Mattie Kahn, “Flint is Family,” *Elle*, August 08, 2016

ELLE

WHEN PRESIDENT OBAMA TOOK A SIP OF FLINT'S WATER IN EARLY MAY, MANY ASSUMED THE CITY'S TWO-YEAR CRISIS WAS OVER. BUT PHOTOGRAPHER AND MACARTHUR "GENIUS GRANT" RECIPIENT LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER HAS A DIFFERENT STORY TO TELL. FRAZIER SPENT FIVE MONTHS WITH THREE GENERATIONS OF FLINT WOMEN WHO BOTH SUFFER AND INSISTENTLY THRIVE AMID THE WORST MAN-MADE ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE IN RECENT NATIONAL MEMORY.

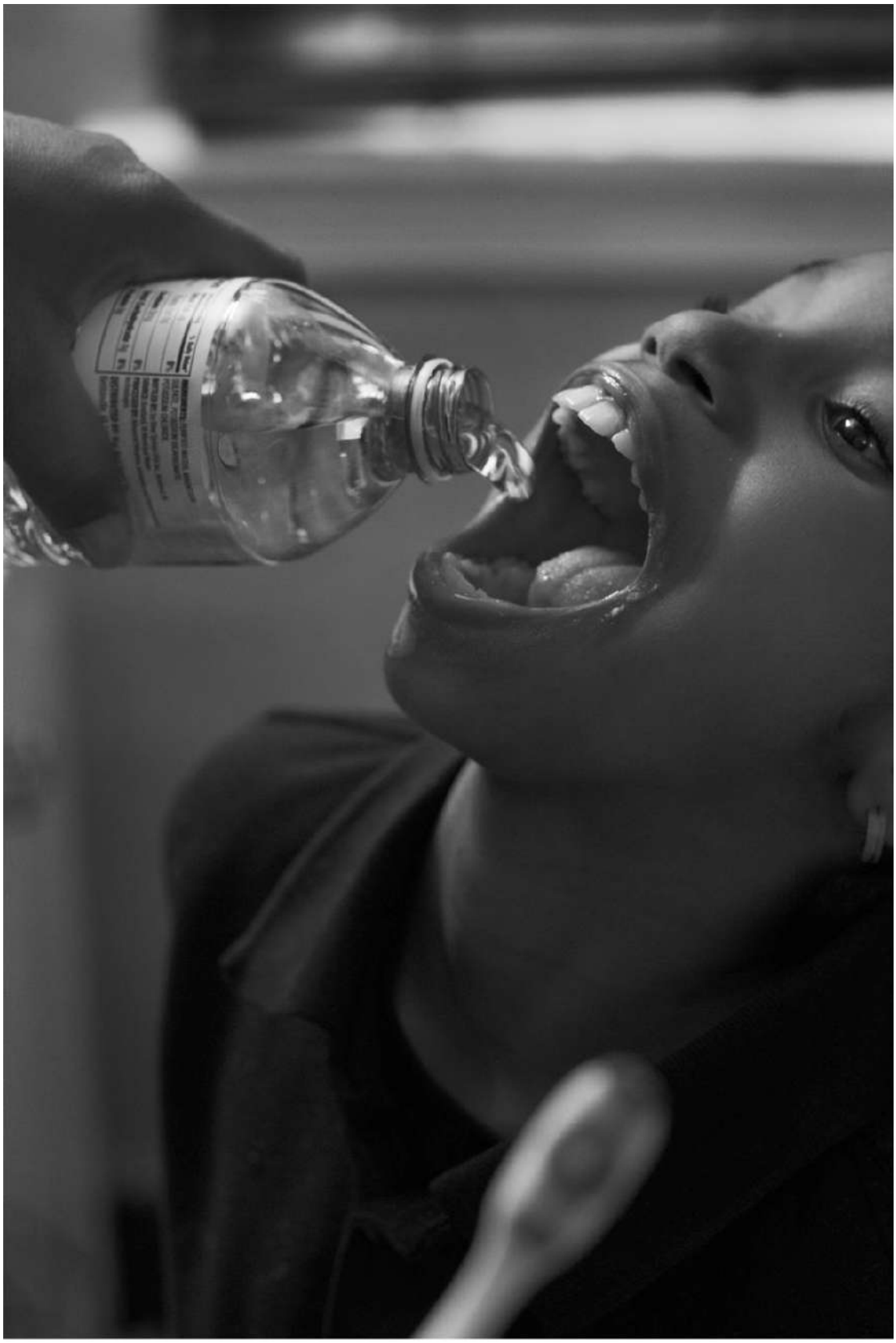
PART 1

PROMISED LANDS

By Mattie Kahn

Shea Cobb stopped cooking in September 2014. It had been five months since her tap water turned brown, since her skin broke out in a furious rash, since Zion, her nine-year-old daughter, complained that the smell of the water made her sick.

