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.

12. So I made it on the bevel.

13. It makes a neater job (83).

The format of the list emphasizes Cash’s effort to contain his disordered thoughts. He dwells on how humans and their structures are made, at times conflating the two with the form of his sentences: “In a house people are upright are made up-and-down.” Perhaps if he can control the formation of the wood, he can control whether his mother is alive or dead. He focuses upon the way that the physical structure that she occupies must change: what holds human beings when they are alive –houses-- is fundamentally different than what holds them when they are dead – coffins. Thus, he obsessively forms the angles of the coffin to fit to a body that will lie down, as opposed to stand upright. His physical tool is that of a “bevel,” which is “a common joiner's and mason's tool, consisting of a flat rule with a movable tongue or arm stiffly jointed to one end, for setting off angles” (OED). Unlike a bed, where a body moves from side to side, a coffin holds a body that lies still, putting stress
downwards, causing a slant. Cash emphasizes the fact that her dead body will persist to have weight upon the boards and earth—it’s “animal magnetism”—and interact with its physical environment. If the body was not placed in a coffin and rather a “natural hole,” the stress would be directly “up and down” and it would “sink by the center.” But if the boards are level, the earth above a coffin “sinks down on the bevel.” Why is it important to Cash that his mother sinks into the earth in a level way, that the job is “neater”? In Cash’s words, it is the structures of houses and coffins themselves that can define respectively, the life and death of his mother.

Faulkner’s attention to the building of the coffin in his novel reveals how such physical structures can contain the most threatening aspects of human experience. Cash’s attention to the detail of the angles of the coffin contradicts the nature of his mother’s death, which is the most natural, inexplicable, uncontrolled aspect of human existence. Like Faulkner, Ward articulates the houses within her novel with care, building them up so that they represent what her characters’ most fear and express what they most love. For Ward however, the most threatening concept explored in her novel is not only the death of their mother—but also the hurricane that decimates everything. Just as Faulkner builds the coffin around the illusion that human beings can control death, Ward builds houses around the deception that human beings are

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3 The term “animal magnetism” was coined by a German physician of the 18th century, Franz Mesmer, who suggested that “the gravitational attraction of the planets affected human health by affecting an invisible fluid found in the human body and throughout nature.” The fluid, Mesmer argued, acted according to the laws of magnetism, of electrons and any blockages to this flow would result in disease; modern day theories of hypnosis arose out of the idea of animal magnetism. Faulkner, who would be familiar with this philosophy, therefore works to give Cash a theory of the way even a dead body persists to affect the world. “Franz Anton Mesmer.” Encyclopedia Britannica. 7-2-12. [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/376668/Franz-Anton-Mesmer](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/376668/Franz-Anton-Mesmer)
wholly in control of life, of death, of their bodies, of natural materials, of the physical world. Ward expands the notion of building central to Faulkner’s text. First, building is not associated with any one character, but rather endemic to life. Similarly, building is not just a human activity: it is a natural activity, rooted to the finite materials available on the Pit’s land. In Ward’s novel, Faulkner’s deceased mother character becomes Mother Nature and the wood, natural resources.

In *Salvage the Bones* a son is also building, his work a constant action that propels the plot. Esch’s brother Skeetah believes that the puppies, new to life, and China, weakened by her pregnancy, are sick from the dirt on the land around their house: they need a stronger shelter. As Esch observes him getting wood so he can put down a floor in the shed, she roots his work to a deep family history of men building structures for women upon their land: “Daddy had started on our house once he and Mama got married. Hearing the stories about him and Papa Joseph when I was growing up, I always thought it was something a man did for a woman when they married: build her something to live in” (Ward, 60). By describing the house as something a husband makes for his wife “to live in,” Ward positions the gendered roles of men as the builders of the structures that women must fill, of the structures that define them: Skeetah’s attempt to protect China is compared with her father’s to protect his mother to his grandfather’s to protect his grandmother. However, unlike for Cash, where there is a clear distinction between the way “in a house people are upright are made up-and-down” and the way a coffin holds people, there is no distinction for Ward’s characters: houses hold life and death. There are two houses in the Pit; next to Esch’s house, still stands the house of her grandparents on her
mother’s side, “Mother Lizabeth” and “Papa Joseph,” who originally owned the property of the Pit. After the grandparents died, their house began to crumble and Esch’s mother began to use it as a source of reinforcement materials for her own house. By the time of the novel, Esch’s mother has also passed away and the house that was built for her to live in is also physically disintegrating. However throughout the narrative, Esch’s Daddy is still building: worried about the approaching hurricane, he is repairing leaks and holes in their house in order to protect his family. While once he built to define and protect the life of his wife, he is now rebuilding to fight – like Cash-- the reality, the possibility, the threat of death. Esch’s house is thus rendered both a coffin and house, marking both the life and death of the mother and as preparation for the hurricane.

In Ward’s text, the activity of building is not limited to the one brother, or to containing a single entity. While Skeetah is the primary builder, he seems to compress many identities. While he is still building the shed, Esch observes his work: “I see Skeetah dragging wood to the door of the shed…The frame for the kennel that sat for days, wedged into the dirt like a fallen scarecrow, is upright again. He is building her a house. He is watching over her, gauging her for sickness. He knows love” (Ward, 103). The frame is “upright again,” evocative of Cash’s attention to the direction of movement: “In a house people are upright are made up-and-down.” Ward confuses the comparison to Cash by attributing Skeetah a compilation of the characteristics that define each of the sons in Faulkner’s novel. Skeetah is like Jewel because an animal centers his attention and affection; he is like Darl because he has the strongest relationship with his younger sister; he is like Cash because he is a
builder. Not only is Skeetah all the sons in Faulkner’s text but also, by protecting the new mother China, he is a husband, a father, a son – a mother, in Ward’s text. Furthermore, what he protects is not just a dog, a mother, but the figure that Ward depicts as representative of all motherhood, as a force of all destruction and creation.

In another departure from Faulkner, the structures in Ward’s text become less stable from generation to generation, while the environment seems to overpower them. In order to find wood to build China a floor, Skeetah salvages the floorboards of his grandparents’ house. Discovering Skeetah has taken the boards, his father is furious: he needs the wood to reinforce their house for the hurricane. Skeetah’s father approaches the shed, where Skeetah is working: “Them’s boards. You been in my piles?... I got them gathered for the house. You always meddling. You want the window to shatter?” (105). While Skeetah’s building impacts his father’s efforts, the dramatic irony is that both of them are actually destabilizing the structure that will in the end save their lives in the hurricane. In the storm, the family has to scramble to higher ground, to the grandparents’ decaying house in order to survive. While their own house loses its roof in the climax of the hurricane, the grandparents’ house, even in its dilapidated state, remains strong -- stronger than anything that has been built since. Although Skeetah (much to his father’s disapproval) has brought China inside their house in the final days leading up to the hurricane, he loses her in the water as the family moves to the grandparents’ house. The consequences for building and what defies Esch’s family’s efforts to protect life have become more severe with each new generation: while Skeetah’s grandmother died of natural forces, his mother died during childbirth -- China dies during the hurricane. From the son in Faulkner’s novel
to the son in Ward’s, the tradition of building reflects a failed method of relating to natural resources.

Although it’s the hurricane that spectacularly remakes houses, throughout the novel, Ward depicts her houses as destabilized by human rather than by natural forces. Skeetah’s grandfather’s original extracting practices on the Pit is the reason that their house floods and why Skeetah so violently loses what he tries to protect. Papa Joseph nicknamed the land the “Pit” after he let the “white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses,” which had left a huge hole where they had excavated the side of a hill (114). “Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a… pond…and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling the earth for money” (14). The terrain of the Pit is thus established: the land lacks its original integrity, due to abstraction of resources for other houses for “the white men.” Not only do foundations for White people directly cause instability, a lack of foundation, for Black people, but also Ward shows a human relationship to land explicitly about consumption: the social configuration of the previous generation, the way that resources were extracted and reallocated, is what unmake her characters’ immediate physical environment. With one family history, Ward has shown how it is not the hurricane itself that destabilizes the landscape: she has built physical structures into her story so that it is a process of human degradation that has left them without foundation.

Drawing attention to the “joints and seams” of the physical world, both
Faulkner and Ward have made clear that the construction of physical structures symbolize the human effort to contain what cannot be contained. In both texts, the climactic moment is a scene of unmaking, of building destroyed. These moments when the physical structures are unmade also mark the unmaking of the structures of language. Faulkner opens the coffin that Cash has built so meticulously in the first half of novel: after the mother, Addie Bundren, he allows her an entire chapter of her own to speak. Thus, Faulkner simultaneously breaks the order to physical and linguistic structures: it is the voice of Addie, the mother who will always be dying that allows him to get at the event of death itself, to reach for what human beings cannot understand with his own words. Ward will ultimately allow the hurricane to tear the roof off of her main characters’ house, a scene that proves key to understanding her linguistic project that has remained enigmatic throughout the text until this moment. In order to understand how this scene functions in Ward’s text to name the hurricane and all that she has built for it to convey, we must understand how Faulkner lays bare the center of his own text.

