

38 Seconds *
Chaos and Beauty in Haiti
By Laura Simms

Introduction

To write about my responses to the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti became an attempt to seduce meaning and words to something too vast and paradoxical for a single narrative to hold the horror, power and-beauty. Most of the fragments I have recorded come from seen images and interviews during visits to Haiti starting in June 2010 that continued until the present. I remain haunted by voices and sighs.

I began visiting Haiti in June 2010, five months after the earthquake. As a storyteller my role was as artist and healer offering trainings for Haitian educators, health workers and those - who in the immediacy of the tragedy- created makeshift schools, arts centers and creative projects for children and mothers. I continue to work in one camp supporting and directing a Girls Group for Arts, and a children's Arts Program.

Some comments were made by OFEDA women. They are a powerful a cooperative group (aged 19 – 84) who sought refuge in a temporary and small camp behind a destroyed school on Routes des Freres in Port au Prince. Most of the women still live in the tents three years later. Their stories vacillated from despair and frustration to a sense of discovered self-empowerment and joy.

38

1. Arrival at the airport in Port au Prince June 2010: It was my first time in Haiti. I had television images of destruction and a romantic idea of Voodun ceremonies and resort hotels as a reference. A band playing music dedicated to Erzulie, Voodun Goddess of Love greeted us somberly as we descended from our flight. The songs seemed like a shadow of forgotten celebration. None of the musicians were smiling. None of us were tourists. I smelled dust, and not knowing how not to smile when greeted by songs, I avoided eye contact with the musicians. I climbed onto a bus that took us to a temporary customs and luggage building past piles of metal and garbage.

A Haitian woman was speaking with an enthusiastic blonde girl wearing a **Jesus Saves** T Shirt.

The girl asked, "Were you here?"

"I was here.

*I heard the earth groan before it shook –
groan like a giant crying. Then my house began to move."*

The women grew quiet.
Then the woman added, *without being asked,*
"Our house is no longer standing."
"Where are you going to stay?" asked the T-shirt girl,
"..with a friend."

.The woman sighed as her face returned to the blank stare
she had before the conversation.

"

2.

We were stuck in a far too-much-traffic drive from Pietenville to Routes des Freres. Mica, (Michaela Leger) serving as translator and arts teacher with kids in the Camp I was visiting, described the day of the earthquake. I had known her for more than a year. She had never talked about that day. But we were on the streets where she had walked back home in January 2010 from a hospital where she had been visiting a friend.

"The ground turned to water. Earth was moving up and down like waves.
Buildings fell one after another like a deck of cards.
I was trying to get to my home when
I saw a woman leaning on a man.
I don't think she realized that she had lost her leg."

3.

"My dog saved my life that day," she said. We were having lunch in the beautiful garden of a Middle Eastern restaurant decorated with metal sculptures, flower filled Haitian paintings, and a wood sign that said 'Beirut.'

"I followed him out of the building.
When he turned, I turned.
I kept my eyes on the dog. .
Often, the other direction - the way I might have gone-
was the place where everything collapsed
a moment later."

4.

I noticed flowers blossoming everywhere.
Flamboyant red flowers climbing over ruins and rubble,
peering through fences defying destruction.
My friend said, *"I think I should learn to live like a flower."*

5.

A woman in the camp said:

"We slept in the ravine on Routes des Freres, where the bridge collapsed for three nights. There were hundreds of people.

Our conditions were worse than pigs. Every aftershock was a terror.

I want to live in the camp with the other women.

My son comes here everyday to be with his friends.

I am still living in the stones and trash of the ravine with my husband's family. They don't want to move far from their house. It is too damaged to remain inside. Each time there is a big rain the tarps of the roof of our tent are washed away.

Can you get me another tarp?"



6.

