

Century Walker

THE TSUNAMI NOTEBOOK

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The person who embraced me first and last was the cook. The one who had nothing left but her hands. The bits of torn cloth left on posts, to say does anyone recognize this? had a redolence of salt. And sweat. And rot. There were hardly any birds left, their nests all gone. There was the moon. Thunder. Rain that did not erase the heat. Mosquitoes. Hungry cats.

Her hands knew how to chop red peppers, and they knew healing—in the ways of grandmothers. You pummeled the flesh. You pulled at the fingers, one by one. You sang praises; you prayed without cease. She stirred whatever there was. Dry noodles. Maybe a vegetable. Maybe rice. Maybe an octopus' leg. Always chili, for spice, and to slow the spoilage. Always grease, from the oil. She hummed non-stop, voice high as a little girl's. We slept on a plywood floor on the belly of the equator. Her people had been swallowed by its black wall of an ocean. When I left, she gave me the only pretty thing she had: a polyester blouse of monstrous pink flowers, the arm holes ripped in shreds. She didn't say you will remember. She put it in my hands. She placed her hands

on my uncovered head and prayed for Allah to send me a good new man.

Solo wanderer. Century walker, city-walker, island-walker. How did she know my whispers in the dark? What she incants three times a day, unrolling her prayer rug toward the east in a burner-stove and water-bucket kitchen, in the dirt, in public, in private, is Allah, Allah, Allah. A long, low guttural sound like swallowing. She has no family left. She heard there was a clinic and strangers, and she needed to be with people and to cook, although there was absolutely nothing to buy; she cooked spices with a gruel for those who came to her once-upon-a-village of mud and rubble to help survivors. She prayed for me to have someone good, when I departed. Her clothes are colored with kitchen oil and sea water, and blood. Her headscarf smelled of the oil of coconuts. That's all there was at first. There were a million fallen coconuts. I gave her all my clothes at the end. She gave me her only pretty thing.

Her scrubbed feet, the skin cracked, the toes splayed wide as a lizard's, held up a woman older than my middle age—a shy-girl face swept clean of any lines at all. "I used to be crazy—but now I sing for the world." She says that in sign language. She becomes a clown for just a moment, fingers twirling and circling her head like a helicopter, then rocking closed, like an autistic child, then opening wide, as for a great aria. It stops abruptly. A stranger has arrived.

I hang her gifted blouse on my bedpost in Paris; in case I think I have any reason to cry. It has been there for a year. I have not mended the arm-holes.

Have you wondered why all the windows in heaven
were broken?

Have you seen the homeless in the open grave of
God's hand?

(Kenneth Patchen)

I have a dearest friend who sent me those words of a poet, after the tidal wave, and before I met the cook. My friend is a midwife in a tiny and remote village where she's had a natural birthing clinic for thirteen years. We've been friends for twenty-five years, since we met on another island where we both lived, once. My friend is a drama queen, and a Filipina-Chinese-German-Irish dragon lady—but she is also a young Mother Teresa, in a real sense, and she has always told me stories that can spill my tears. She called me after the Christmas tidal wave of 2004 to say, "Come to Sumatra"; and I thought: Heart of Darkness.

When her blood sister had died in the early years of our friendship, her family contacted me—I was to go and find her in her garden, and tell her. There were few telephones in the valley we shared, then.

"My sister, my baby sister," she wailed, in my arms. Then she uncoiled, and she stared into my eyes and said, "You are my sister, now."

So when she called me from her Indonesian kitchen a few weeks after the December 26 tsunami, I listened. She said she was called to go to Aceh, nearly the epicenter of the quakes, and she was going to go and help the survivors. I worried and I begged her not to, but she already knew that she was going. A month later, she returned to Indonesia and called me again, as soon as she was back in her own kitchen. "You need to come. I'm asking you to come back with me," she said. "Come, we have made a clinic in the mud and sand." So I climbed the ladder of a ten-seat Red Cross plane in Medan, and I went with her to a spot on the map of Sumatra in walking distance of two thousand bodies who survived. There, most of their children are returning to bones in their burial sands. There, her clinic serves some 10,000 survivors, now. The roads to hospitals were all broken and flooded. There, most have no one they loved left. There are a few hands. And then, a few more hands.

Cot Seulamat, Sama Tiga. The name of the town means “Sister Blessing.” A bamboo and plywood clinic in the heat. There, I met the cook who blessed me at the beginning and at the end. There, I listened; I massaged the ones she called friends, the old people, the very distant relatives who had returned from those mountains where tiger and eagle and orangutan couch in the still deeper regions. There, I held people who had less than nothing left; there, I spoke through sign language and touch, made photographs and poems.

I’m afraid, I admitted to my dragon-lady sister. There was another earthquake on the day after we’d arrived. You’ll see, she said. You’ll see more. And you must. “Must” is a word of the soul; we both know that. Then, she whispered to me of the family found—all women, who knew they could not, would not escape the ocean of souls that bathed them that winter day. All were found when the waters were gone, and the weight of their five selves—twined—had kept them where they had held fast and dead—and clasped around one another.

If we had to die, my dragon sister reached for my hand, wouldn’t that way be all right?

Yes, I said.

After the cook embraced me the first time—my friend and sister whispered to me once again. It was *her* family: the five women. Then she walked away. There were rebel men on the steps, who had come down from hideouts, now, with malaria. My friend took the screaming infant, with its badly re-sewn eye, from the youngest one’s arms.

The cook sat down in a corner and pulled a vial of the kitchen oil from a fold in her sarong. She poured it into her hands and began to massage the skinny woman beside her, stroking and stroking, until that woman cried. The cook looked up and motioned with her chin to me. That person. That person, there. I came to a staring boy. He pointed to

a pregnant girl. My own hands lifted and began to imitate the cook—and then, to do what they understood how to do, on their own. They massaged. They held. They cooked their meal of sparse ingredients. They worked until there were more tears. And a different silence sauced the slow and swollen heat.

The cook rose and left me to my work. My dragon sister was treating malaria and festered cuts that morning. The clinic had filled with those who knew that something human—something possible, in a world that had turned and turned and turned—had left a few to do it all again. A thousand meters away, the sea seemed to have no work to do at all.

By high noon in the swelter, the cook offered any who were hungry her meal. It burned my tongue with spices. It filled my belly with endurance.

She hummed and patted my hands as she passed me. We had no language besides our hands.

My dragon sister waved at me from the cubicle corner that was a dispensary. Week after week we worked together in the heat, to help a few who seemed like so many. And at the end, I bore a blouse of monstrous pink flowers and ripped armholes back to my 17th-century wooden beams above a bed in Paris.

This is a time when *apocalyptic* holds too many meanings to imagine I may understand. This was not disaster tourism. Or a “regarding of the pain of others” in the way of Sontag. But a passage. Not more than human. A calling. A whisper. So we went and I returned. Maybe Noah’s ark is not a metaphor. And, it continues. The need to fathom what has not fallen. With nothing left but my hands.