

An aerial photograph showing a city area completely inundated with brown floodwater. Three large, modern buildings with white and grey facades are visible, surrounded by lush green trees and vegetation. The water level is high, reaching the rooftops of some structures and completely submerging the surrounding landscape. The scene conveys a sense of isolation and the impact of natural disasters.

A CITY UNDER SIEGE

In summer, communities throughout Queensland experienced their worst flooding in decades. In Brisbane and other towns, people are still working to rebuild, both physically and emotionally.

STORY BY **ASHLEY HAY**



Islands in the stream.

Apartment blocks in Brisbane's riverside suburb of St Lucia, near the University of Queensland, were inundated by the floodwaters on 13 January 2011.

IT'S THURSDAY 13 JANUARY 2011, and I'm cutting through backyards, looking for a way into my street. All around me, the hollows and divots of the landscape have been filled in with a thick, brown liquid, more sludge than water.

I think I know water: I look through a glass of the stuff, admire the meniscus, maybe notice the way it curves or enlarges whatever sits behind its lens. I know the way it foreshortens the distance of its depth, misleading a hand that reaches in to scoop something from beneath. I know the way it ebbs and flows as waves run in and out along a coastal shore, the ocean's blue thinned down to the clear nothingness of a series of runnels, a ripple of foam.

This water is solid and alien. Anything engulfed by it – the post of a street sign, the trunk of a tree, the body of a car – is so obscured that it might have disappeared altogether. Cut off, truncated, a street sign, a tree, a car, look less like themselves than like abstract shapes and forms, a scatter of children's building blocks. I walk along the last driveway, and I'm in my street, opposite my house. Small, yellow, its under-storey has disappeared beneath this impossible surface of rilling mud, the water spilling across the front lawn to mark its high tide, a few crucial centimetres below our floorboards. I can't make sense of our home, of the absence of its garage, its front steps, and the white palings that skirt its foundations. It floats next to the other houses in our street, some submerged to their gutters, some to their window frames.

The comings and goings that give this street a busyness and activity have disappeared along with all the day's normal sounds – engines, brakes, voices, even birdsong. Other, unfamiliar, sounds take their place. The outboard motor of a boat, launched from someone's driveway. The rhythmic thrum of a generator, trying to keep some of the street's fridges operational now that the power is out. It's as if I've sunk into a deep bath of water and the world has fallen mostly silent, except for the odd plumbing gurgle, the odd movement of something hard against the bath's solid tub.

I am holding my breath, taut with uneasiness. Perhaps this feeling started when the rain began in September and kept falling. Or October, when the Bureau of Meteorology issued briefs about a La Niña event that was not, it said, "a run-of-the-mill La Niña". Or when our garden reached saturation in November, or a cyclone crossed the far north Queensland coast on Christmas Day and turned into a vast, rain-bearing low. Or when the weather alerts issued by the Brisbane City Council shifted from "heavy rain and localised flash flooding" to the locations where sandbags could be collected. Or when the park behind us became so waterlogged that several families of ducks moved in. Or when the rain fell and fell through the first days of



the new year, its noise ramping up until it didn't seem possible for any greater volume to fall from the sky – although it did.

FLYING NORTH TO CAIRNS the previous Monday, I had looked down at the sinuous shape of Brisbane's river, meandering through so many switchbacks and turns that even after almost three years of living in its city, I still found its shape hard to reproduce. The plane climbed, and I traced the river's line back as far as I could, up towards Colleges Crossing where the tide still pulls, 100km in from Moreton Bay.

Sailing north along Australia's coast aboard the *Endeavour* in 1770, Joseph Banks had hypothesised about the existence of this large river from the "dirty clay colour" he saw in the ocean north of Cape Moreton, and it was this river that dictated ▶



Army of helping hands.

About 12,500 volunteers a day were bussed to the worst-affected suburbs like Rosalie (above) to help with the clean up. In fact, there were so many helpers that hundreds were turned away. At writer Ashley Hay's inner-Brisbane house (left) water rose to just a few centimetres below the floorboards – the level of Ashley's elbows.