Shea, 32, clamped her mouth shut in the shower and barred Zion from drinking from school water fountains. She used bottled water to brush their teeth. She made her mother, Renée, 55, promise to swear off tap water, too.



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Even so, Renée noticed her hair was falling out. It had been thinning for months. But now it was coming off in clumps. She obsessed over it—they were so careful. Finally, it clicked. Renée worked for General Motors. She drank coffee every day, sipping it to stay alert during the punishing third shift. It was brewed with water from Flint.

Shea and Zion were born and raised in Flint. Renée has lived there since she was a kid. Like so many Rust Belt cities, Flint has been hollowed out by economic change. But the Cobbs have stuck with it, watching it become a twenty-first century ghost town. A writer for *The Detroit News* described Flint in 1983 as a place in which "there are so few people about that you might think the neutron bomb had hit." But to these three generations of women, it's home.

When I visited these women over this past winter and spring, to learn about how one family endured the water crisis, they stressed that to me. Flint was family. Family was Flint—until now. This is the story of how a town loses a family and a family loses a town.

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In 2013, the Flint City Council voted to leave the expensive Detroit water system and contract with the still-incomplete Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), a water-distribution corporation. But while the city waited to join the KWA, Flint would need an interim water source. In June, state-appointed emergency manager Ed Kurtz ruled that Flint would start to draw water from the 78.3-mile Flint River, which flows from Lapeer County into the Saginaw Bay.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder had awarded Kurtz the job the year before in his latest bid to reverse Flint's financial downturn. The autumn before the switch to Flint River water, Flint had a $19 million deficit. Using the Flint River would save the city about $5 million over the course of two years. Officials promised that Flint residents—mostly black and 40 percent poor—wouldn't even notice the difference.

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On April 25, 2014, Flint's mayor, Dayne Walling, invited about a dozen people to join him at a small water treatment plant to commemorate what he deemed a "historic moment." The switch would let Flint "return to its roots," Walling said. Someone started a countdown. A pitcher and plastic cups materialized. Officials raised their cups of Flint River water and toasted: "Here's to Flint." At zero, the mayor pressed a small black button, which turned off the flow from Detroit.

Within weeks, the complaints streamed in. The water tasted rancid. It stank. Across the city, people were breaking out in hives and rashes. Their hair had started to fall out—eyelashes, too. Mostly ensconced in wealthier suburbs like Flushing and Grand Blanc, which drew water from a different source, officials insisted the water in Flint was fine to drink. "It's a quality, safe product," Mayor Walling said that month. "I think people are wasting their precious money buying bottled water."

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Shea used to hear rumors about the Flint River. It could turn your skin blue or make you grow an extra toe, people said. Some kids whispered that dead bodies rotted below the surface. It was toxic, a decades-old dump site for waste and chemicals. In the 1930s, when thousands of fish died at once, a lab determined that pollution had so deoxygenated the water that the fish had suffocated to death. Flint passed a series of ordinances in the 1950s and 1960s to try to decontaminate the water, but the efforts suffered setbacks. In 1974, researchers discovered that a local wastewater plant had been oozing raw sewage into the river for decades. In 1999, when Shea was 15, a 72-inch pipe that connected sewers to the Flint Waste Treatment Plant was accidentally slashed open. By the time workers stopped the flow, 22 million gallons of human, industrial, and commercial waste had flowed into the river. For the next 14 months, health officials forbade swimming, fishing, or even coming into direct contact with the river. Shea remembers her uncle Rodney warning her that if she ever fell in, she'd better run to the hospital: "'You don't know what's in there,' he told me, 'so do not waste time, Shea. You go get help.'"

IN 1974, RESEARCHERS DISCOVERED THAT A LOCAL WASTEWATER PLANT HAD BEEN OOZING RAW SEWAGE INTO THE RIVER FOR DECADES.