What does this character, the center of all of her sons and her husband’s reality throughout As I Lay Dying have to say? Addie, speaking from the grave finds words inadequate. It is her voice that draws Faulkner’s analogy of physical structures and words as forms of containment: she says that words, like coffins and houses, cannot define her in life—or in death. She recounts first meeting her husband, Anse, who approached her looking for a wife. She reproaches him for not having any womenfolk: “‘You haven’t got any? But you’ve got a house. They tell me you’ve got a house and a good farm. And you live there alone, doing for yourself, do you?’ He
just looked at me, turning the hat in his hands. ‘A new house,’ I said. ‘Are you going to get married?’” (Faulkner, 171). Thus, Addie relates Anse’s marriage proposal. His language ineffectual—“he looks at his hands”—to create a connection, it is instead Anse’s ownership of a house and of property that necessitates Addie’s presence. Just as Cash built the coffin around Addie before she had even died, Addie now makes known that her husband built his house around Addie before she even was married to him. The house is a predetermined structure that Anse needs her to fill—the expectation for her role as a wife and a mother, in her own words, is no different:

Sometimes I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh, and I would think: Anse. Why Anse. Why are you Anse. I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into a vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar (Faulkner, 173).

Addie articulates the fundamental limitation of language with cryptic eloquence. She conceives of her husband’s name as a case—like a house or a coffin--, protecting the insides from the outsides. “Anse” tries to contain something, yet is unsuccessful: “I would then find that I had forgotten the name of the jar.” Addie draws a parallel between the way that Anse’s house and his name are vessels, forming arbitrary structures, containing nothing: the shape that his name forms is “profoundly without life like an empty door frame.” The way that Addie thinks about these two
manmade constructions --language and houses-- contrasts with the way she *hears* “the land that was now of my blood and flesh.” While her sons and daughters are an undeniable, tangible product of her relationship with Anse, the construction of his house and of his name fails to define her, to contain her.

Furthermore, Addie makes known that Anse does not see these fundamental limitations of words as she does: he instead uses them to try to determine the relationship between them. She says that he uses the word “love.” The word does nothing for her. “I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear” (Faulkner, 172). How are words “a shape to fill a lack”? Visualize an image in white defined only by surrounding black space: the shape of the image is formed by what is not there. Addie imagines words as the arbitrary lines that divide the white space from the black: they make a shape that can be named but that shape means nothing –it is “empty.” Thus, just as Anse’s words are vessels that fail to contain, they are also structures –like houses and coffins—that forms the insides, apart from the outsides. While one protects and the other shapes, both of her conceptions of words, which she relays from the grave, prove that Anse failed to determine her.

In Addie’s chapter, Faulkner articulates that he envisions words as empty structures that attempt to define what human beings cannot. However, he does not leave her absent presence as a void, but rather gives her a voice: he *tries* to put words to death. The climactic scene of *As I Lay Dying* has led us to the corresponding one in *Salvage the Bones*. When her main characters’ house opens, Ward seizes the
opportunity to try to give the hurricane agency – to lay bare this force of creation of
destruction. This physical unmaking is the moment in which Ward, like Faulkner,
grasps with her own words to name the unnamable.

The next three chapters reveal first how Ward’s use of three literary figures
formally build instability into the houses in her novel, blurring the linguistic divide
between the human and the nature. And second, how the scene in which her main
characters house blows off in fact reveals the overall project for these literary devices,
which each work to give the hurricane a voice of her own.
Chapter II: Metaphor: The Mother

Introduction: What’s a Metaphor?

Ward names metaphor as a particularly destabilizing literary device and therefore crucial to her representation of Hurricane Katrina. In November 2011, three months after she published *Salvage The Bones*, Ward read a piece for NPR entitled “Living Through a Category Five Hurricane,” which is now included at the end of the novel. In this short essay, Ward compares her own experience of Katrina—which bears many similarities to that of her characters—to her mother’s experience of a hurricane 30 years earlier name Camille. Ward recalls being struck by her mother comparing the sound of the wind to “a passing train.” Ward concludes: “So that’s what my mother meant: I understood then how that hurricane, like Camille, had unmade the world, tree by water by house by person. Even in language, it reduced us to improbable metaphor” (Ward, 262). Ward’s first sentence refers to the way that she blurs categories—or, “unmakes the world”—in her novel, which is clear from her constant comparisons. But the second sentence suggests a more complicated and—as I will show—more radical conception of language. In order to describe the impact of the hurricane, to render the impossible possible in her language, Ward suggests that she had to create relationships between words that seemed improbable, relationships that had not been named before—that were new.

*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines “metaphor” as “a trope, or figurative expression, in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings.” While the term has become part of
everyday, colloquial language, the device is subject to thorough debate among literary
theorists and philosophers: the above definition is only the first sentence of a 13-page
entry in the acclaimed encyclopedia. What is a normal use of a word? And how does
its comparison with another word or phrase render it strange or new? I will show that
typically, metaphor’s structure of comparison tends to create hierarchical
relationships between tenor and vehicle that are often extended to the objects of
comparison – human/object, animate/inanimate. But Ward destabilizes these
oppositions, formally pursuing the kinds of unmaking that her story of the hurricane
thematizes. Her language will offer a way to rebuild linguistic material as an
equalizer, an erector of similarity rather than difference.

Metaphor, a traditional reading

Describing the dilapidated structure that once belonged to Esch’s
grandparents, that Skeetah and his Daddy now fight over for spare materials, Ward
uses a striking metaphor:

The house is a drying animal skeleton, everything inside that was evidence of
living salvaged over the years. Papa Joseph helped Daddy build our house
before he died, but once he and Mother Lizabeth were gone, we took couch by
chair by picture by dish until there was nothing left. Mama tried to keep the
house up, but needing a bed for me and Skeet to sleep in, or needing a pot
when hers turned black, was more important than keeping the house a shrine,
crocheted blankets across sofas as Mother Lizabeth left them. That’s what
Daddy said. So now we pick at the house like mostly eaten leftovers (58).
The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics defines the two components of metaphor, which were coined by influential English literary critic and rhetorician, Ivory Armstrong Richards in 1936. While the tenor refers to “the thing meant—purport, underlying meaning, or main subject of the metaphor,” the vehicle refers to “the thing said—that which serves to carry or embody the tenor as the analogy brought to the subject.” Upon a first reading of Ward’s metaphor, the “house” functions as the tenor and “the drying animal skeleton” serves as the vehicle. First named by Aristotle, metaphor depends “on the perception of the similarity in dissimilars”: while the two terms of metaphor must be logically different, the effect depends on seeing the similarities. Thus, in Ward’s metaphor, there is foremost a difference between the two terms: the animal skeleton is an interior support structure for an animate, nonhuman being, while a house is an exterior, inanimate structure for a human being. The effect of the metaphor is that a third meaning is created, which Richards claims “the vehicle brings with it, because it derives from an aspect of experience outside or different from the literal experience in the poem, a host of implicit associations that, although circumscribed by the tenor, are never quite shut out entirely.” Thus for Richards, the vehicle works to reveal the implicit meanings of the tenor, the main subject of the metaphor. In this case then, the animal skeleton serves to illuminate something about the human habitation, the house.

Conventional understandings of metaphor would have us look for the similarities between these seemingly disparate things – a beloved grandparent’s house and a drying animal skeleton. And indeed, we can draw a number of connections between these entities. For instance, when birds, soil, and rain have eaten away at the
flesh, organs, and blood of a dead animal, only the outline of bones remains: the insides are the same as the outsides. Ward does not imply that these insides are no longer alive—rather, their “evidence of living” has been repurposed, salvaged. (Note, “salvage” is phonetically similar to “savage,” which the OED definition denotes as the fierceness “of an animal or force of nature.”) Similarly, although now “mostly eaten leftovers,” the house once offered much—beds, pots, and sofas. Using the house as a source of sustenance, rather than “a shrine,” the house is stripped of human value and, like a skeleton, is reduced to mere dead matter. The house, no longer a home for Esch’s deceased grandparents, takes on a meaning in this metaphor as an empty frame, protecting nothing but providing much. Like a dead animal, the remaining nutrients within its structure must be broken down and redistributed. These are a series of possible “points of contact” between the two terms, which The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics claims are “often called the ground.”

