A Seat Above the Floodline

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By the time the water reached the curb outside my block in D.C., I stopped thinking of home as something stable and started thinking of it as evidence. The smell was gasoline, sewage, wet concrete, and everything neighbors could not carry out in time. I had a backpack, a phone at twelve percent, and nowhere dry to go. It is 2038, and after days of extreme heat, a sudden storm overwhelms D.C.'s drainage system and floods streets, basements, Metro entrances, and low-lying neighborhoods near the Anacostia and Potomac. This scenario feels possible because Craig shows that climate change is already forcing Americans to rethink about where they can safely live as flooding, heat, and other disasters reshape the meaning of home (Craig). In that moment, climate change would not just feel like a future problem. It would feel like a question raised directly at me: Where do you go when the place holding your life can no longer hold you? As a Nigerian from D.C., I already see that movement is never as simple as people make it sound. People do not leave home because it is easy. Sometimes they leave because staying has become impossible, or because another place seems to promise a better life. After the flood, my family would not only be looking for shelter we would be looking for hospitality. Through James J. Brown, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Langston Hughes, I would learn that climate migration is not just about moving from one place to another. It is about who gets welcomed, who gets filtered, who gets treated like a problem, and who gets allowed to belong. My options after the flood would be real, but every one of them would come with conditions. I could try to stay in D.C., but with roads flooded, power out, Metro stations closed, house damaged, and work disordered, staying would become a gamble. I could leave for Maryland, Virginia, Atlanta, or Ithaca, but leaving would not always mean safety. It would mean needing a valid ID, a working phone, proof of address, transportation, citizenship, and enough savings to survive before any help arrived. Climate migrants often do not fit in neatly into existing refugee protections as Ionesco argues, people displaced by climate change fall outside international refugee law and often depend on the goodwill of receiving communities rather than enforceable rights (Ionesco). I would be displaced, but not always legally protected. I would need help, but I might still have to prove that I deserved it. James J. Brown helped me understand why asking for help after the flood could feel so bureaucratic, even when people claim to care. Brown argues that hospitality is not only a warmhearted feeling. It can also become an "ethical program," a set of procedures that depends on how arrivals are handled, sorted, welcomed, or turned away (Brown 5). After the flood, I would experience hospitality through programs the FEMA portal, the shelter intake form, the insurance claim, the emergency housing list, and the ID verification step that cannot be skipped even if my wallet is underwater. Brown's otherness between unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality matters because these disasters expose how conditional most forms of help really are (Brown 6-7). People might say, "We welcome everyone," but the system might still also ask for the right document, zip code, deadline, or legal status. Brown helps me see that the issue is not only individual kindness. The rules themselves must change. Jhumpa Lahiri helped me understand the feeling of being close to comfort without really having access to it. In "The Boundary," the narrator's family lives beside a vacation house they help maintain, but they are separated from it by "a tall hedge that becomes a kind of screen" (Lahiri 1). That image shows how exclusion does not always be seen as a locked gate. Sometimes it looks like being near the house, near the table, near the comfort, but still not fully inside. This connects to post-flood D.C. The city can look powerful from the outside because of its monuments, federal buildings, universities, restaurants, lifestyles and offices. But behind that image are workers, families, immigrants, students, and longtime residents whose lives are more fragile than the city's official image show. After a major flood, the people who tolerate the daily life of the city could be the first displaced and the last helped. Lahiri also reminds me that displacement is not always caused by weather. In the story, the narrator's father is confronted by men who tell him to "go back to wherever you came from" (Lahiri 5). That scene matters because the father is displaced by violence, racism, and humiliation, not just by economics. In 2038, the flood might be the visible disaster, but it would not be the only force deciding who belongs. Some people are pushed out long before the water arrives. Climate change would show boundaries that were already there. Langston Hughes would offer something different from Brown and Lahiri. He would offer refusal. In "I, Too," Hughes claims America without asking for permission: "I, too, sing America" (Hughes line 1). He then names exclusion plainly: "I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen , When company comes" (Hughes lines 2-4). But the poem does not stay in shame. Hughes change the kitchen into a place of preparation and the table into a sign of belonging. Tomorrow, he says, he will sit at the table, and they will see his beauty and be ashamed (Hughes lines 8-18). In 2038, Hughes would not let me confuse a cot in a gym with real hospitality. A cot might keep me alive for a night, but it would not mean I belonged. Climate migrants from D.C. would need more than temporary kindness. They would need housing, transportation, school access, healthcare, and a real claim on the communities receiving them. As a Nigerian, I know how quickly people can turn migration into suspicion. People ask where you are from, but sometimes what they really mean is a question of whether you belong. In a climate disaster, that question would become even more complicated. I might be, Nigerian, displaced, Black, a student, a worker, a son, and a stranger all at once. Brown helps me understand the systems that would sort me. Lahiri helps me understand the boundaries that might keep me close but not included. Hughes helps me refuse the idea that needing help makes me less worthy of belonging. These three writers give me something real, but they also have limits. Brown gives me a map of the system, but not the power to change it by myself. Lahiri gives me language for the boundary, but her story ends with the hedge still standing (Lahiri). Recognition is not the same as transformation. Hughes gives me self-respect and disobedience, but tomorrow is a promise, not a guarantee. Still, together, they give me a way to name what is happening. In 2038, the question would not only be where the water went. It would be where the people went after the water receded, and what kind of welcome was waiting for them. D.C. would force the country to answer what this course has been asking all semester: what do we owe the stranger standing at our door with wet clothes, a dead phone, and no home to return to?

Works Cited

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