Four months after officials opened the city's taps to Flint River water, tests detected traces of E. coli in the water. The bacterium can cause diarrhea, stomachaches, headaches, and nausea. But it poses a more serious risk to children and the infirm, threatening organ failure and other grave health problems. Officials issued water-boil advisories and promised to fine-tune the chemical mixture they had been using to treat the water. The pipes were flooded with chlorine. Tap water in Flint started to smell like a public pool and taste like copper. It stung Zion's eyes. The rashes persisted.

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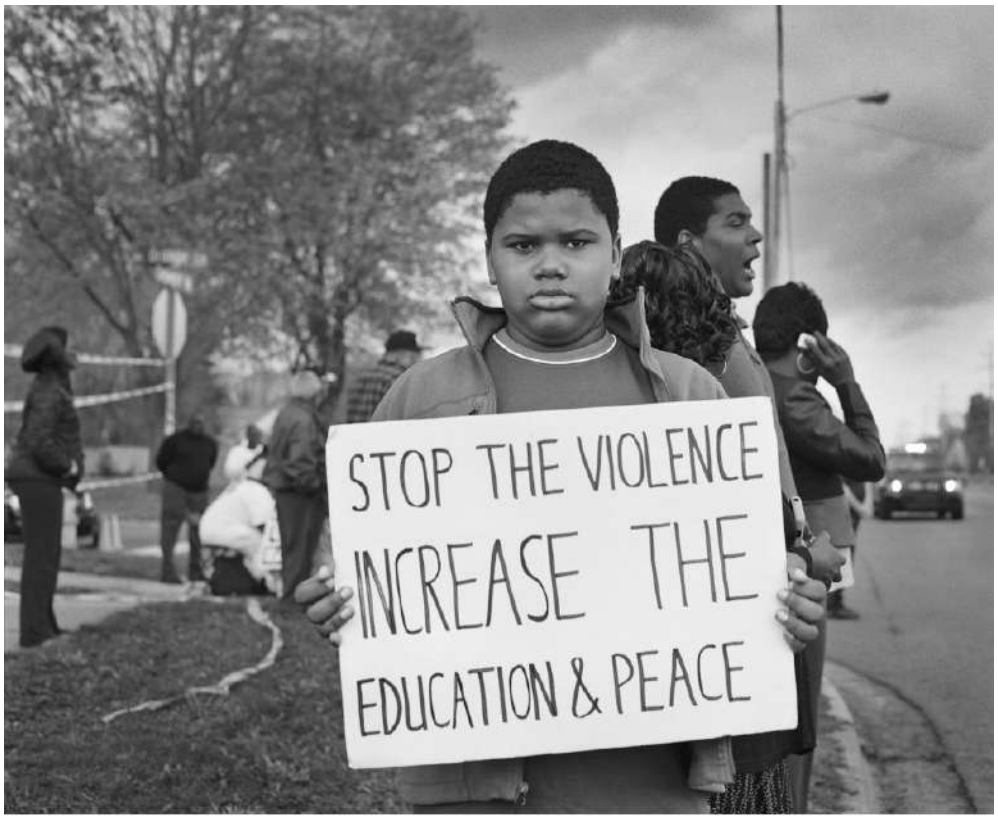
By September 2014, Wally Janeczek, the executive chef for Flint Community Schools, decided he could no longer take a chance on foul water for school kids. He placed orders for bottled water, making space in the budget for gallons of water to wash and cook all school food. In October 2014, General Motors announced it would halt the use of Flint River water in its downtown plant and contract to hook up to Lake Huron instead. The highly chlorinated river water had started to eat away at engine parts. And in February 2015, LeeAnne Walters, a mother of four, had her water tested at home. She discovered lead levels more than seven times the government's maximum threshold. A month later, they had reached 27 times the limit. Walters, the "whistleblower" of Flint, convinced the Environmental Protection Agency to intervene. In May, the EPA found elevated lead levels in at least two more homes in Flint.

“OUR CHILDREN ALREADY HAD EVERY OBSTACLE TO SUCCESS. AND THEN THEY GOT LEAD. IF YOU WANT TO BRING DOWN A POPULATION EVEN MORE THAN IT ALREADY IS, YOU EXPOSE IT TO LEAD."

