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Meaningful memory

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Thousands were rendered homeless, wrecked and without a future when an earthquake rocked Haiti five years ago.

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact…

Remembrance of the disaster which could be the gentlest want of foresight.

Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of Disaster

It had been a few weeks since the earthquake. The dusty port town of Léogâne was the epicentre. Nearly every concrete structure in the town was destroyed; 20,000 people had died instantaneously and everything was in disarray. Makeshift homes made of cardboard boxes and sheets were put together in haste to accommodate the living. Parks soon turned into dwellings, and life was lived on the pavements and streets. The earth had shrunk; the dead had to be buried together in mass graves. The local pastor's son, instead of giving them their last rites, rolled up his sleeves to help move the dead to their communal graves. "The dead grow heavy with regret, as they stay unburied. That is why they are so heavy," he said.

People lived in disinterest, detached from disaster, hurrying to make new plans, as they prayed, scavenged and learned to live again. When people's lives collapsed along with the buildings, they took with them souvenirs of their past. Broken vases, crushed calendars, headless toys and photographs inside cheap plastic albums. Stories grew around these objects reclaimed from the disaster. They had new meaning and belonged to a pantheon of retrieved objects. In the abrupt absence of twenty thousand who had disappeared, each previous act of normality became the last clutches of mortality. There were stories about last meals, terrible fights, of hasty love making, and broken promises. Memory of the unmemorable was transformed into the meaningful. New meanings and stories were constantly woven into memory. The people they had become in death bore little resemblance to the people they had been in life.

One afternoon, walking back from the ICRC camp, I ran into Marylene. I had met her earlier in the week at the St. La Croix hospital. "You look like us, but your hair," she had smiled with excitement. She had been a teacher in Port au Prince and then a midwife. She had no income, but walked around offering translation help to NGOs and helping out at the hospital. Marylene chatted away and I mostly listened.

"Do we have a duty to live?" she asked. "What if someone had been willing to die, not like the soldiers who go to fight, but just comfortable with dying…?" I quickly wrote her question down, Marylene's name and date next to it.

"Do we have a duty to live?" she asked again.

"I don't know," I said. I had not thought about such a scenario. My own visual senses were jammed with stories of survival and resilience of the Haitian people. A deep desire to live, perhaps not an obligation to stay alive.

Marylene said that she had asked her pastor, who had expended all his energy in not listening to her. He had not understood her question.

"It is — maybe not a question," she said.

“No. It was a question,” I told her. “A very good one, and a very difficult one.”

Just that people can never answer such questions without taking a sledgehammer to their beliefs and not walk out of it with dignified sanity.

Marylene, unlike others I had met, refused to talk about herself. Other Haitians I had met told stories about their lives before and after the earthquake. I would often walk away knowing their entire history. Marylene’s personal life was vague. I never got a story, or answers to my questions, just random facts that I had to piece together. Instead she assumed the role of an interlocutor between her damaged town and an unlikely outsider. She spoke continuously about the surroundings. She presented facts about old colonial churches, the shortest way to the ocean, how many times a day the Canadians patrolled the main street and where the aid workers drank their beer.

As we strolled, she asked if I wanted to join her for a prayer meeting. God was a distant figure, and the church she had gone to since she was child was gone, but she said she went to prayer meetings that had started taking place in open lots so that she could sing. She always loved singing. “I sing to cry without tears.” When things went bad, people poured their fear into prayers; it was not salvation, it was an escape.

I said I would join her and we walked towards the other side of town and passed more makeshift homes before we reached her place. We walked past injured in pain laying in their tarp homes, their families sitting around in apathy. She pointed to a middle-aged woman sitting outside her temporary shelter. “She is just waiting for him die. The doctors said they can’t do much, gave him medicine for pain. He is clinging on to life and she is waiting for him to go.” Pointing to other homes as we walked by, “They are too sick to make it to MSF,” she said. “Many had died of fever after wound infections”.

We finally made it to her new home made of tin and tarp. She had salvaged a mattress and had a few utensils around. On her tin door hung a small piece of a larger broken mirror. Right next to it was a small cheap purple lipstick and a small plastic box that said ‘Ponds Cold Cream’. She stepped out with her water canteen, washed her face, came back and applied her purple lipstick. She said it was from Port au Prince; she had gotten it when she was there last with her family. I looked around and there were no signs of a family, expect of two other women she lived with.

On our way back, she pointed to distant rubble of yellow walls and said that her family was still entombed in the rubble of their home. “No one came to help,” she said, and then added, “I can’t stand the stench anymore.”

“Many are buried like this”, she said with indifference.

Then, only seconds later she waved to a Canadian soldier patrolling the street. He waved back in recognition. “The soldiers are protecting us”, she said, and then quickly moved on to something else, while I was still taken by the information of her family trapped inside. Her purple lipstick was still fresh. It bothered me and distracted me at once. I had expected a certain despondence, bereavement and morsels of hope, not bright purple lipstick.

Unable to broach the subject, I began a long disingenuous sermon on hope. I told her that things would get better.

“*Comme la vie est lente/ Et comme l’espérance est violente*.” (*How slow life is/And how violent hope is*).

Marylene went quiet and cold. I had bullied her into a brief silence and she refused to be made into a victim. In the end it was not her garrulous prose, but her silence that I was to remember the most. “*Hope is not violent. Hope is insufficient…*,” Marylene said with her beautiful angry eyes. She paused and spoke in a hushed voice. “*Do I have to be hopeful to make you feel less guilty? To make you comfortable with the Hell I call home*.”

We didn’t go to church. Instead, she walked me back to where we met and disappeared behind the Canadian tanker around the square.

I never saw Marylene again. But I had visions of her crying for help. Or returning every day for a week with diminishing hope, and then abandoning her home because the stench became too much to bear. It was not hope, but pain that is violent.

To experience disaster and to think about disaster are two different things. Marylene thought about it with an elegant sophistication that escaped me. I had abstained from empathy. I had spoken to console myself and forgotten about her. The ones who came to bear witness, those who came to help seemed most taken by the disaster. When confronted with silent violence and vulgar disparity of life, the natural instinct is always to aestheticise. To create them in our mirror image, excluding them and including ourselves in the narrative. Our relationship to the country and the people became decided even before we meet them. But in the end none of us understood its immensity.

In the template of engagement with people like Marylene, *the vulnerable*, and *the dispossessed* are cast in a similar mould. And we demand two qualities from them: servile obedience and passive quietude towards the outsider. Two years later, I would stumble upon an incoherent answer to Marylene’s question. Where life does not reign, where decisions are perpetually poor, where living is to endure by waiting for a misfortune about to come. Where future and past come together in the absence of the present, dying is living.