

WEIGHT OF WORDS:
A Co-Constructed Narrative of Love and/in Trauma

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A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Columbia University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

New York, New York

May 2013

She went to Rwanda to study genocide and fell in love with a boy named Adolphe.

The first time I went to Rwanda, my sister, Lisi, and her Canadian roommate and colleague,

August 6,
2007

Things to
remember:

Murambi air
Gisozi
children
dancing
scars
muzungu
running in
the rain
waiting
but I love
your sister
I will wait
for you

Amanda, picked me up at the airport. They met me with homemade newspaper hats decorated with stickers and drawings in bright colored markers. *Karibu*, welcome. We wore our hats as we hailed three motos, motorcycle taxis. I straddled the driver, hugged him tightly, as we sped down the hill and I lost sight of my friends. My eyes tried to close as he weaved through other motos, taxi buses, dirty white suvs with aid organization logos on them and spotless suvs with men who smiled at the white girl obviously scared to death. When we got to the bus station, a dirt road with a few restaurants and shack-like ticket booths, we told inquisitive passengers that the newspaper hats were traditional muzungu welcoming attire.

When I returned in 2008, there were no hats. I flew to Rwanda from Tanzania after having spent a week in the rainy paradise of Zanzibar, where winding stone streets had filled with warm water up to my knees. The rain lightened up just in time for sunset. Twenty or so boys were diving off a dock, thirty feet high, into the harbor despite a sign that forbids swimming and warns of danger. They were loud and laughing, doing flips and bellyflops, against a backdrop of silhouetted old wooden trading boats and the sunset. I stood back to photograph the boys but the frame of the picture was too rigid. Fresh chapatti and popcorn whiffed from the street food market in front of the mosque to the edge of the dock. I tucked my camera into my bag, hid it under my sweatshirt in the pile of the boys' clothes. One boy, probably twelve, saw me coming

and called to his friends to watch. We laughed and through languageless pointing, they showed me which way was safest. I hesitated, then inhaled, then dove fully clothed into the Indian Ocean off the coast of East Africa.

I look back at that moment as a moment of stupid clarity. I took a risk, maybe the first risk I'd ever really taken, and what followed broke and built me in ways that I hope to discover (uncover) in this work. I jumped off a cliff into the unknown, and five years later, I cannot help but recognize my own selfish intentions. I wanted the excitement, the witnessing, the burden. I wrote my thesis at the NYU Trauma and Violence Transdisciplinary Studies Program on the 'Trauma Vulture,' one who chooses to study and expose him/herself to trauma.¹ I researched and speculated on the type of person drawn to the field and the problematics of being interested in suffering. In this work, I would like to take that further. What does it mean to come of age in the light of trauma? To find love? Can suffering be shared? How close can one get to a trauma they didn't experience and to someone who survived it? By telling the story of my time in Rwanda in 2008, the things I heard and the people I met, I hope to offer up myself and this work as an example, or perhaps more aptly, an experiment, to how we might share the weight of words.

¹ Wolcott, Sara. "The Trauma Vulture: Responsibility and the Intentional Onlooker." Unpublished manuscript: 2010. pp5: "The study of trauma brings the student unavoidably close to a subject matter that irreversibly changes lives. Trauma and traumatic experiences break through the shield that protects one's natural consciousness, making impossible a sense of agency, dividing the mind and the body, and leaving one psychologically vulnerable to flashbacks, anxiety, numbness, and dissociation. The traumatic experience is one of devastation, be it from the natural world or by the evils of humanity, leaving little to survive. Those who have experienced trauma would rarely wish upon another the knowledge trauma provides and evades, and yet Trauma Studies has created a community of scholars who are choosing to risk their psyches in order to be close to such knowledge. What does it mean to choose this path of study, to intentionally expose oneself to such disaster? What attracts students to the field and what are the violences of this attraction? Who makes up this community of onlookers and what are the complexities inherent to the "libidinal economy" of the trauma vulture?"