In September 2015, local pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha shared her research on the crisis: The percentage of young children with elevated lead levels had at least doubled, if not tripled, since the switch. While lead is always toxic, it hits kids the hardest. Exposure stunts not only physical growth, but behavioral and intellectual development, too. Some studies have linked lead to attention deficit disorders and even violent tendencies. "We have no full-service grocery stores. We have tremendous unemployment and limited transportation options. The life expectancy of people in Flint is 20 years shorter than people in neighboring suburbs," Hanna-Attisha told ELLE.com in February 2016. "Our children already had every obstacle to success. And then they got lead. If you want to bring down a population even more than it already is, you expose it to lead." On October 8, 2015, lead was found in the water fountains at three public schools.



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Meanwhile, experts linked a 17-month outbreak of a severe form of pneumonia to the crisis. The Flint area reports around six to 13 cases of the disease during a typical year. In 2014 and 2015, almost 100 people in Flint were treated for it. Twelve died.

The state government at last bowed to public pressure in October 2015, passing a bill to redirect funds to Flint. Flint used that money to reconnect to Lake Huron. But the real harm was harder to reverse. Because it wasn't just bad river water that set the crisis in motion—it was what that untreated water did to sewers and drains and pipes that doomed Flint. Corroded infrastructure cannot be fixed with the flip of a switch.

Governor Snyder has maintained he knew little of the conditions in Flint in the early months of the crisis. But members of his senior staff certainly had the facts. In October 2014, a Snyder aide who grew up in Flint wrote in an email that "the notion that I would be getting my drinking water from the Flint River is downright scary." In January 2015, a special projects manager in the Snyder administration deemed the circumstances in Flint "a public relations crisis" and warned that the news was just "waiting to explode nationally." And while residents continued to choke down lead-laced water, in early 2015 the state started to deliver filtered water for government employees in the area. An internal memo circulated on January 7 stated that employees would not have to drink tap water that did not "meet treatment requirements." Citizens in communities in Flint were not extended the same grace.

When Shea's grandparents, Hazel and LeRoy Cobb, moved to Flint from Mount Vernon, New York, in 1967, they landed in a city in its prime. Flint was the "Happiest Town in Michigan," according to *Coronet* magazine. It had good schools, a stylish downtown—and work. For decades, General Motors, which was founded there in 1908, produced not only millions of cars, but also thousands of jobs. By 1954, the company employed almost 80,000 of Flint's 200,000 residents.

LeRoy, Hazel, and their seven children—including Shea's then-seven-year-old mother, Renée—had followed the flow of black workers into "Vehicle City." Having lost employees to the war effort, General Motors first started to recruit African Americans in the South to work in factories in Flint during the the 1940s. And even once the war was over, the trend continued. News of opportunity spreads fast, after all. And so by the postwar era, residents in the black St. John area of the city had a nickname for the influx. They deemed it "the rush-in." By 1960, the black community had swelled to more than 30,000 people.

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The Cobbs flourished in the black, middle-class enclave that was developing in Flint. LeRoy became a master mechanic at Buick. He and Hazel moved into a corner house on Mary Street, a tree-lined block just a few streets over from Martin Luther King Avenue. Together they hosted block parties and barbecues. They danced a lot, blasting music from every room. LeRoy "loved music," remembers Denise Clay, Shea's aunt. "All kinds—from country to hip hop to bluegrass." Hazel was at home in the kitchen, famous for her scratch-made chicken and dumplings. "It was really nice as a kid," Renée remembers. "It was so full of life."

But less than a decade after the Cobbs moved in, 15.1 percent of people in Flint were out of work—and almost 50 percent of African American teens could not find a job. The oil shocks of the 1970s had derailed the expansion of the auto industry. By the mid-1970s, Japanese carmakers controlled almost 10 percent of the United States market. Henry Ford II described the arrival of Japanese cars on American shores as "an economic Pearl Harbor." In 1999, General Motors shuttered Buick City, the largest industrial complex in Flint. By 2009, only 5,000 people were still on GM's Flint payroll. "Buick is Flint and Flint is Buick," asserted the official historian of the Buick division of General Motors in 1945. At the time, he wanted to celebrate the connection. Now it sounds like a premonition.