As illustrated in this example, embedded in the structure of the two terms of metaphor remains a question: does the comparison assume an equal relationship between the two entities? We assumed that the depiction of the dead matter of bones informed the depiction of human relationships as represented by the house in Ward’s narrative. In positioning the animal skeleton as the vehicle, we privileged the human term over the inert, natural term. Yet Ward’s project in this novel seems to be to explore a situation in which the natural world overpowers the human; throughout her novel, houses function as a site to destabilize, rather than reinforce, the opposition between the human and the natural. What would it mean to shift the weight—to imagine bones as the tenor, to render them as important as the house? One
imaginative literary theorist re-conceptualizes bones in a way that allows us to reposition the drying animal skeleton in the above metaphor, bringing us one step closer to understanding how Ward’s use of metaphor works overall in her text.

**Metaphor, a different reading**

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett imagines how matter—including specifically, bones—can be re-imagined not as inert material but rather with an agency of their own. Instead of giving priority to humans as “knowing bodies,” it is Bennett’s ambition to give voice to “things and what they do” (Bennett, 3). She reaches to articulate the “material recalcitrance” of nonhuman substances, which emerges to resist our own social constructions and determinations. Her agenda is to create “a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology” (Bennett, 4). Bennett offers a series of exciting depictions of different material substances that demonstrate how they could be conceived of with more vitality than we usually attribute them. Her description of bones is particularly powerful. By privileging an evolutionary scale of time rather than a human one, Bennett presents bones as mineral material, developing and changing autonomously of human action. Bennett quotes philosopher Manuel De Landa’s account of bones:

Soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden *mineralization*, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the
mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself (Bennett, 11).

Mineralization therefore designates the dynamic agency by which bone was produced: once bones had developed, they made “new movement control possible for animals, freeing them from many constraints and literally setting them into motion” (Bennett, 11). When viewed in a context of evolutionary history therefore, Bennett claims that bones appear as the “movers and shakers,” rendering the self-directed action of vertebrates --of human beings-- as merely a product of this process.

What are the implications of such a perspective --what would it mean to imagine bones as the tenor in Ward’s metaphor? The house (now the vehicle) forms points of contact with Bennett’s description of bones (the tenor): houses provide a structure for human beings just as bones give a composition to our flesh, protection to our minds, agency to our hands. Perhaps, pushing for even less human-centeredness to our imagination, the comparison at the core is of how things are made, revitalizing both bones as well as wood and plaster as vital materials. Following this logic, while there is little relationship between houses and animals as complete forms, as components there is a relationship that does not privilege one term over another.

Bennett herself positions her argument about bones within her text to introduce the idea that, if we render human beings as a “particularly rich and complex collection of materials,” we no longer find ourselves so clearly at the ontological center or hierarchical apex. Her work enables a different reading of Ward’s description of the house as a “drying animal skeleton”: more than a simple comparison that informs our conception of humanity, perhaps Ward puts forward a
new way we use the human (houses) to understand the natural/inanimate (bones) as possessing agency.

What would it mean to read all of Ward’s metaphors like this, positioning the “natural” term as the tenor, and the “human” as the vehicle? In fact, Ward encourages us to do so through her frequent practice of overlaying metaphors so that the tenor of one metaphor often becomes the vehicle of another. For instance, she writes: “His skin was the color of fresh-cut wood” (6). Here, the wood is the vehicle, and Randall’s skin is the tenor, the inanimate object being used to illuminate a characteristic of the person, as we might expect. Later, however, Ward writes: “The wood is a sleeping animal, still empty” (210). Here, the inanimate object, wood, has switched to become the tenor, rather than the vehicle of the metaphor, and an animate object, a “sleeping animal,” has become the vehicle, used to describe a feature of the wood. Examples like this pervade the text.

We also see that she does assert occasionally that a natural term must be the tenor, as when she uses the image of birds to describe her brother’s hand: “[The birds in] flocks break and dip and they are Randall’s hand on a basketball, Skeet’s on a leash, my legs in a chase” (207). However, clear in this example, the human term, the hand, supersedes and almost consumes the “natural term. More often, however, Ward’s tends to use metaphor in ways that more deeply challenge conventional understandings of this device by using the same term as both the vehicle and the metaphor. For example, wood is the vehicle in: “His skin was the color of fresh-cut wood” (6). And the tenor in: “The wood is a sleeping animal, still empty” (210). Obeying the rules of metaphor in Ward’s text meet only dead ends. The switching of
tenor and vehicle becomes crucial in the most significant, overarching metaphor of *Salvage the Bones*: “my mother is a hurricane.” In order to understand how she reveals this metaphor in her language to give the hurricane agency, we will have to look at how another son in *As I Lay Dying* processes his mother’s grief.

**Metaphor, As Traditional as Faulkner**

Finally, we arrive at what I have been grasping at since Esch said that she answered the hardest question right about *As I Lay Dying* in summer English reading assignment: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?* Ward calls her reader’s attention to the famous metaphor in Faulkner’s novel, calling for comparisons to be drawn with her own use of metaphor. One page after the passage in which Cash describes building the coffin with the bevel, his younger brother Vardaman has a chapter in which he says but one sentence, “My mother is a fish” (84). Vardaman, like Cash, processes his mother’s changing from the living, breathing woman that he knows to a dead body lying in a bed: just as Cash makes sense of his mother’s death by building a coffin, his younger brother uses the concept of a fish. Vardaman has killed and gutted an enormous fish he catches in the river; his sister Dewey Dell begins preparing it in the kitchen; their mother, who has been lying her bed dying, finally passes away. The fish fresh in his mind, Vardaman reels from his mother’s death and he forms the metaphor that has puzzled literary critics for near a century: *my mother is a fish*.

The fish, the vehicle, explains the tenor, the death of Vardaman’s mother. For the characters in *As I Lay Dying*, the occurrence of life and death, the exchange
between existence and absence, is the missing center, the black hole, which they must grasp at and attempt to explain. Faulkner uses the physical transformation of an animal’s body to explain Vardaman’s rationalization of the loss of his mother. The fish that explains his mother is not the fish swimming through the river however, but the fish gutted and cut up. What has died, what has been broken down, what has completely changed in form--swimming animal to tasty fiber in a pan or, breathing mother to body in a coffin—has in fact not disappeared but become something else. In order to keep his mother breathing, Vardaman cannot allow her to be a body in a nailed coffin: she will instead be a chopped up fish in a pan because then she can be eaten and live on through all of his family members. Like the first discussion of the metaphor of Mother Lizabeth’s house, Vardaman imagines that her body will not be preserved in a coffin but rather repurposed as the substance of his world as matter in his family’s bodies. Faulkner’s metaphor summons a series of binaries that were alluded to and erected in Ward’s description of the house as an animal skeleton: a natural object without agency explains an abstract human concept.

Ward’s metaphor

How does the youngest son in Salvage the Bones, Junior, who came into being the same day that his mother died, deal with her absence? What Ward positions in place of Junior’s mother, in place of Esch’s and Skeetah’s and Daddy’s and Mother Lizabeth’s is Mother Nature herself, in the form of Hurricane Katrina. Thus the analogous metaphor to Faulkner’s emerges: my mother is a hurricane. While once separate narratives, in the climactic scene of the hurricane, these two mother figures
collapse. As Esch and her family find themselves knee, waist, elbow deep in water in their house, they scramble to get to the attic; Esch father brings with him a plastic bag of photographs of their mother. Esch narrates: “Just before Skeetah pulls shut the attic door, seals us into the darkness, Daddy makes as if he would touch one of the pictures, hesitant, as lightly as if he is dislodging an eyelash, but his glistening finger stops short, and he wraps the pictures again and puts them in his pants. Mama” (229).

Here in the house that became the mother’s coffin when she gave birth to Junior, the family now is also trapped in darkness, facing death. The roof of their house blows off. Throughout the narrative of their escape out of the disassembling house, through the water and across the upturned structures of the pit, Esch articulates every action in relation to their mother. In an attempt to prioritize helping his sister, Skeetah yells to his father that she is pregnant. Shocked, he pushes Esch into the water: “And in that second after he pushes me, Daddy is reaching out with his good hand… his eyes open and hurt and sorry as I haven’t seen him since he handed Junior over to me and Randall, and said, Your mama” (234). With Esch swimming, kicking in the storm’s waters to stay alive, her brothers and her Daddy reaching for her from their precarious hold upon tree branches, the height of the storm is equated with Esch’s own family’s history of birth and of death.