*"Of course there were miracles. People helping each other everywhere.
People digging with their hands for those who might still be alive.
I saw a man's head sticking out from between two slabs of concrete.
He was alive. His eyes were open. Another man stopped. He touched the man's brow
gently to comfort him.
Comfort. I felt it.
I forgot about my misery and felt at peace for that moment. "*

7.

*"I fell while trying to get home. The earth opened on the road.
A hand lifted me back to safety just as the ground was closing again.
I knew the man, but never had a chance to thank him. I haven't seen him again.
I kept rushing to get home... for hours.
There were so many people on the street.
I didn't realize until later that my knee was cut open."*

8.

A UN worker described the earthquake:
*"When the sun rose the next morning
we were alive!
What was extraordinary was that all over the city I could hear people singing.
Prayers. 'We are not alone', I thought.
The entire city was singing.
Hundreds of people were on their knees."*
I listened to him imagining that after the quake, when the buildings tumbled,
the aching earth, broken open, became a natural cathedral.

9.

*"I keep wondering if my mother is still under the rubble.
If she will push her way out and come home.
I dream that she is trying to
call me on her cell phone.
After the eighth day we gave up hope.
But I have not stop dreaming."*

10.

*"I bumped into my sister on the road.
It was destiny. At first we started laughing.
Then we walked in silence until we came to a place where there were many people
gathered behind a wall. We had nowhere else to go. No where to go. No where.
We have been living in these tents behind these wall for two years."*



11.

The girls' first writing class in Pietenville ended early, and our driver was late. I took the five teen aged girls to my apartment for sandwiches, in order to wait where it was cool. They sat in the living room, eating in silence, perched politely on the couch. This was the first time they had been out of the camp in 16 months. They had wanted to go somewhere.

Mismah went into the bathroom. Soon Sabrina followed, then Kimberly, and Tashi. I heard squeals of laughter. All of them were there for a long time. I finally knocked on the door. Water was everywhere. They were washing wildly and toweling each other dry in a trance of hysterical bliss.

I said, "Just clean up a bit when you are finished," and closed the door. Kimberley came out asking for a drink of water, and followed me into the kitchen.

I opened the refrigerator. She asked, "Is that a refrigerator?"

She pointed to a bowl of fruit. I handed her three plums.

The five girls sat back on the couch.

This time, in a frenzy of focus, they shared the plums, passing them around, taking small bites, devouring them slowly as juice slid down their chins. Then chewed on the pits.

No one spoke during the drive back to the camp.

I was uncertain if I had made things worse by bringing them to the apartment.

But every time I return they ask, "When can we visit your hotel again?"

12.

"You asked me if there was anything I liked about life in the camp.

I am not happy, but my life is better than it was before in some ways;

I like living with others. It is hard. But, I don't think I knew I could do so many things.

It is good to share dinners. . In the first nights before we had tents, we sat outside, making a fire, sharing our food, retelling the same stories of our lives over and over.

I had forgotten how good it was to be together

But I don't want to live here forever.

I want to go back to a house and to work."

13.

She told me she went back to see if her plants were alive.

"All the furniture was broken and tossed around like broken toys."

"But," she smiled reporting, "The plants were alive in the one room that was not damaged."

She described dragging the plants out of the half buried house to stand

them up in the garden. *"I go back when the weather is dry and water them."*

That evening, sitting in the flowering garden under a mango tree beside the

swimming pool at the house that IMC rented for staff in Belleville,

I realized my only danger was being hit by a falling mango.

14.

A good-looking man was seated on a wooden stool, bare-chested and muscled, on a hill of rubble between two tents on a plateau of sand and tarps in the middle of a hot

afternoon. He was playing guitar. Beautiful music! A thin armed girl in a pale blue sundress was dancing nearby. Her arms moved to the music slowly like a bird in water. Spontaneously, I leaned out the window of the van and applauded. He bowed, smiling broadly, as if he was performing in a concert hall. Then he waved. The little girl never stopped dancing.

15.