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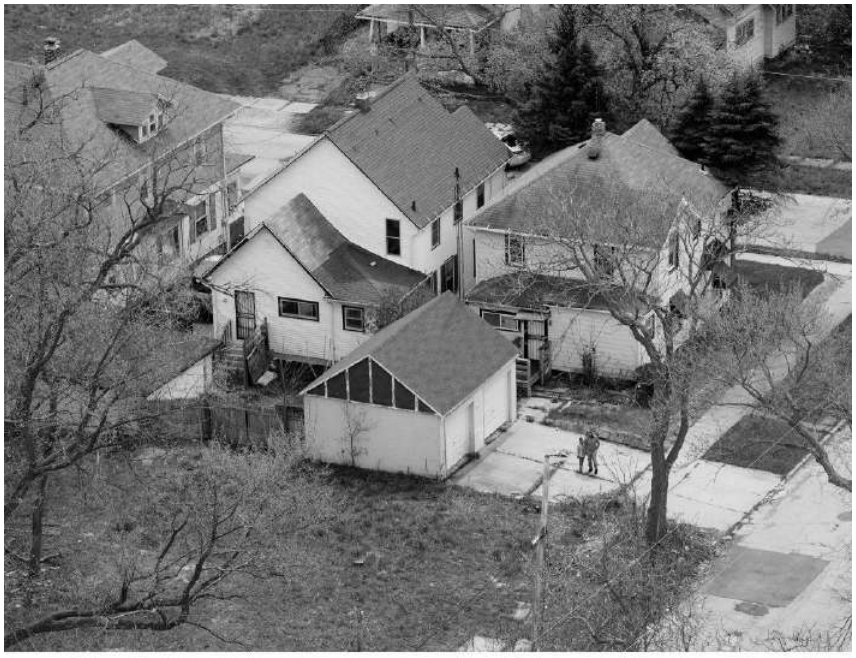
Renée, the baby, watched her brother and each of her sisters leave home. But none went too far. One sister moved to Pontiac, less than an hour away, another to Kenton, Michigan. Everyone else found work in Flint. By the time Renée was ready to leave home, she had almost a dozen nieces and nephews. She met Shea's father at a skating rink in her twenties. In 1984, she had Shea.

Flint didn't really bottom out for Shea until LeRoy and Hazel got sick. LeRoy checked into the hospital in 2006, showing symptoms of Bell's Palsy. The day he was released, Hazel slipped and fell on an icy patch of snow. Shea moved in to take care of LeRoy and Hazel. She planned to spend just the weekend, but Hazel couldn't get down the stairs on her own. LeRoy was deteriorating fast. In July 2007, he died of cancer.

The recession thrust one-third of the city into poverty. Crime exploded. Houses were burned to the ground. Opiate addiction soared. In 2013, the population in Flint sunk below 100,000 for the first time in almost a century. It has continued to fall since. The real estate market plummeted, leaving many trapped in untenable mortgages. Then the water crisis struck. Hazel died of heart complications in July 2015, living just long enough to witness this final blow.

Since 2005, more than 5,000 homes have been bulldozed in Flint. Where the Cobbs once lived, the houses that remain are ransacked and broken. The blue house on Mary Street is still standing. It is surrounded on three sides by vacant lots.



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Shea drives a school bus in Flint, but the job description belies how much she means to the children she delivers to and from school. She is beloved by all. Young women confess to her—hopes, fears, sins, boys. Surly teenagers defer to her. She is a cheerleader, celebrating the achievements of "her babies."

"Go to class," she calls out to a cluster of retreating figures one breezy morning in April. She has taken me to Southwestern Academy in Flint, her alma mater. She seems to know almost every child who walks through its front doors. "Do not make me come for you," she cries.