While the two sentences – my mother is a fish and my mother is a hurricane – appear analogous, a closer inspection reveals a crucial reversal in Ward’s reprisal of Faulkner’s famous metaphor. While in Faulkner’s text, the fish is a vehicle used to explain the tenor of the deceased mother, in Ward’s text, the biological mother is a vehicle used to explain the event of the hurricane. In other words, Ward’s sentence
should actually read “The hurricane is my mother.” Thus, Ward inverts Faulkner’s metaphor, positioning the natural, the inanimate, in the position of the tenor, while the human mother takes the place of the vehicle. Underscoring the limits of human ability to comprehend natural disaster, Ward, like Bennett, transfers agency from the human figure of the mother to the natural phenomenon of the hurricane. While Faulkner assumes that his readers have a stable and comprehensible relationship with the natural world, with rivers, with fish, with guts, so that he could more easily explore death if he rooted it in this relationship for Ward, such relationships are precisely what the Hurricane calls into question. Her readers do not know the “nature” she is trying to depict, Hurricane Katrina. And so she uses a relationship that they do know—to explain the event that she herself was struggling to get her mind around. For Faulkner it was death. For Ward it is Hurricane Katrina—the force that reveals that human beings have lost their relationship with the earth.

_Unmaking metaphor, Faulkner’s language_

However, while it seems clear that the fish serves as a vehicle for the tenor of the mother’s death, the language Faulkner uses to contextualize the metaphor seems to collapse the distinctions between the two terms. In Vardaman’s attempt to name death, the relationship between the mother and the fish becomes deeply ambiguous:

It was not her because it was laying right yonder in the dirt. And now it’s all chopped up. I chopped it up. It’s laying in the kitchen in the bleeding pan, waiting to be cooked and et. Then it wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she wasn’t. And tomorrow it will be cooked and et. and she will be him and pa
and Cash and Dewey Dell and there won’t be anything in the box and so she can breathe. It was laying right yonder on the ground (66).

When his mother is alive and the fish is dead, he knows it is not his mother—obviously: “It was not her because it was laying right yonder in the dirt.” When his mother dies, however, Vardaman reasons: “Then it wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she wasn’t.” There are two possible readings of the line. Perhaps the fish “wasn’t [dead]” and his mother “was [dead]”—the fish is alive and his mother is dead. Or, the fish “wasn’t [dead]” and his mother “was [alive]”—the fish is dead and the mother is alive. The fact that these two options are positioned next to one another winds up rendering the fish and the mother interchangeable, drawn together in the confusion in the language. If the fish is the vehicle, its concreteness—all chopped up—renders the transformation of Addie’s body from alive to dead (as in the reading above). But if Addie is the vehicle, the abstractness of the transformation death applies to the fish as well. Faulkner therefore renders each term as both human and natural, a vehicle and a tenor, abstract and concrete--and the relationship between the two is both probable and improbable—figurative and literal. What has drawn these two terms together? The event of death has created the relationship between them. By so obviously convoluting the conventional terms of metaphor, Faulkner draws attention to the limitations of language to capture the moment, the occurrence, of death.

*Unmaking Metaphor, Ward’s language*  
Ward’s language in fact pulls a similar trick to animate the hurricane. Neither of the terms in the metaphor, *my mother is a hurricane*, defines the other but rather
both are linguistically inextricable. This becomes most clear in the scene when the house loses its roof uncovers the puzzle of her literary figures.

“Move,” Randall says. “Junior, go by Esch.” And I feel Junior’s little pin fingers on my wrists, and he bangs into something, and he is a monkey on top of the bucket, locked to my lap. “I got it.”

Randall is swinging something in the dark, and when it crashes into the roof, it makes a dent, a chink of light. He bashes the wood, grunts. Whatever he swings is making a hole. He swings it again, and the wood opens to a small hole no bigger than my finger, and I see that he is swinging the chainsaw, hitting the roof with the blunt end.

“Any gas” --Randall bashes --”in here?”

“Can’t remember,” Daddy yells. The storm speaks through the hole, funnels wind and rain through. We squint towards it. The water is over my crotch. The house lists.

Randall cranks once, twice. He pulls the cord back a third time and it catches, and the saw buzzes to life. He shoves it through the finger-wide opening, cuts a jagged line, draws it back out, cuts another jagged line, a parenthesis, before it chugs to a stop. He tries to crank it again, but it will not start. He swings again, and the closed eyelid he drew with the cutting saw, with the blows, flutters, and the roof opens. The storm screams, *I have been waiting for you*. Light floods the flooded attic, close as a coffin. Randall grabs Junior, who swings around and clings to his back, his small hands tight as
clothespins, and Randall climbs out and into the hungry maw of the storm. (230).

Although most of the narrative is focalized through Esch, this climactic encounter with the mother is fittingly focalized through the perspective of Junior, the youngest son who like Vardaman seems most vulnerable to the impact of the mother’s death. Two words, repeated numerous times in this passage reveal what connects a set of the most common recurring terms in Ward’s text: *pins* and *fingers*. Together they are rendered first “pin fingers,” and then “hands tight as clothespins.” Randall makes a hole no bigger than “my finger,” and shoves the saw through the “finger-wide opening.” Why would Ward emphasize these seemingly unremarkable words in her climactic scene? These terms can be traced through Junior to memory scenes involving the biological mother. Clothespins: “After Mama died, Daddy moved the clothesline to a closer tree, but he didn’t tie it tight enough, so when Randall and I hang them out with wooden clothespins, the line sags, and our pants dangle in the dirt” (108). Fingers: Esch describes Junior: “I can’t see his baby teeth, small and yellow like candy, only his throat, wet and pink, and he is an infant again, his mouth always open, always trying to find the nipple so that he’d grab our fingers, the blanket, his bib, the paws of his lost dogs, and suck them” (185). Junior never knew the clothesline when it hung above the dirt, when someone else’s fingers held the world together; he never got to breastfeed. Again and again, Junior tries to fill the void of his mother with the materials at his disposal. Junior clings now more than ever to his other family members, as the world around him is ripped apart, emphasizing the emotional loss of losing a biological mother. Therefore this language
arises disordered and emphatic when the mother figure is most present in the narrative: both function as separate vehicles to the same tenor.

But how do these terms relate to the hurricane itself? The words do not only arise in memory scenes with the mother or in this climactic scene but rather as parts to many different analogies throughout the novel:

“… Daddy hangs there limp as sheets on a clothesline before they’ve been stretched and pinned” (178).

“A muscle spasms in China’s side: a white sheet flapping in the wind on a clothesline” (112).

“My clothes catch on one ankle, hang like they’re half-pinned from a clothesline” (145).

“When [he] was curling pleasure from me with his fingers mid-swim in the pit” (25).

“China is the shushing sound, the finger laid against the lips in admonition” (81).

These are just examples, both terms scatter throughout the text: “fingers” appear 71 times in the text, “clotheslines” 8, “clothespins” 2 and and “pins” 5. Esch’s father loses his fingers, fingers touch, stir, make everything. Clotheslines are used to describe the power lines, the branches of trees. Ward therefore allows these terms to draw relationships between everything – the animate and the inanimate, the human world and the natural world. Through Junior, they can be traced to one tenor, the biological mother, and from here identified as a particular set of terms to track throughout the text. However, the fact that they are not exclusively connected with the mother but rather seem to suffuse the narrative, just as the impending hurricane suffuses it, suggests that these signs are equally attached to Katrina. Just as Ward
built the instability of houses into her narrative, the instability of language has been
there all along, serving to contextualize what the hurricane lays bare when the
structure of the house finally disappears. Just as the event of death drew together the
unlikely relationship between a mother and a fish in Faulkner’s text, the force of the
storm that reduced everything in its path has drawn together the unlikely relationships
between a mother and a hurricane.

Faulkner draws attention to the inexplicability of death by convoluting the
terms of metaphor in Vardaman’s attempt to name it; Ward raises the stakes of this
conflation in two ways. First, while in Faulkner’s metaphor, the mother is one mother
and the fish one fish, in Ward’s novel, the mother is all mothers and the fish is the
entire physical world. And second, she renders this not with one metaphor but with
many: the terms of “mother” and “hurricane,” each encompassing many different
analogies. Rather than forming each individual metaphor or simile to hold its own
weight, privileging either a human term over a natural or else a natural or a human,
Ward has formed them as part of one larger relationship.

The theme of motherhood ultimately unites the human and the natural in
Salvage the Bones. Typically we think of a biological mother (human) as a creator
and a hurricane as a destroyer (natural). But in Ward’s text, the mother has passed
away and the hurricane is the active, vibrant figure? No, in Ward’s text, the hurricane
is inanimate, absent and the mother remains vibrant? Recall Faulkner’s impossible
line: “Then it wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she wasn’t.” Perhaps the
hurricane “wasn’t [dead]” and his mother “was [dead]”—the hurricane is alive and
his mother is dead. Or, the hurricane “wasn’t [dead]” and his mother “was [alive]”—
the fish is hurricane and the mother is alive. Just as death creates the relationship between the Vardaman’s absent mother and the chopped up fish in Faulkner’s novel, the hurricane has created a relationship between Junior’s torn up landscape and the memory of a mother who disappeared as soon as she gave birth to him. It is during the scene when the roof blows off the house, off the structure that contains the mother’s death and that divides interior human world from the exterior that we can see Ward’s language truly dissolving the boundary between these two concepts – between the human and the natural.