I watched from the closed window of the “protected” van. There were people walking this way and that on the streets. Always there were piles and rows of women selling everything, or sauntering along with patterned mountains of pharmaceuticals, batteries, stockings or bottles of water balanced on their heads. Occasionally, someone was asleep on top of their goods. I noticed a tall woman dressed in an impeccable white dress and high heels stepping through mud and remnants of fruit skins and plastic bags, unsullied. She was a vision of dignity and female magic. Our car moved slowly. So many piles of mangos and vegetables, second hand clothing hanging on walls next to rows of sandals in every size waiting for someone to buy them. Or not. A dog caught up with the woman in white and walked behind her. Further down the street, a seven year old girl in a school uniform, drew pictures with her finger on a piece of blank cardboard. She seemed to be creating something in her own ocean of silence.

16.

The boys starting playing soccer in the alley way immediately when the door was opened. Only a single stone wall remained where the school had been.

They used a half deflated soccer ball.

‘Where did you get that?’ I called out.

‘I found it,’ answered the boy absorbed in the game in the middle of troubles.

He was wearing only one shoe.

17.

In Pietenville, in the afternoon, I saw two men, moving gardens, walking side by side. Each one carried potted green plants in their hands and a tray with a tall flowering plant on their heads. They were chatting across the street from the large camp in Place Boyard.

18.

Every day the same enormous pipes and pieces of metal stick out like a forlorn airplane wing after a crash from the same building on the same side of the road. I worry about children returning from school walking beneath it. In time, the rubble is cleared and the walls of the building are washed, but the top of the building has remained a rusted bird paused in the middle of flight. Months later I noticed that the building housed two shops. But no one had mended the bird's broken wing.

19.

*"An old woman on our street opened up a church in the alley
between our houses. She put pieces of wood on stones and made us
chairs. Does God hear our voices?
We prayed anyway."*

20.

Describing the morning of the earthquake, a friend revealed,
*"I dreamed about the earthquake many times before it happened.
Even that morning I wanted to leave work early.
I felt something.
I used to own a small store.
I sold cosmetics and clothing.
My coworkers said, "Why do you want to leave early?"
I couldn't explain.
But I started to sing under my breath,
'God is everywhere.'"*

She pointed upwards, as if looking inside the few clouds.
In the clear pure tropical blue of Haitian sky.

*"In the moments after the earthquake the sky was missing.
Everything turned to dust and smoke.
I couldn't see the city. I feared it had disappeared."*

21.

*"I still sleep in a tent on the roof of my house.
I am afraid."*

22.

One day, driving towards Carrefour, the wind blew a cloth door open in front of a house. I saw a man and a woman seated on either side of a table covered with a flowered plastic tablecloth, having a conversation, drinking cups of tea.

On the next turn back onto a busy street, a boy was sitting legs out in front of him on a low fence. His legs were covered with open sores. Everyone else in the car was accustomed to the sights accustomed to not being able to do everything for everyone. The car kept moving. My translator tapped me on the shoulder. She pointed to a woman's body on a bench covered with a white kerchief over her face. "Cholera," she said softly. I had mentioned earlier that I didn't see any evidence of cholera although I knew it was everywhere. We turned to see a line of people, watching from a distance. We moved on. I heard an ambulance.

23.

A year later, arriving again in Port au Prince at the same airport, I walked down the same steps towards the bus to customs. The same band was playing. This time the music was lively. The musicians were smiling. I still looked away, uncertain of how to respond. The same heat. The same crowds. The same lines. The same half built terminal. The same chaos of waiting and searching for luggage. But the piles of metal were smaller. Women were wearing black high heels and flamboyant hats waiting for boxes and bags. Outside, the driver recognized me. This time I did not succumb to the scam of having someone carry my bag from the building for \$20.00. The driver and I talked in half English and half French. I noticed how much trash had been cleared, and how much had not been cleared. I saw two skin thin cows in a field munching. There were less merchants on the road but just as many second hand shoes.