Gahoro: Gahoro

I can't remember how I got out of the harbor, but I do remember leaving a trail of water behind me as I picked up samosas at the market and walked to my hotel. The next day I flew to Rwanda and arrived on the morning of the fourteenth anniversary of the 1994 genocide. The outdoor airport was empty, only a few tourists, missionaries, getting off the plane with me. The streets were quiet, just a few buses passing, each somber passenger wearing a bright purple band on their arm to signify the commemoration. I checked into a room to watch President Paul Kagame's speech on television. He spoke in three languages, Kinyarwanda for his people, French for his "ally," and English for the rest. In French and English, he told the story of the genocide: 800,000 people killed in 100 days by members of one tribe against another, a conflict decades old, a country working towards reunification, towards peace². In Kinyarwanda, he emphasized that he would reconsider his relationship with the French, who aided the genocidaires in the war, and assured that he would send troops into the Congo to find the remaining perpetrators.

Buses passed without the normal hollering out the window by the driver to find passengers. The streets were silent. People walked holding hands down the sidewalks. I piled into a bus on its way to the Gisozi Memorial Museum and squished between a woman with a baby wrapped onto her back and a man, probably my age, who silently compared the blond hair on my white arm with the lack of hair on his. We drove into the city, up and down the hills for which the country

² For more information on the history of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, I would recommend Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador, 1998) or Jean Hatzfeld's trilogy of excerpts from oral histories with survivors and perpetrators, *A Life Laid Bare*, *Machete Season*, and *The Antelope's Strategy* (New York: Picador, 2006, 2007 and 2010 respectively).

is named. *Le Pays de Mille Collines*, the country of a thousand hills. Rwandans like to say that God comes home to sleep in Rwanda: he spends the day around the world, but Rwanda is where he calls home. On this day, I waited in traffic on the way to the museum as police cars passed by. I leaned forward to avoid the touch of warm strangers and to try to get a sense of the hold-up. I saw taxi-buses with Madonna bumper stickers, fringe hanging from the back windshield, and arms stuck out windows for air. I craned my neck, frustrated. The man next to me said *gahoro, gahoro*. Slowly, slowly.

Rwanda has been at peace since the end of the war. On occasion, there are attacks. When students return to school after spending time with their families for holiday vacations, there have been instances of violence. At school the students are taught anti-genocide ideology, but the parents have been taught generations of hate.

The next day, I read in *The New Times*, Kigali's English newspaper, that the traffic was caused when someone threw grenades into the guard's quarters at the museum. Another person drove through the memorial parade. Two people were killed on the first day of memorial week.

The next day, I passed through villages, by local commemoration sites and mass graves, on the 40km trip east of the capital city to Musha, my home for six months. We passed markets and shops filled with people, chickens and goats on ropes, mattresses and baskets of bananas balanced on young heads. Taxibuses communicated through hand signals and rhythmic honks and bangs on the side of the door. When I saw a familiar bicycle stand, I knocked twice on the roof of the taxi. The driver pulled over and I began my ascent up the mountain on the dirt path with all my belongings on my back.

April 9, 2008
The only sound is
the screeching owl
walking on the roof.

I spent the first two weeks of my life in Rwanda alone in the house. I re-read my books on trauma, on the history of Rwanda, my notes on oral

history techniques.³ I played with my field recorder, an ipod hookup with an omni microphone that recorded directly to the ipod. On April 12, 2008, I sent this mass email to friends and family:

I have spent the last three days in Musha on my own (Lisi and Amanda are on vacation for another week) and have accomplished great things. First, no cockroaches or bugs waiting for me, which was a relief. Also no water, and the lights in the kitchen and bathroom are not working. I ate bread and fake nutella for dinner, then watched both Bridget Jones movies to curb my nerves and loneliness. Yesterday I managed to handwash all my clothes and even remembered to take them off the line before it started raining again. I then ventured into town and bought tomatoes and a pineapple. I cooked a delicious dinner on the propane stove and even managed to wash dishes by flashlight. The neighbor kids have learned my name, or something like it. Rwandans have a problem with their "r"s and "l"s, so I now respond to "Sara," "Sala," and even "Sawa" sometimes. I also wave to "Alicia" and "Amanda," as all white people look alike, and because anything is progress from just being called "Mzungu," which means "white person."

I already have three admirers: one of whom is only 17, and thus best to steer clear of for the next few years, one of whom is my sister's ex-boyfriend, definitely a bad idea, and finally, a very attractive man named Davis (I think), who was charming until I gave him my phone number and have since received upwards of twenty calls in less than two days. Still, he is a musician and wrote me a song called "You are Beautiful," which is honestly more than any American boy ever did.