However, while the intricacies of the metaphor that Ward draws at the site of the house make clear that the human term has not been privileged over the natural, the agency that Ward grants the hurricane is ambivalent. Neither the mother figure nor the hurricane in fact opens the roof of the house. Instead, the sentence reads: “The roof opens.” In this scene, the only thing that the storm actually does is speak. Like Faulkner, Ward has opened the physical structure, simultaneously unmaking her linguistic structures. Is the voice that of the mother --or of the hurricane? Is it both? The ambiguity of what opens the roof, allows them to seize agency at the same time: “The storm screams. I have been waiting for you.” Although it is specifically the storm that speaks, has the human term finally overpowered the natural --what could be more human than language?

In order to understand how Ward renders this occurrence of speech as both an act of agency of the (dead) mother and the (inanimate) hurricane, we will have to examine how she unmakes the terms of personification.
Chapter III: Personification: The Human

*Introduction:*

While the previous section explored the binary of nature/society through the lens of metaphor by examining the linguistic relationship between *vehicle* and *tenor*, this section will delineate how Ward uses personification to challenge the terms of *person* and *thing*. Just as metaphor embeds a human centeredness within its structure, personification erects similar conventions in our language that Ward rethinks. By focusing throughout her text upon her use of a device that directly represents humans, the way that Ward provides agency to both her characters as well as to the hurricane in the climactic scene in the attic becomes clear. Again, she offers an insightful comment in the interview at the end of her novel:

> When you stand on a beach after a hurricane, the asphalt ripped from the earth, gas stations and homes and grocery stores disappeared, oak trees uprooted, without any of the comforts of civilization —no electricity, no running water, no government safety net —and all you have are your hands, your feet, your head, your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: you survive. You are a savage (268).

In order to both render the hurricane as more than an animate, inert force --and also to strip us down from the human to the “savage” that the Hurricane exposes, Ward must expose the way that we have defined and protected ourselves as human beings with language.
The device of personification proves a tool for her to unmake the aspects of our self-identities that render us different from our surroundings. The OED defines the literary device: “The attribution of a personal nature or human characteristic to something non-human, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form.” Personification depicts something non-human with human characteristics – but what is the distinction between “non-human” and “human”? Like metaphor, personification has two terms: person and thing. Personification explicitly privileges the human term by asserting that the nonhuman (thing) acts like the human (person). Ward does use single instances of personification in the most traditional sense: “the Pines whistle and whip, dance” (189). But at the sight of the house, she plays with personification in order to challenge the idea that two separate ontologies could be distinguished in language based upon not just a comparison—as in metaphor—but by one enacting the predetermined actions of another.

**Personification: the history of the person/thing binary**

The history of the formation and conventions of personification reveal this device’s foundation upon a distinction between humans and nonhumans based upon animation. Heather Keenleyside in her essay “Personification for the People: On James Thomson’s The Seasons” provides a brief history of personification, which developed from the union of two realms that had traditionally been defined as separate figures in language—that of speech and of action. Keenleyside cites Quintilian in order to contextualize how classical rhetoric had defined the speech under the category of prosopopoeia, and action under that of metaphor:
First, under the heading of “Prosopopoeia” or “personating Characters,” he describes a figure that occurs whenever we “speak, as it were, by the Mouth of others,” and “speak, as we suppose they would have spoken.” Quintilian imagines a striking variety of mouths by which one might speak: one’s own, or that of an adversary, a god, a ghost, a town, or Fame, as well as of “Boys, Women, People, [and] inanimate Objects.”

Quintilian distinguishes this figure that represents speech from a species of trope that represents action: those “bold, and what we may call dangerous, Metaphors, [that occur] when we give Life and Spirit to inanimated Objects.” Quintilian’s examples of this type of metaphor include poetic phrases like Virgil’s “The wond’ring Shepherd’s Ears drink in the Sound” and colloquial expressions like “the Fields are thirsty” (Keenleyside, 448).

Thus, while in classic rhetoric, metaphor functioned to bestow agency upon the “inanimate,” this agency was not explicitly linked to the human; prosopopoeia simply named the speech in language, applicable to both humans and nonhumans.

However, over the course of the 18th century, Keenleyside explains that Quintilian’s two literary devices were brought together as “personification.” Prosopopoeia came to be distinguished –most commonly—as the representation of the speech or action of “absent or dead human beings” while personification was reserved for “the speech or action of “nonhuman objects abstractions, or creatures” (Keenleyside, 468). Furthermore, the unification of metaphor and prosopopoeia in the new term of personification institutionalized an uncertainty about what makes a human in language: “Critical discussions of [personification] are marked by
difficulties that stem from this move, as writers try to work out what it means to set action or animation alongside speech on the side of persons, as attributes that are figuratively conferred on the side of persons, as attributes that are figuratively conferred on other kinds of beings” (Keenleyside, 449). In other words, authors had to decide if voice or action better depicted the agency of humans in language in order to render them distinct from everything else.

To establish personification, Keenleyside describes how most theorists chose action to define persons, problematizing a now erected binary of persons on the one hand and things on the other. Some theorists either sought to define explicitly what could be personified (e.g. ideas, objects, dead people, women, children, cities, gods) or else resigned to more vague classifications like “inanimate objects” and “every thing we can treat of.” And the other side of the figure – the person part – was also made less distinct: “While [one theorist, Francis] Johnson defines “person” as “human being,” the attributes that personification bestows properly belong, for [another, Henry Home, Lord] Kames, to “sensible beings” and for [yet another, Geoffrey] Beattie, to “animal life.” Is personification, then, distinct from animation?” (Keenleyside, 449). Furthermore, the range of attributes that the device was able to bestow multiplied: “sensibility, voluntary motion, life, action, affection, sympathy, perception, intelligence” (Keenleyside, 449). Keenleyside’s point is that by attributing most – if not all – actions to persons, every thing that lived and moved then had to be categorized as a person, or as a thing made into a person – a personification. Thus personification, which now named the event in language when a thing took on the characteristics of a person, erected a firm difference between humans and nonhumans
in language based upon *animation*. Therefore, what was not human was inanimate – except when under the category of personification.

Keenleyside contextualizes the device of personification as a move by literary critics and poets of the Age of Enlightenment to reject the “primitive” confusion between persons and things: they asserted their modernity by coining the term *personification* as a rhetorical device that made a controlled comparison (447).

However, Keenleyside comments: “On such a definition, the figure of personification can appear duplicitous, cloaking ontological uncertainty in a rhetorical move” (450).

Keenleyside analyzes the literary device of personification in the work of the eighteenth century poet James Thomson, which she argues intentionally exposes what personification tries to conceal —namely the uncertainty of what constitutes a person in language. Through Keenleyside’s perspective, the comparison between person and thing, in which attributes of the first are used to describe the latter, functions in Thomson’s text not to blur the terms but rather to collapse the binary itself (Keenleyside, 451).

Keenleyside’s analysis of Thomson’s blurring of persons and things parallels and contextualizes the way that Ward pulls apart personification. How could Ward animate the hurricane, but not personify it?

*Personification: Unmaking Humans from Persons*

In her book *Persons and Things*, literary theorist Barbara Johnson works to delineate a helpful distinction between persons and humans that separates language from materiality, words from flesh. Johnson explores the fundamental humanness of
prose with a simple linguistic convention. Rather than *address* the world around us – houses, trees, dogs—, we speak *about* it. In written language, despite dialogue and a few literary devices that allow the inanimate or the dead to speak (explored in Part IV), both human beings and nonhumans are described rather than spoken to directly. The effect is that it becomes difficult to distinguish human beings from everything else. Johnson pays close attention to personal pronouns; she paraphrases the linguist Emile Benveniste:

> In other words, the notion of “person” has something to do with presence at the scene of speech and seems to inhere in the notion of *address*. “I” and “you” are persons because they can either address or be addressed, while “he” can only be talked *about*. A person who neither addresses nor is addressed is functioning as a *thing* in the same way that being an *object* of discussion rather than a *subject* of discussion transforms everything into a thing (Johnson, 6).

Johnson presents the idea that in prose, human beings are rendered as things or objects: “persons,” as she terms humans in language, are our *ideas* of humanness, rather than human beings themselves. While usually people focus on the negative aspects of treating persons as things, as for instance a way to deny rights, Johnson asserts that it is the norm rather than the exception: "Rather than trying to invent a humanoid thing capable of passing ever more sophisticated Turing tests, in other words, our real impossible dream is precisely to learn to live in a world where persons treat persons as persons” (Johnson, 2). She illustrates the issue as one pertaining to language but also to self-conception: when we look in the mirror, we expect a version
of personhood that our own humanity will always disappoint. According to Johnson, this is the inclination of language, as it is far easier than dealing with the unimaginable complexities of these entities in full.