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Ashley Hay is a novelist and freelance journalist based in Brisbane. Her last journal story was *Out of the shadows* (AG 102) about convict sites now on the World Heritage list.



the position of a British penal settlement more than 50 years later. The major tributaries of the Brisbane River include the Stanley River to the north, the Bremer River to the south, and Lockyer Creek to the west – and its catchment measures some 14,000sq.km, into which is etched over 28,000km of streams. There’s nothing unusual about a city built on a river – what makes Brisbane unusual is the confluence of its floodplains, a metropolitan population, and rainfall that comes in tropical lumps, hard and fast, rather than being spread out more leisurely across a full year.

That morning, I had packed an umbrella in case of rain in the north. But I hadn’t thought to pack up my house against the weight of rain in the south. Passing over Rockhampton, I’d seen the town stranded in a vast milky-brown puddle. Queensland

had been flooding since 10 December 2010, when 1000 people were evacuated from Theodore. By 10 January, towns including Condamine, Dalby, Chinchilla and Bundaberg had gone under and government workers were being shipped around the state to work as flood recovery and relief staff.

From several thousand feet up, Rockhampton had looked static, arrested. There wasn’t a single flicker of movement visible: no cars, no boats, no people. “So that’s what a flood looks like,” I had thought. And on I had gone.

Even later, watching the terrible footage of walls of water crashing through Toowoomba, hearing about its shocking progress through the Lockyer Valley, through the town of Grantham, twisting cars, ripping buildings apart, picking up houses and depositing them in the middle of roads, or paddocks, the story



Beyond control.

Two men (left) watch as water thunders over the Fairbairn Dam spillway near Emerald, 250km inland from Rockhampton. A car passenger (below) waves for help as a flash flood with fatal consequences rips through downtown Toowoomba on 10 January 2011.



Predictions of the flood's height crept up and up, towards the markers of the famous 1974 floods – which had submerged our house to its windowsills – and up another metre, maybe more. I lay awake, imagining the water creeping through our rooms, inflating our clothes, lapping over our furniture. I imagined our books floating quietly free from their shelves to drift on the water's surface. I imagined that surface would be blue, like an ocean, clean and clear. And I wondered how long I could hold my breath.

I flew back to Brisbane on Wednesday 12 January, 12 hours before the flood's peak. At five the following morning our neighbours sent us a text message: "Your home safe. Water already dropped one inch."

S O HERE I AM where I can begin, standing in my waterlogged street on that hot summer's day, looking at this stranded world, wondering when I'll come up to the surface. Wondering how to make sense of this space. Wondering what will happen next.

The tinnie revs its engine and sets out over submerged bitumen and people's fences and a chequerboard of sports fields. "The number of times I drove round here," says someone, "and I never realised how much lower one end of the street is than the other." Our house is the most southerly in a row of five, and the only one without water in its rooms. It has never seemed that much higher than anyone else's. Then again, our street has never felt particularly close to the river. And as quickly as the water has come, it goes – by the day's next high tide, midafternoon, our lawn has reappeared. And our lemon myrtle, *Backhousia citroidia*, a rainforest tree optimistically planted on this suburban block, has burst into blossom as if it has finally, finally had enough to drink.

We can walk back into our house then, stand on our back deck and survey our strange new water view as the apex of our ▶

was still about other people in other places. And then, overnight, the confluence of those water-soaked events finally became Brisbane's story. What I knew of water, what I thought I knew of how it looked and what it did, was about to be washed away.

By Tuesday 11 January, more than 30 of Brisbane's suburbs were at risk and my husband had phoned asking what I wanted him to pack in the one carload of belongings he'd be able to drive across town when he took our son to his parents'. The park where those ducks were living had completely filled, and the water was still rising. Ahead of it, my husband watched waves of flightless insects, arachnids and lizards – spiders, beetles, cockroaches, skinks – as they moved across the grass. "There are leeches scaling the house walls," he told me, "trying to get out of the way."