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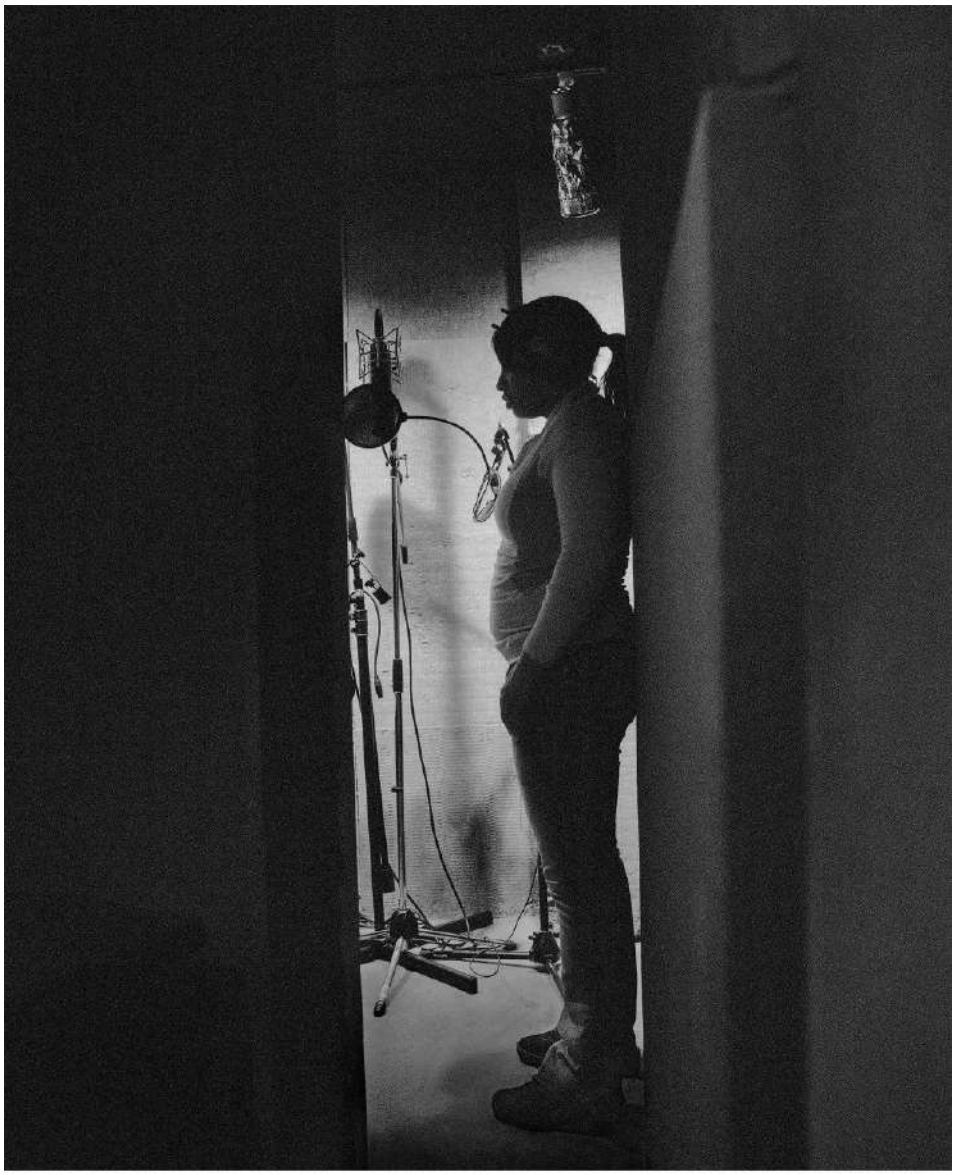
She likes the work, but music is her passion. For months, Shea has been weaving the water trauma into a record she wants to sell. Her sound mixes spoken-word poetry and hip hop, with a note of country she blames on LeRoy.

Too many roads I see don't make it to nowhere/ So Imma spread my wings/ Go by air/ 'Cause it's my destiny to be above it all/ My head high/ I stand tall/ Who's gonna stop me now?/ Is it you?



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Like everyone who still lives in Flint, Shea picks up free water bottles from pop-up water distribution sites around her hometown. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has supplied the water bottles since January 2016 and continues to do so now. Even so, residents have been instructed to flush their tap water every day. It's been treated with chemicals that are supposed to restore an essential protective barrier in the pipes. But many—and Shea, too—have so given up on their government that they don't bother. She never expects to drink Flint water again.

In April, I ride shotgun as Shea makes her daily trip to the distribution site closest to her house—a parking lot where flatbeds of water bottles are piled each morning. She pulls in and opens her trunk, watching in her rearview mirror as a staffer deposits four cases of filtered spring water in the van. "Faster than a drive-through window," Shea says.