There are many implications of this unmaking: what is a person? What is a thing? Johnson would say that, in language, all things—including persons—are things and nothing is a human. While she names the terms of personification and anthropomorphism to explicitly rely upon a conception of the human form, her claim is that these figures are no different from our projections in other more informal uses of language (Johnson, 15). For Johnson, there is still a reason to study the depictions of persons and things: “Although often hotly denied, people’s relations with things contain or embody the hopes and fears they think belong to their relations with people. It is by studying the complexity of those relations that I have hoped to shed light on the human” (Johnson, 232). Therefore, Johnson positions us to examine how Ward distinguishes persons from things, in order to understand what she has to say about humanity in the face of the hurricane.

**Ward, personification**

I will first examine three instances of unmaking personification in order to establish what Ward has to say about what distinguishes a person from a thing in her novel. I will show how she establishes 1) only persons *see* and *craft* and 2) both persons and things *act*. These attributes, particular to how Ward distinguishes between persons and things at the site of the house, are more specific variations of the animation that Keenleyside has positioned to define persons and things in her
definition of personification. In each example, a house or a synonymous tool or structure, function as the thing. By determining first how Ward has destabilized personification throughout the novel in her depictions of houses, the climactic unmaking of persons and things in Ward’s language when the roof blows off during the storm, takes on its full depth.

**i. Persons: see**

This first example introduces the third crucial house that Ward depicts in her novel. Esch and Skeetah, on a rare occasion, leave the Pit. Skeetah is in search for cow wormer in order to treat China and the puppies for worms. Mother Lizabeth’s house does not provide such resources and so the two siblings dress in dark clothing and run through the woods to their neighbor’s house, which belongs to a white family. Instead of bestowing a human characteristic upon this house, Esch’s narration instead denies it one.

The house is plain from all angles: its white is faded to tan by the sun, and all the windows are shut with white curtains drawn over them. It’s a blind house with closed eyes. There’s a raised concrete porch running across the front of the house, and some rocking chairs, painted bright blue, the kind of bright blue I’ve seen on the lizards that live in the seams of our walls, that crouch still on the front porch. The barn is unpainted and tall, and the doors are shut. The wood is old and dark, like the kind of wood Papa Joseph used to build Mother Lizabeth’s house. It looks similar, as if all the walls are so old they’re about to peel away from each other at the edges (71).
It’s a blind house with closed eyes. Ward could have said that the inhabitants had shut the blinds but instead she gives the house more agency, choosing to call upon “closed eyes” to illustrate the functioning of the house. Skeetah told Esch before they left the Pit: “You got to change… Wear something green or brown or black. Don’t wear nothing white or tan” (65). Their assumption that somehow they will be seen emphasizes the difference between such an awareness of the characters as to their color versus the materiality of the house that is “blind.” On the one hand, Ward is “personifying” the house by giving it a human attribute, but on the other hand, this “human attribute” of blindness underscores its lack of agency and therefore its inanimate nature.

The contrast thus distinguishes the house, the human construction, from persons. Persons see. Esch sees that the outside of the house is white, like its inhabitants, while the porch --the threshold between the two-- is blue. Blue like that of lizards. Rather than the “drying animal skeleton” that defines the boundaries of Mother Lizabeth’s house in Chapter I, the blue characterizes the thresholds (e.g. the porch and the walls) that define each house from the surrounding environment. The animal creatures separate Esch’s house to a lesser extent than the paint of the other house, although Esch relies upon color rather than material differences to make her comparison.

The similarities drawn between Esch’s deceased grandparents’ house and the barn however, are material: the barn is “unpainted” and the “wood is old and dark,” like the kind of wood Papa Joseph used to build Mother Lizabeth’s house. Ward draws an uncomfortable parallel between the barn, which houses animals, and the
crumbling old structure where Esch’s Black grandparents lived: just as the Pit’s land caused an instability for Esch’s house so that White people could have foundations for their houses, the materials without paint hold the truth of the social organization of the previous generation. Unlike the description of the houses held together by color however, the barn and Mother Elizabeth’s house have walls “so old they’re about to peel away from each other at the edges.” While the house cannot see, the walls of the dilapidated structures can peel: when the wood peaks from underneath, the materials lain bare, and the human beings gone, there is no difference—at least as divided by neighborhood and race lines—between the structures. The house’s closed (and blind) eyes allows Ward to make known that while the persons in her novel see the world divided by the boundaries of color, these divisions are not upheld in the substances of their world.

While conventionally personification explains the “nonhuman” by giving it “human” attributes, in the above example of the house Ward denies an attribute in order to make a distinction between the two. If she had given the house sight, what would the human characteristic have revealed about the house? Sight would have allowed the house to take on a characteristic of a human without acknowledgement, to infuse the human construction of a house with an aspect of humanity itself. Race heightens the stakes of Ward’s distinction: if the house, the material itself, could see, race would be naturalized in the materials themselves. Instead, the house is blind and therefore, in the comparison named in “human” terms, able to reveal a characteristic that defines persons from houses in her novel—their tendency to draw lines in the world based on color. Ward therefore establishes and problematizes sight as a
characteristic of the persons rather than of the things in her novel.

**ii. Persons: craft/act upon**

The second example that defines a “person” characteristic in Ward’s text centers upon Esch’s house when the hurricane is very near. Rather than involve the entire structure in a relationship with persons, Ward takes us inside. In this scene, all the persons within are rendered inanimate, while all the man-made things – tractors, chicken coops, bottles, TVs, windows — that unused by the characters become animated. By denying a characteristic that readers assume persons to unanimously possess, Ward reveals the second attribute that defines persons from – not houses, but rather — their own tools in her text: the ability to *act upon/craft*.

Now Daddy sleeps. He hasn’t slept this late since the week after Mama died, when I found him at the table, on the sofa, beside the sink in the bathroom, in the hallway, his torso over the threshold, his legs out. Cans and bottles, mostly beer, lay about him like smaller versions of himself wherever he was. The sun is over the tops of the trees, flooding down into the small clearing around the house. All of the fans are blowing at all of the windows, so the house hums as if it is alive. Big Henry sleeps on the sofa. Randall is snoring in his room. Daddy’s door is closed. The chicken coop stands with three walls still, the tractor lightly touching it as if providing a thick, rubber-muscled shoulder to lean on. Junior is watching a rerun of *Reading Rainbow*, the volume so low it is barely louder than the fans. He does not turn it up (133).
Foremost, Ward’s characters do not move: every single one is either asleep or else being acted upon by something else. The passage lists everyone’s location in the house. Big Henry sleeps; Randall snores; Daddy’s door has been closed (passive voice); Junior is watching television and does not turn it up; Esch, the narrator, is presumably awake but the reader receives no clues—and is fact, impossibly disoriented, unless she is moving around— as to her placement in this scene. Just as Ward does not allow these characters to command verbs (thus making them into the objects rather than the subjects of her sentences), she confuses Esch’s father with the things around him. First, he is merely found: he never gets a verb after “sleeps.” But then, in the third sentence, which details where Esch found him—“at the table, on the sofa, beside the sink in the bathroom, in the hallway”—, Ward’s use of commas to suggest not that he moved around, but that he was everywhere at once. Furthermore, the things that lay about him are “cans and bottles, mostly beer,” which are “like smaller versions of himself wherever he was.” The explicit comparison does not dictate an analysis of the way her father was like a can of beer, but rather falls under the classification of metonymy, a version of metaphor where one part represents the whole: her father is an alcoholic and so therefore, cans of beer represent him. However, by dulling the use of metonymy with the like, the depiction further loosens the cans and bottles from their owner. Continuing to emphasize the juxtaposition between persons and things, once Ward has rendered her characters without the ability to act upon their surroundings, Ward’s gives agency to the things around them.

Things, as opposed to persons, are the subjects in the passage. Two sentences stand out: “All of the fans are blowing at all of the windows, so the house hums as if
it is alive” and “The chicken coop stands with three walls still, the tractor lightly touching it as if providing a thick, rubber-muscled shoulder to lean on.” The fans *blow*, the house *hums*, the chicken coop *stands*, the tractor *touches*, which allows the chicken coop to *lean* upon it. Are these man-made elements of the landscape acting on their own? Jane Bennett, who contributed the imaginative reading of bones in Chapter I, suggests that “objects” that are imbued with human meaning become obsolete, take on the agency of “things,” when they are all together without human beings around: “In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics… I glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects” (Bennett, 5). Bennett defines “things” as actual physical objects rather than their renditions in literature, but her comments helps to break down what Ward accomplishes in her list: when not one but many inanimate objects receive such power of movement in succession, they take on their own agency. However, all of these man-made devices do not in fact *impact* or change anything else. Ward has made the distinction between persons and the human tools and structures, based upon the ability to *craft* to alter. Thus, now we know that persons (unlike the constructions of houses) can see and (unlike the constructors themselves), can craft.