24.

On the hillside above Rue Boudin, where craftspeople leave their paintings out all night in the rain on metal fences, there is a mountain side of ramshackle broken houses. It looks as if someone shaved off the front walls. In one room a red shirt hung on a hanger on a yellow painted cabinet, for a long time. The hanger and the shirt were gone weeks later. People moved back into their houses, some living in tents on the rooftops, others making walls of cloth and tarps. At night from my hotel window I see lights and fires, burning on the hillside. Recovery.

25.

Talking to a woman in front of her tent, we saw a child walk between tarps carrying a bucket of water. She stopped for a second, put down the bucket, and smiled. Then, we heard her stepmother yelling at her to hurry. The child's face grew serious. She lifted the water again. My friend tried to help her with the bucket. The girl froze, and fiercely refused help. She picked up the bucket and kept walking. The mother shouted again. We walked away hoping she wouldn't be beaten for stopping to talk to us.



26.

An elderly man hangs up hand sewn Vevers every day (brilliantly colored sequin embroidered voodoo flags) with hearts, swords, snakes, eggs and other symbols on a stone wall not far from my hotel. I admired them. One morning he asked me if I liked them. He was not selling them to me, he remarked. I was very interested, I responded. He told me about some of the different gods and goddesses (the loa) the significance of the white egg and the red heart, the snake and other symbols - describing pathways... crossroads.... leading inside and out from this world to the other. As I walked away, with three sequined banners, I heard him chanting under his breath.

27.

At an OFEDA meeting, I asked the women how their one year celebration had gone. What had they enjoyed? A small woman pushed to the front of the room and told me the party was too serious! She wanted more dancing and singing. The other women, fifty of them, scoffed. I stood up and said, "Let's dance." She and I began to dance. The other women burst into song, giggling, until they were all dancing with partners in the school room between the makeshift desks.

"How was that?" I asked.

She said,

"Bon."

28.

"Life goes on somehow. I don't concentrate on misery."

The Haitian woman in her African headscarf and long earrings, who had been a dancer returned from Canada a day before the earthquake. She spoke as we walked to Le Giant, a market where expats shop. I tried to purchase a mango from a woman sitting on the edge of the gutter between five other women selling vegetables at the entrance.

The merchant said in English, "ten dollars!" pointing to one mango.

I said, "Je vous donne deux dollar." (I give you two dollars)

They fall freely off of trees, I thought.

She turned away saying loudly, "Twelve dollars. One mango!"

I wanted to explain that if she sold ten mangos for ten dollars there would be lots of sales. But, I couldn't think fast enough in French and she was not paying attention to me, anyway. Then I noticed her beauty and pride, and her beautiful skirt. I gave up my inadequate logic and entered the air-conditioned supermarket.

29.

"I was in commerce since I was eight years old.

I worked in the market beside my mother.

She was a business woman. She sold rice and beans.

I sold the sweet cakes.

Sometimes we made a few goudes. That is how she sent us to school and paid the rent.

I would like to do that again, but I can't afford to buy the goods for sale.'

30.

“I have seven children. I lost my husband. What can I do?”

She carried a metal soup pot with hot sugary black coffee on her head. On the tray there was a single stained cup and a can of sugar. She wiped the dirty cup out with her scarf and offered me sweet black thick hot coffee. I drank. “Merci. Merci.”

Forgetting about illness and health.



31.

*“When I was a little girl in our village I loved to play in the river with my friends.
We swam and played with stones and twigs.
I wanted to be a singer. But I followed a boy to Port au Prince when I was fourteen -
never went back to the village.
He disappeared when I was pregnant.
I have his child. I still love him.
Love is the most important thing in the world.
I would like to go to school.
I wanted to be a singer before I fell in love.
Did I tell you that?”*

I asked if she still liked to sing?
She sang me a song.

32.