LEFT: JODIE RICHTER/NEWSPIX
RIGHT: REUTERS/STRINGER AUSTRALIA

Inescapable sludge.

Alice Richter-Ward (right) sweeps brown ooze from the steps of her Ryan Street home in West End, a low-lying riverside suburb of Brisbane. In Brisbane City, the river peaked at 4.46m on 13 January, flooding more than 25,000 homes and leaving 100,000 without power.

washing line reappears, topped by an immigrant green plastic chair. “We’ll clean up that big puddle,” says our two-year-old, “before we play in the yard.”

By Friday morning the water has drained away completely, uncovering a strange, monochrome world – everything flood-touched has been blanched to a palette of sepia, grey, and drab, dun brown. It’s the cliché of a wartime trench, the cliché of a wasteland, and the colours that remain above the high-water mark – house paint, clothes, unsullied leaves and occasional flowers – seem impossibly bright.

You know the story of the volunteers who come: 25,000 register, and the Brisbane City Council estimates that up to four times that number are actively involved. People who had lived through the benchmark 1974 flood estimate that a cleanup that took three months back then was achieved in three days this time. Friends come; family come; people we have never seen before and will never see again help us separate detritus from salvage. A physiotherapist carefully washes martini glasses

The water has drained away completely, uncovering a strange, monochrome world.

that were stored under the house. A shadow of Goths from the Gold Coast painstakingly scrubs piece after tiny piece of Lego. Our nephews fiddle with the Christmas decorations we’ve collected over the past decade, one a year, tilting and tipping them so that thick water oozes from their crevices. A group of three women – mothers, with toddlers our son’s age farmed out somewhere – unpacks crate after crate of the research notes and notebooks that I’ve turned into books, papering our muddy backyard with muddy sheets of A4 as if the dirt, the stench, might fade in the bright summer sun and bleach the archive back to its original condition. After a few days, I bundle the hard, dry sheets together and throw them out. Who wants an archive that smells like a sewer?

That’s the thing about this mud. Its smell is fetid and heavily rank; I will taste it months later when I look at photos of this time, and its edges will lurk in the shadows of streets and gutters well into autumn and towards winter, the odour sparked by a gust of wind, a ray of light. It speaks of soil, and sewage, a murky stock brewed from every component of the lives of the people who live along the calligraphic ribbon of the Brisbane River.

To clean up after a flood, you hose more and more clean water onto the murkier water you’re trying to excise. You peel away every melded, muddied artefact of your life and weigh up what to jettison, or save. It’s a long process, and an exhausting



one – the desire to throw everything out and start again is easy to understand. In our street, someone takes that option, coming back to her house, shaking her head and walking away. But the neighbours can’t bear that she should have nothing; they go over to the mounds of rubbish, and start to poke through. They rescue an exquisite Japanese tea set and a couple of pieces of beautiful crockery. So that she has something.

Made into a pile, the contents of a home – from plasterboard walls and widths of carpet, through all the furniture to the books, the clothes, the appliances, the toys, the curtains, the photo albums and often, literally, the kitchen sink – can reach as high as the roofline of the house they once filled. A car trip along flood-affected roads that first weekend isn’t about driving through so much detritus; it’s about driving through the sculptures of rubbish that were once people’s lives. ▶



Muddy aftermath.

Condamine Bell Hotel licensee Shane Hickey (top), surveys the damage to his home, which is attached to the back of the pub in Condamine, about 290km north-west of Brisbane. Receding floodwaters left Queensland homes and vehicles covered in a thick, stinking mud (above, and left), rendering many uninhabitable and unusable. Thousands of houses had to be completely gutted and refitted before they could be re-occupied.