**iii. Persons and Things: Act**

The third example, and the last before we arrive at the site of the house’s destruction, reveals what type of animation persons and houses share in common. The
only consistent term compared to the house throughout the novel is that of a human hand. Unlike the first two examples in my analysis above, in which houses could not see nor craft, in this grouping of examples, things and persons share animation when it is explicitly part of the human body. Ward therefore makes possible that the house can possess the *same* agency as the persons in her novel when there is an explicitly shared physical relationship between the two terms.

Furthermore, the analogy is first involved in a relationship between a simile, second in a metaphor, and then finally a personification: the simile and the metaphor between the same two terms function to show the reader how personification, the transfer of action, is the only term that can allow persons and things to share animation in the face of the oncoming storm. The first example illustrates the shed where China gave birth, where Skeetah now takes care of her and her puppies. While watching the dogs, Esch comments: “Even though we are in the shade, the heat is worse in the shed, like the inside of a hot fist” (99). The simile compares the microenvironment within the shed to the sweating, enclosed space within a clenched hand. A fist is not passive: while it may not move, it is a suspended action. One made in preparation—to fight. However, the building of the shed, the attempt from Skeetah to protect China, to defy the forces of life and death, has proved to in fact make worse the effect of the natural environment: “the heat is worse in the shed.” Thus, the simile serves to emphasize the disparity between the way that human beings act upon the physical environment and the way it actually functions: our preparations are misguided.
Metaphor erects a similar difference. Much closer to the event of the hurricane, after Esch and her brothers have completed the preparations on their house that their father has dictated, the siblings go outside: “Randall and Junior and I have been sitting in the yard for the past hour or so, jobs done; the house is too dark, too hot. It is a closed fist” (191). The “closed eyes” from the previous reading had served to give the house agency—the ability to close—yet its blindness worked personification to create a difference between the order of the material structure of the house and the social order that Esch saw when she looked at it. However, the redundancy of the “closed fist” (because a fist by definition must be closed) does not imply action but rather renders the house without agency: the metaphor serves to contrast the way that a human can close or open her hands, can make things, yet what she makes is stuck in the form that she makes it in. Furthermore, although Esch and her brothers have worked on the house to close it from the external world, it is uninhabitable. It itself is too dark and too hot to live in: they go outside.

Ward’s use of simile and metaphor position Ward’s last unmaking of personification to step in to adequately blend the action of hands and houses: they both resist the oncoming storm. The materiality of the person and the thing finally become equally vulnerable, equally capable, which Ward accomplishes not by taking away agency of persons, but rather by making human and nonhuman agency explicitly one and the same. Ward does this by conflating personification (thing taking on characteristics of a person) with anthropomorphism (thing acting like a person), using animation to intentionally connect the persons with the things in the face of the storm: “[Randall] walks between the thumb and pointer finger of the
house, it clenches, and he is gone. The day goes cloudy, and stays” (193). Now, not only is the house an aspect of the human form, but Ward allows it to move like one: “it clenches.” Before facing the hurricane, the house braces itself. The characters brace themselves by going into their house. The storm is very near now: Randall “is gone” and the day has gone cloudy. Right before the storm, both persons and things have animation –both act.

**Hurricane: Persons and Thing**

Leading up to the hurricane Ward renders persons with the ability to see and to craft materials, while both persons and things can act when it is an action explicitly human. When the house is unmade however, Ward redistributes this composition of agency.

“Move,” Randall says. “Junior, go by Esch.” And I feel Junior’s little pin fingers on my wrists, and he bangs into something, and he is a monkey on top of the bucket, locked to my lap. “I got it.”

Randall is swinging something in the dark, and when it crashes into the roof, it makes a dent, a chink of light. He bashes the wood, grunts. Whatever he swings is making a hole. He swings it again, and the wood opens to a small hole no bigger than my finger, and I see that he is swinging the chainsaw, hitting the roof with the blunt end.

“Any gas” --Randall bashes --”in here?”
“Can’t remember,” Daddy yells. The storm speaks through the hole, funnels wind and rain through. We squint towards it. The water is over my crotch. The house lists.

Randall cranks once, twice. He pulls the cord back a third time and it catches, and the saw buzzes to life. He shoves it through the finger-wide opening, cuts a jagged line, draws it back out, cuts another jagged line, a parenthesis, before it chugs to a stop. He tries to crank it again, but it will not start. He swings again, and the closed eyelid he drew with the cutting saw, with the blows, flutters, and the roof opens. The storm screams, *I have been waiting for you*. Light floods the flooded attic, close as a coffin. Randall grabs Junior, who swings around and clings to his back, his small hands tight as clothespins, and Randall climbs out and into the hungry maw of the storm. (230).

### Hurricane: Persons and Things

Harkening back to the first textual example in this chapter, in which persons were defined with the ability to *see*, Ward here unmakes this characteristic by rendering the human constructed, the house, and the persons with the same sight.

Upon a second trip to her white neighbor’s house in the hours leading up to storm for more supplies, Esch, now with Randall, describes the way that the other family has prepared for the hurricane in contrast with their own preparations: “They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids” (208). While the
boards are tighter, smoother, --evocative of Cash’s attention to the coffin--, that protect this house, by repeating the word “eyelid” in such close succession with its use in this particular scene, Ward implies that no matter how tightly shut these eyes are, they will open in the hurricane. Back in Esch’s house in the scene above, “The closed eyelid [Randall] drew with the cutting saw, blows, flutters, and the roof opens.” Furthermore, what the house lays bare is sight: when it opens its eyes it lets in light: “Light floods the flooded attic, close as a coffin.” What the house sees is what Esch sees: light is like water is like the darkness within a coffin. The confusion is that insides have been turned inside out: for a moment, Esch, narrating, cannot orient herself. To know the moment of the hurricane, the structures that have been built relinquish their hold on how Esch experiences her world. It would make more sense to name the house as a coffin before the roof comes off the house, indicating the threat of death for Esch and her family. But the fact that Ward only uses this term once the roof is off supports the reading from Chapter II of the house both opening what has contained the death of Esch’s mother and also what has divided Mother Nature from a human interior. Sight, the animation Ward has established for persons to differentiate between colors, to determine boundaries of human order, has been reinvented as what all materiality sees: light.

Looking back to the second example in my first analysis, which defined persons with the ability to craft, Ward unmakes this characteristic by rendering the human constructor, the saw, with such agency instead –although only when it is off. In the height of the hurricane therefore, things craft material and persons do not. When it involves an impact on materiality, the swinging motion does not belong to
persons: the chainsaw swings five times in this passage, each time on its own volition. Although Randall ostensibly wields the chainsaw, grammatically, he never actually does anything: “when it crashes into the roof, it makes a dent,” “whatever he swings is making a hole,” “the wood opens,” “the roof opens.” In his publication “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown contributes a distinction between objects that serve human purposes and things that do not: “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown, 4). Accordingly, Randall only gains agency when the “saw buzzes to life,” which gives him power and control: he “cuts a jagged line, draws it back out, cuts another jagged line.” A theorist who refers to Brown’s thing theory, Jonathan Lamb, articulates things in The Things Things Say as “obstinately solitary, superficial, and self-evident, sometimes in flight but not in our direction; they communicate directly only with themselves, and have no value in the market that they reckon” (Lamb, xi). Ward frustrates Lamb’s conviction that things cannot revert to or become objects: the chainsaw goes off again and, in this state, manages to accomplish what Randall had intended and failed to do. Ward takes the “self-evidence” of Lamb’s definition of a thing a step further to designate an ability to act on its own not just in a realm of thingness but in relation to persons. Thus, in the face of the hurricane, persons can no longer wield human physical tools –the tools make their own impact on the house.

Ward unmakes the characteristic of crafting once more by rendering persons with agency the same as the saw, the human constructor –although only when it is
Furthermore, the only impact that persons manage to craft in this scene is in fact language itself. Ward draws attention to this move by setting up an analogy to what *Randall* himself manages to do with the chainsaw to language itself: Randall makes a “a parenthesis.” She repeats this move throughout the novel: “his glance is a comma” (21); “He twists like a question mark” (164); “He claps in exclamation marks, over and over” (165); “Randall’s hip eats the end of the word” (227). These instances are evenly distributed throughout the text, although take on especially weight in this relationship with the theme of the house. By making frantic strokes into a roof into a “parenthesis,” Randall demonstrates how the one tool that is explicitly human—namely, language—attempts to order materiality. This is perhaps the only tool that human beings have left when their houses fail to protect them from the outside and then their chainsaws fail to protect them from the inside of their houses. Harkening back to the theme of physical and linguistic structures in Chapter I, the human effort to order the world with physical structures here explicitly collapses with that with linguistic structures.