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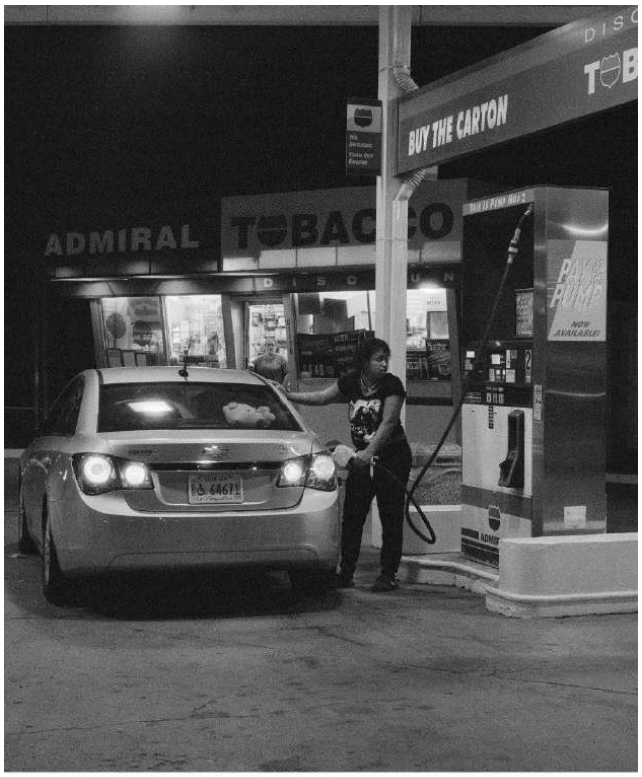
Shea and Zion were living with Renée when I visited. Shea had been on her own since Hazel died, but was evicted when she refused to pay the water bill for water she couldn't drink. Renée has insisted on tidiness—no parties, no noise, no mess. The row house is painted in shades of ocean and sand. The towels match. A yappy white dog bounds around a squat front yard. Renée has installed a table and umbrella on the patio, which she admits she's barely around to use.

As soon as Shea carries the cases inside, she removes the bottles from their plastic-and-cardboard boxes and stacks them in neat pyramids in wicker baskets in the kitchen. She makes concessions in the car, leaving a shrink-wrapped case of bottles in the trunk for Zion, who seems to get thirsty as soon as they pull out of a driveway. But whenever she parks the car, she takes an extra second to gather the empties and throw them away. Seeing them careen around the floor like that, it makes her anxious. It looks like crisis.

"I don't believe democracy exists," Shea tells me at Captain Coty's diner, where we stopped during one of our drives. "I think that's the lie we tell ourselves to think this country is halfway decent to live in and the system will somehow work for [us] someday."

A few months ago, Shea made up her mind to leave Flint and follow her father to Mississippi. He moved down in 2000, deciding to retire from General Motors after he had a minor stroke. Shea's father is the third generation to run the farm where he now raises horses. Shea tells me about a mare called Dolly who Zion is especially fond of. The good news is she isn't going anywhere; she's blind in one eye. "No one will take her," Zion squeals. The farm is 30 minutes from Meridian, an hour outside of Jackson, and a universe away from Flint. Her father had been inviting Shea to join him since she was in high school. But when the crisis started, he made a serious offer. He has plenty of room. Zion loves it there, having spent her own summer breaks on the land.

And so in a kind of reverse Great Migration, Shea and Zion have decided to head South. "Seven pairs of jeans, seven T-shirts, seven underwears, seven socks, and one toothbrush," Shea says, chanting Zion's packing list. It's May, and the move is still almost six weeks away. But Shea is hungry for it. "You don't need anything else in the world," she says. Zion will "sweat and play and be black. That's it." Once Shea leaves, Renée wants to move to Texas or Oklahoma, where she has some distant relatives. Shea has heard her cousins mull over job prospects in Georgia.



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When I reach her over the phone in July, it's been less than a month since she arrived in Mississippi. But Shea is optimistic. "It's very peaceful," she says. "It's quiet. I get to rest." Demands creep in, of course. She has started to explore what options Zion will have for school in Mississippi. She's been helping to maintain the fence line and weed the flowerbeds. She knows she'll have to look for more work soon.

Unlikely as it may be, Mississippi has always been a kind of promised land for Shea. "When I was 12 years old, [my father] took me to this spring," she says, "and he said, 'You can drink that right out the ground.'" She cupped her hands; the water was cold. Her father took a photo. A few months ago, he texted her a photo of the decades-old snapshot and then called her: "This water isn't gonna kill you," he said. "Come home."

Additional reporting by Anna Clark.