Help comes. Water comes. Food comes — more food than you can imagine; people set up barbecues and start frying; they arrive with sandwiches, muffins, intricately decorated cupcakes. In the heat of the first afternoon, an elderly man from the northern suburbs drives slowly by, a hand-lettered sign in his back window. “Free beer. One per adult.” His granddaughter is in charge of distributing the beverages from the boot. “I’m an old-aged pensioner, love,” he says, “and I’ve got a bad back, so I can’t get in and help. But I wanted to do something, you know. I wanted to do something.”

Outside each house mountains grow and grow, and then the cleaners come, a host of Bobcats and tip trucks and burly crew. The Army is here too, their heavy khaki camouflage incongruous and sweaty in the summer’s heat. The Army is part of the piling

and the sweeping, and before the first weekend is out, the pile of muck on our footpath has been loaded up and taken away so carefully and completely that only a couple of broken sticks and one tiny plastic toy are left.

Seventy-two hours after the flood recedes the first wave of street sweepers comes through, brushing the road so clean that the mud might never have been there at all. We’re lucky: our power has been turned back on. With our floors and walls dry, we’ll be able to move back before another week goes by. We’re lucky; we’re all safe and well.

A few days later, still trying to hose mud out of the narrowest crevices of a pram, I look up to see a bunch of people walking our fence line, a young guy in the lead, 25 years old or so, four or five people trailing behind him. “And this place,” he says, gesturing



Massive cleanup.

Roger Hodger (left) sits in front of the old fruit shop factory in the town of Gatton, 70km west of Brisbane and part of the devastated Lockyer Valley. Residents and volunteers (below) clean up the streets of West End, Brisbane. More than 25,000 registered to help with the cleanup.

to our home, “so lucky; the water stopped a few inches below the floorboards – unbelievable.” His voice cuts off as he sees me on the grass. “What is this?” I want to say. “Flood porn?” But his tour group still pauses, pointing to the Plimsoll line painted along our trees when they were immersed.

People hunger for stories, to hear them and to tell them. They hunger for what happened here, and how, and how lucky and how could we possibly not have seen that coming? Then they want the stories of what happens next: how can we come home? How have those homes changed? And how can we make sense of a home inside the river’s fluid littoral zone, a home that might be washed out again next summer, or the next one, or the next? Which stories, what information, can we use to sandbag ourselves against next time?

WE CHOOSE ODD THINGS in which to place our faith. As Campbell Newman – the city’s Lord Mayor until March 2011 – knew, most of Brisbane trusted that they wouldn’t flood because Wivenhoe Dam had been built in the wake of the famous 1974 flood and not a single major flood had happened since. Never mind that quite a chunk of that period also corresponded with a major drought, or that Wivenhoe could only control inflow from the Stanley and upper Brisbane river catchments. This was Brisbane’s protection, and it was designed to knock 2m off the height of the 1974 flood – without taking into account the impossibility that an exact replica of the rain that created the 1974 flood would ever fall in precisely the same places in Brisbane again.

In October last year, Campbell tried to counter the talisman of Wivenhoe, to talk about the probability of a flood, to ask people to be prepared. “It was clear we were in for a very wet season,” he says. “The Southern Oscillation Index was going through the roof.” And in October last year, the floodgates of Wivenhoe were opened for the first time since its completion, to release some of the water held there to slake Brisbane’s thirst.

This is the other purpose of Wivenhoe Dam, to store drinking water. Just three years ago, in 2008, it was scraping 15 per cent capacity and Brisbane was committed to three-minute showers, drought-proof gardens, and backyard water tanks. Opening the floodgates in 2010 meant the dam’s capacity to store drinking water had surpassed 100 per cent for the first time. It didn’t mean the dam was full; what was left empty was almost the same volume again, available to control and mitigate any floodwaters that came its way.

Professor Hubert Chanson, a hydraulic engineer at the University of Queensland, had driven out to watch those releases. And he had driven out of Brisbane again in the first weeks of January as the rain kept falling on the city’s saturated catchments, watching river levels rise, watching the bridges he had just crossed disappear, watching the weirs and the creeks. ▶



TOP: DEAN SAFFRON; BOTTOM: GETTY

Flood chaser.