Returning to the third example, which defined both persons and things with the same animation (i.e. of the fist), Ward now unmakes this relationship by rendering the same part of the human body—fingers—as distinct from the animation of persons. When the house still dictates their environment at the start of the passage, Junior’s fingers appear as “little pin fingers,” while at the end this extends to “hands as tight as clothespins.” However, fingers work to do more. The finger appears first as a noun, “a small hole no bigger than my finger” and then oddly, as an adjective: “the finger-wide opening.” Keenleyside, who grapples specifically with the ontological
uncertainty behind the blurring of person and thing in personification, orients Ward’s repetition of the same word in different grammatical contexts as a move to both bestow and take away human agency in relation to the same terms (Keenleyside, 457). Keenleyside thus offers the contortion of personification as an answer to the problem that one body part, presented in so many different contexts, poses. When fingers are pins, the tightness of clothespins, or even a width value, they become both capable of moving and of being moved without human beings. While in this scene, persons craft materiality and language, human hands have an agency of their own. Therefore, as distinct from persons, human hands cannot craft nor use language, human beings and become merely a composition of moving parts, vibrant only as material. While in preparation for the hurricane, persons and things shared animation that seemed explicitly human (i.e. the fist), when the house has being pulled apart in the storm, Ward emphasizes the materiality of human beings –something that neither physical nor linguistic crafting can counter. Ward has therefore uncovered the human from the person.

If human beings therefore have been exposed by Ward’s enigmatic yet meticulous pulling apart of each of the characteristics typically associated with persons in language, how does she represent the hurricane? She gives the storm speech. Is she therefore a thing? A person? A human? The storm is not a thing because things have been rendered as only constructors of materiality and the hurricane does not in fact act upon the house: “The roof opens.” The storm is not a person because its language is in the form of speech rather than the crafting of material/linguistic structures that Randall exemplifies with the “parenthesis.”
Reduced to many different physical parts (recall the all-encompassing mother metaphor in Chapter II), perhaps it is like the disoriented fingers of the human? But it is not depicted as material but rather the opposite, only in speech. What differs about this speech event from the characters’ dialogue at the beginning of the passage? At last we reach the final literary device, the origin, mother term of personification: prosopopoeia.

**Part IV: Prosopopoeia**

While Heather Keenleyside narrated in the previous chapter that *prosopopoeia* marked the use of all speech in classic rhetoric, the term is now more narrowly defined as 1) “a figure of speech in which an abstract thing is personified” and 2) “a figure of speech in which an imagined, or dead person or thing is represented as speaking” (OED). Thus, although one deceased and the other of a storm, the voices of both Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* and of Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* are named by this figure. Literary critic Barbara Johnson, who distinguished persons and things in literature from human beings in the flesh in Chapter III, contributes a rich understanding of the work of *prosopopoeia*, providing one lens through which to understand the device in these texts.

Johnson’s text *Persons and Things* discusses *prosopopoeia* as one of the most exciting moves an author can make to acknowledge rather than describe a “person” in language: “There seems to be an easy way to treat a thing as a person, then: address it, turn it into an interlocutor or a least a listener through the rhetorical power of language. I would like to explore here the major rhetorical figures by which this act of
animation is achieved” (Johnson, 6). Johnson makes clear that the project of rendering a human in language may be just as difficult as rendering a nonhuman – through the device of prosopopoeia however, she positions speech as the ultimate action of animation, of empowerment through language. Prosopopoeia differs from those of personification or anthropomorphism, which Johnson imagines as rhetorical figures that are primarily “unconscious constraint[s] on imagination.” Conversely, Johnson articulates prosopopoeia as an example of direct animation.

While prosopopoeia is most commonly used to give voice to the dead, Johnson elaborates that this voice not only allows the dead to come alive, reversing the progress towards death, but also almost always functions to warn of death: “the eternity he now enters consists entirely of consciousness of the shortness of life” (Johnson, 14). Within Ward’s text therefore, Johnson foremost positions the words, “I have been waiting for you,” as a reflection of the hurricane and of the mother: death and birth are always latent, always waiting to erupt, to be known. The storm’s words can apply both to the deceased mother character to express her guidance, her love, as well as to the hurricane to relay her violent will. Interestingly, Addie’s speech in *As I Lay Dying* is a much longer mediation on life and death – why? Why does Ward limit the hurricane to this short statement rather than to narrate, like Addie, as another character?

Johnson draws an apt connection between the literary device of prosopopoeia and an epitaph, speaking to the brevity of Ward’s use of a speech event. “Sometimes the deceased is addressed by survivors, but an epitaph must be short (short enough to be carved on a tomb), and must mark memory, not display the mourner. The author
must write like every mourner” (Johnson, 13). Both Faulkner and Ward explicitly root their uses of prosopopoeia in physical structures, supporting Johnson’s grounding in a physical permutation. Faulkner explores death at length with this literary tool. Ward merely marks her main characters’ house with a brief speech event. Yet for both, the act of speech marks an impossible marking of memory in language, a capturing of a moment in between life and death, destruction and creation. Johnson pushes upon the instinct of epitaph in language, expanding it to apply to the same one that inspires the author’s voice:

What an epitaph accomplishes, then, is what all literature has to accomplish: to make poetry that convinces the reader that the poet speaks, that the poem gives access to his living voice—even though the individual author may have been buried for more than two hundred years. A text: speaks… Prosopopoeia is thus the figure for reading. (Johnson, 14).

Johnson suggests that Addie and the hurricane’s voice particularly open the text up to Faulkner himself, to Ward herself—to their living voices.

Johnson asserts that prosopopoeia in poetry “should not ultimately be up to something that cannot be assumed by a voice, a living speaker, a human mind” (Johnson, 14). Unlike Faulkner however, pondering the limitations of human structures to conceive and to name death, Ward has raised the stakes of Johnson’s imagination of prosopopoeia. Ward’s figure is not a deceased person but rather a human memory, a physical event, a mother, a destroyer, human, vibrant, natural personal—she is Ward herself. The act of direct speech penetrates the conventions of language more deeply in Salvage the Bones. Ward, for whom, language is her own
agency, her own salvation, does not just seize language for herself but she draws in her reader to a relationship: “I have been waiting for you.” She draws you, the reader, into this impossible moment where the structures of houses and of language have fallen away and she allows her reader to share this moment of chaos— to share the event of Hurricane Katrina.
Conclusion

A good friend of mine, a biology major at Wesleyan, wondered why I had spent an entire academic year reading one book. He got himself a copy and read it slowly: he said he wondered what I was seeing. His comment when he finished the novel has stuck with me: “It feels like she has created a bunch of different trails, an entire map of them, and then she leaves you to explore.” This image captures the rich and dynamic world that Ward has created in *Salvage the Bones*. My process of analyzing and pondering, reaching and discovering, has given me an enormous appreciation for Ward’s linguistic fluency and craft.

My intention was to create a finished analysis that straddled the two disciplines of English and environmental studies. The ambition left me often working at the drawing board – rationalizing the value of words to the fields of ecology and conservation, imagining the value of the physical world in literature: the binary between humanity and nature was blatant in my own choice of majors and in the discourses I wished to unite. Along the way, it also became evident how divided my own thinking was. I thought that Ward completely collapsed the human world into a larger, more encompassing ecosystem – and she showed me the strength in language as creation rather than deconstruction. I thought that her language could impossibly reach for and empower inert matter, nature, things we don’t understand – and she showed me that the best way to do this might in fact be with human terms.

As Ward has demonstrated, thinking about how connected we are as human beings to our immediate environments pushes upon the limits of our language as well
as our emotional equilibrium. It hurts to think that a mother could be a hurricane –that a hurricane could be a mother. It hurts to imagine our identities as human beings without falling back upon the conventions that render us in words. But the greatest challenge is to recognize how our language has overlooked the important issues embedded in our world, how unprepared we were to understand Hurricane Katrina and how unprepared we are to continue to think about it.

Ward’s use of language in Salvage the Bones exemplifies the level of creativity needed to push our language to capture a world that no longer fits into its conventions. Of a changing climate that is now more forcefully disobeying our human structures. Ward’s novel deserves a second reading –a third. Her destabilization of language has forged a map of new trails to be explored, each demanding new tools, new concerns, new discoveries –new questions.
Works Cited


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