“Why do you attend these meetings every week? Walk for an hour to the camp in the heat?” I asked a woman. She said, “Women meeting together gives us strength.” Another woman in the OFEDA group said, “It is good to do something and not to sit and wait for something to happen that may never take place.”



33.

In the late afternoons, in the camp, in July, suddenly, the blue sky turns dark. The palm trees bend in the wind. The first drops of the daily monsoon start to fall. I gathered my notebooks and recording equipment. I fold up the unbalanced plastic chair I sat on during interviews. I carried it back to the tent where the women meet, girls dance, and health information is shared. The young men continued their soccer game in the downpour. The women sat under trees or the edges of the school building porches. It was time for me to leave before the storm flooded the road.

34.

One day walking through random rows of tents, we came across a beautiful young woman taking a bath. She washed with sudsy water from a tin bowl on the ground. skillfully wrapped in a dark green towel. Smiling, she posed for photos and said, *"I owned a beauty parlor."* She loved seeing the photos. Later, we forgot her name and referred to her as 'Beauty.' We searched for her when we came back, but heard she had left the camp. Recently, I have seen her. She made a makeshift beauty salon by the water source with two plastic chairs. Radiant, she braids women's hair.

35.

"I am thirteen years old. I love to dance. Watch me."
She danced with other girls in perfect synchronization
to a song recorded on an taped up battery run cell phone.
"I love Rhiannon" she called out, exaggerating her words.
Repeating the lyrics of the song in English, miming imagined glamour,
hips gyrating,
her feet beating the rhythm of the tune on the plastic tarp floor, She could be a
teenager anywhere.
Young boys stood outside, watching.
They knew better than to enter this female space.
I felt like an honored guest.

36.

*"My grandmother told stories. She practiced voodoo.
But we don't speak about that any more. My family is Christian.
I could tell you a story about twins. But I don't speak about those things.
I had two brothers twins. One of them died. I can't tell you about those things."*

Another woman said, *"I remember a story about a King who had three daughters.
A fruit tree grew in front of his palace.
Well, I don't remember anymore.
I am too old.
The earthquake took away my memories."
"If you remember please tell me," I said.*
The next day she told me the story and sang me a song.
*"Only the man who could find out the names of the princesses could marry one of them.
He was he most ugly man. But he climbed the tree and hid
listening to the girls who talked beneath him.
He was ugly but smart.
The King was angry, but had to keep his word"*

. *So the girls washed that man clean and he married a princess.
He was handsome when cleaned.”*
She started laughing even though I knew she was ill.
“Where did you hear that story?” I inquired.
“*Outside the house when I was a child.
There was a funeral indoors.
We were told stories and made to laugh to keep the ghosts away.”*

37.

*“I ran home to see if my house was still standing.
Was anyone alive? I didn't know for days that my husband had
survived.
God is good, even if he forgot us for a while.”*

38.

I turned around at the airport before leaving to look at the hillside, in August 2011. The blue sky, the mountain of palm trees, the tents in the distance, the memory of the sound of children’s voices asking when I would come back, which story I would tell. I felt tears on the edges of my eyes. My baggage of memories, images and weather. The man checking passports at a folding table said, “ You must be happy to leave!” I answered, “ I am sad to leave.
“This place, where the world split open, here something new can be born.”
He stamped my passport.
I knew I would be haunted by faces, and tears, and the endless litanies of frustration I had recorded during the week. He said leaning toward me, “*Some say this earthquake was a long awaited signal that starts the new world. “*
A woman tapped me, “There are ancient caves under Haiti with petroglyphs.”
But the pushing and chaos took my attention as I held tight to a woven bag bursting with metal sculptures, papers and sequined bottles I was carrying home.
Then, the sadness returned.
Tender, sweet joy - unbearably sad.

** My title was inspired by a Poem by Patricia Smith entitled 34. Hearing her read reflections on Katrina, I found a way to write about my experience in Haiti*