Hydraulic engineer Professor Hubert Chanson (right) drove more than 3500km in Queensland in December and January to observe and record the floods; his 127-page report was published in February. He's pictured here with models of culverts – the channels that allow water to pass under structures during floods. The landmark Story Bridge (opposite below) was comfortably above the Brisbane River at the flood's peak.

I meet him to talk about the way the flood had come into being, and how it began to move. In his office, Hubert reaches behind his desk for a thick, bound journal volume. “This was written in March 1974,” he says, and reads a passage about the ‘Somerset Dam Syndrome’. The Somerset Dam had been completed in 1959 in response to catastrophic floods in the late 1890s and 1930s. In the ‘70s, everyone knew about the 1893 flood and the height it had reached, just as they know about the 1974 flood now. “‘Now we have the Somerset Dam,’ said the people of Brisbane in the ‘70s, ‘it won’t happen again.’” Hubert closes the book and shrugs. “And now we suffer from the ‘Wivenhoe Dam Syndrome’.”

If the idea of Wivenhoe as the city’s protector resonated across the city before the flood, the idea that it had been – at least in part – the city’s undoing came quickly in the water’s wake. If more water had been released ahead of January’s rains, people

In the past, floods did a lot less damage and their sediments were left on the floodplains

asked, would the river’s height have been kept down? It took less than 24 hours after the flood peak for people to demand a commission of inquiry into the course and management of Brisbane’s flood. Answers to these kinds of questions were going to be flushed out, in the bright glare of hindsight.

As the inquiry’s sittings began in early April, it had received somewhere in the order of 6 million pages of submissions. I want this to be enough to cover the surface of Lake Wivenhoe, but it wouldn’t even touch its sides. There were submissions attacking the operation of the dam, and submissions defending it. There were submissions about emergency services, about the heart-breaking 000 phone calls that didn’t get fast enough responses. There were submissions about water storage and aquifers and deep governmental briefings.

On the first day of hearings, the courtroom brims with competing legal representatives – they spill into its foyer from time to time, peering at vast flood maps spread across the floor like extra carpets. But there is also a handful of people whose stories knock the flood back from the formal language of the inquiry’s examinations to a more basic, domestic level.

“I had to buy shoes this morning,” says one man. “Suddenly realised last night that I’d salvaged two left feet when the water was rising, instead of a pair.”

“Tell me about it,” says another. “I had to go and buy a shirt

– could’ve sworn I’d saved one. And the amount of time it takes to get mud out of your belt-buckle.”

But the idea of Wivenhoe – even the word itself – wasn’t the only one through which Brisbane had imagined itself protected. The city also reassured itself by misunderstanding the probability of what everyone knew to refer to as a Q100 event. If that flood in 1974 had been the one-in-100-year flood, they had reasoned, well, there couldn’t be another one just 37 years later.

“A one-in-100-year flood means there’s a 1 per cent chance of it happening every year,” says Professor Jon Olley, from the Australian Rivers Institute at Griffith University. “So the chance of getting a one-in-100-year flood in a 20-year period works out at 18 per cent. If most people live in a city for 20 years, there’s an 18 per cent chance that they’ll see a one-in-100-year flood





come through during that time.” As a fluvial morphologist, Jon is interested in the channels and the speed at which water flows through them. Where Hubert talks about the time he spent ahead of the flood, driving around the water’s edges, Jon spent days after it, up in the air, retracing its course. Historically, he says, the channels of Brisbane’s vast river system “conveyed flows much more slowly, and they spread the water out a lot more. So the floods did a lot less damage and most of the sediments were dropped out and stored within the floodplains; they weren’t just flushed out.” As the system’s channels widened, water could move at higher volumes and more rapidly, increasing the height of a flood and creating more damage to the land around the channel margins.

Having vegetation along a channel also changes a flood’s ▶

Debris tracks.

The railway bridge at Grantham (right), 80km west of Brisbane, became a scrap heap of cars, trucks, houses and farming equipment swept down the Lockyer Valley by the flash flood on 10 January. Cars were washed into paddocks by the sudden deluge, which roared down from Toowoomba, killing 22 people in the Brisbane catchment. This red sedan (opposite) is 2km from the road where it started.



impact, says Jon, and most of that vegetation has been cleared in recent years. “Having vegetation along the channel increases the amount of floodplain flooding that you get, but it lowers the flood peak and it increases the actual amount of time that the flood takes to pass. It slows down the flood. The flood does less damage even though it inundates a greater area.”

By the time the water reached the city of Brisbane at the height of the flood, it was estimated to be moving at more than 20km/h, or 9000cu.m per second – an Olympic-sized swimming pool holds 2500cu.m. It sounded like a vast and deafening roar. “The descriptions we’ve had of the way the water progressed down Lockyer Creek was that the water would pulse,” says Jon. “It would form a debris dam made up of wood and other material; the water would build up behind that dam; there’d be a whirlpool at the back of it; the debris dam would break; the water would rush down; and that cycle was repeated over and over.”

SURPRISINGLY FEW THINGS floated away in our flood; even our peg basket, immersed as it hung on our Hills hoist, clung to the line, emerging as the tide went out to reveal every peg covered in mud, but still in its container.

Odd things did end up in odd places. Everything from boats, to pontoons, from some of the public wharves used by the Council’s CityCats (Brisbane’s catamaran ferries), to empty plastic flower pots and milk bottles, ended up at the river’s end in Moreton Bay. For \$500 million, says Jon, you could revegetate the river system’s channel networks, “which would change the way the water moves, and reduce what ends up in the bay.” He pauses. “Here’s one of my favourite comparisons: a freeway extension in Brisbane recently cost 1.2 to 1.5 billion dollars. For well under half the cost of 20km of freeway, you could rehabilitate 28,000km of streams.”

As it was, most of the detritus that washed up along the shore was scooped up and taken away, like the mountains of rubbish disgorged from the city’s wet buildings. And most of it ended up at Rochedale, in Brisbane’s landfill site. In the first week of the cleanup, 110,000t of flood-affected material had been taken to Rochedale, roughly one-third of Brisbane’s annual total. By April, it had passed 400,000t.

“We had as many as 970 trucks come through in a day,” says Rochedale environmental officer James Fox. “Normally, 60 trucks a day is a lot to handle.” He drives me onto the plateau of Rochedale’s most recently filled-in cell: we’re driving on

the hill created by the incompatible collision of people and water – somewhere underneath us are my boxes of research notes and all our Christmas decorations.

And then, there were the creatures. A cow named Danette survived the trip from the river’s junction with Lockyer Creek all the way to Moreton Bay. An echidna was spotted floating on a piece of detritus, while sharks swam along the streets of Goodna, 40km inland. Snake catchers reported a spike in business.

The frogs loved it; through the heavy rains of late November and December, green tree frogs had celebrated around our place, amplifying their huge wonking call through the megaphones of hollow logs and downpipes. As the floodwaters receded in January, they were supplanted by striped marsh frogs. “I was watching YouTube,” says Robbie Wilson, of The University of Queensland’s School of Biological Sciences, “and whenever they had footage of the flooding, there was just a cacophony of frogs calling in the background. I had a laugh: all this devastation and the frogs are reproducing in the background. Well, life goes on...”

An echidna floated on detritus, while sharks swam along Goodna’s streets, 40km inland.

But this wet season came after “a couple of good years of rainfall,” says Conrad Hoskin, an evolutionary biologist based at James Cook University. “So these good breeding events mean a lot of frogs will become adults. We should see good build-ups of the populations.”

Robbie suggests a similar outcome is possible for koalas. “Koala numbers have been going down continuously for the past 10 years,” he says, “which coincides with the drought. I’m certainly interested to find out if there’s a slight rebound in koala numbers after the floods – all that water, the eucalypts will be a lot happier.”

BEFORE JANUARY THIS YEAR, my knowledge of floods sat somewhere between Sunday School Noah – all those animals, and the olive branch – and a Winnie-the-Pooh story. “It rained and it rained and it rained,” wrote A. A. Milne in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Continued page 68 ▶

1974: In recent memory.

Brisbane residents (right) take a boat along Margaret Street in the city centre after the river broke its banks in 1974. A young bloke (below) helps a woman through the floodwaters on Bowen Bridge Road, Fortitude Valley. Two women (opposite bottom) take in the scene at inundated Jindalee, which flooded again in 2011.

“Piglet told himself that never in all his life...had he seen so much rain. Days and days and days. ‘It’s a little Anxious,’ he said to himself, ‘to be a Very Small Animal Entirely Surrounded by Water.’” Now, almost six months later, some of the insects that used our house as an ark are still surfacing, and I understand much more clearly Piglet’s sentiments. If I keep living in Brisbane, if I keep living in my home, I will likely be a Very Small Animal Entirely Surrounded by Water again – Jon Olley suspects we’re at the beginning of an exceptionally wet decade, rather than at the end of just one torrential season.

Around us houses sit completely gutted – you can peer through the gaping holes where their windows have been removed, through the rough struts that used to mark out their walls, and out the other side of the house. Neighbours are still with friends, with family. Some people are camping in houses that have no internal walls, no fittings. Some people moved on: some friends who lost everything decided to go back to the USA rather than start again out here. “You know the thing,” says the husband, just before he flies out. “I took a first-year ecology course in my science degree, and the thing I remember learning about floodplains is they always flood. Always.”

And neighbours who rented their houses mostly vanished. We knew their first names, knew what they’d planted in their vegetable gardens, or which equipment their kids liked to play

“The thing I remember learning about floodplains is they always flood. Always.”

on in the park. But when a flood goes through, rental leases are declared void, and tenants find new places to live. We don’t know where many went, and unless they come back to tell us, we never will. It’s a strange thing to happen in a community that really was a community.

My neighbour comes across the road when I’m sitting on my front steps one afternoon – it was her husband who shone the torch at our steps, saw the top one still above the water and messaged us. We sit quietly for a while. “I just wish everyone could come home,” she says at last.

Even when things return to normal, some element of the extraordinary remains. When our shops reopen, it makes national news, and no matter how often I walk through the centre’s new front doors, the high-water mark etched on their glass makes my breath catch, sharp. One house in our suburb has been raised to the new post-flood level approved by the Brisbane City Council – almost 2m above the old floor height. It wasn’t a big house, and now, perched three storeys high, it looks as though it has leapt onto a table to keep its feet away



from something dangerous. The river’s water looks like itself again, liquid and slow instead of that strange contradiction of solid and swift, although along its banks, some of the trees and brush still lie horizontal instead of standing upright, the realisation of a vertiginous painting by William Robinson. The rains that began in November killed 35 people statewide; three are still listed as missing.

And still, when people meet, they talk about all that water.

“How high was it here, love?” a man asks me on the bus, and I point to a hall we can see through the window.

“Five foot above that roof,” I say.

“Geez,” he says, “five foot: you don’t think it could’ve been that much, do you?”

No. You don’t.





1890s: Same old story.

People wade along Albert Street (top), in Brisbane's CBD during the flood of 1893, when the river peaked at 8.35m. During the 1890 flood (above), residents survey their inundated homes from Stratton Street, Fortitude Valley.

Postscript: The Queensland flood inquiry's first interim report was released on 1 August. It made 175 recommendations, most of which are expected to be implemented.

FIND MORE about the Brisbane floods online at www.australiangeographic.com/journal/issue104.htm