³ In 2008, all I knew about oral history was what I'd learned from several day trips I'd taken to the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University to watch Holocaust testimonies. Humbled by the institution, I sunk into old leather desk chairs, put on headphones that didn't fit, and watched hours of video tapes on tiny old televisions. I feverously took notes on the back of third-page sized library call slips: what questions did the interviewer ask, how did they begin, what questions yielded productive answers and which crossed into the arena of exploitation? After my last trip, I drove home on the first beautiful day of spring, confident that I could gather traumatic testimony, comforted by the makeshift interview guide I'd scribbled, sure I could handle the emotional toll of bearing the weight of words, and I hit an already injured deer. I tried to straddle it with my mother's low to the ground car, I made things so much worse. Convinced the car was going to explode (my second greatest fear), I jumped out, gripping my service-less cell phone, and found a safe turnout where I crouched down and shook, grasping my ears where, hours before, headphones had been. What upset me, the stories or the deer?

So things are good here in Rwanda. Sometimes it's hard, but I think I wouldn't want it if it were easy. This project of mine may fail miserably, I may be hugely underqualified and underprepared, I may hurt more than I help, but at least I'm doing it. I miss you all, I miss New York, I miss up-to-date news of Barack Obama, I'm a bit lonely but not homesick yet. A month on the Equator has given me a fantastic tan and wondrous challenges and opportunities.

Who knows. I'm in Africa. I can do anything.

Ready to dive into what I had named 'the Project for Rwandan Testimony,' I approached the Director of Apagie Musha in the beginning of May 2008 to ask him to let me use a classroom to speak to the students of the genocide survivor's organization. The Director put his hands on his hips and leaned back, pushing out his stomach to make himself look larger, fatter, fuller, more powerful, and finally, and most likely out of curiosity, agreed, signified by the Rwandan mannerism of raising his eyebrows and saying "mmm." I practiced my French, put on a pretty dress, and twenty minutes later stood in front of twenty students in a sweltering classroom and realized I was in over my head. I told them about the project, they laughed at my French, they questioned my motives, I did too. Over the next few weeks I refined the project, found two interpreters to help, but no students contacted me to schedule. I made myself visible, wandering around the dirt streets outside the school at lunchtime. People said hello, but none I recognized from my information session. With the help of one student, JMV, a quiet but sweet volleyball player, I scheduled my first interview for May 10.

I spent the following four weeks interviewing ten students who had survived a genocide. The students would come into my house on a Saturday afternoon. I made sure my roommates, their teachers, were nowhere around. I wanted the students to feel safe and to ensure confidentiality.

We had an initial interview to gather a focused life history where I asked the students about their lives before, during and after the genocide, with a special focus on family. The second interview followed up on threads from the first interview, then shifted to discuss the experience of giving testimony, such as how the students emotionally prepared for the interview, how they felt before speaking with me and how they felt leaving my house and the interview. We also spoke about commemoration sites, remembering, and how, and if, the student spoke to their friends about their experiences during the war. I then asked the students to write their life stories on paper, and invited the five students who completed this task to come back for an interview to discuss the differences between writing and speaking their traumatic narrative. I transcribed each interview myself the day after the interview, including my field notes on body language and pacing. When the interviews were completed, I gathered the students for a party at my home and explained the legal release, which was given to them in both English and French, which, as per their request, ensured their testimonies would not be used without their names and only for educational purposes.

During the interviews, we sat on chairs with cushions that pushed air out when you sat on them, making an exhale or fart-like sound, which always got an awkward laugh. I had tea ready in a large red blue thermos on the table and poured some for both the narrator and translator. The students often stirred their tea or played with the spoon during the interviews, perhaps out of nervousness, maybe out of discomfort, but it can be heard on all of the recordings of their interviews. The recordings also hold stories of death, of fear, of the coldness of the barrel of a gun, the sharpness of a machete, of hiding in bushes, of the scars that remain, of the smell and

stickiness of blood. They hold the stories of last memories of parents and siblings, of songs sung, of hardships since, of God. I hold these stories too.

Dori Laub writes extensively on the burdens and opportunities of bearing witness to traumatic narrative as well as the necessary role and responsibility of the listener. In his essay “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” Laub writes that “testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a

long time.”⁴ Laub has also suggested that “the listener of trauma needs to... be a guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone.”⁵

⁴ Laub, Dori (1992). “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. New York: Routledge. pp70.

⁵ Laub, D. *ibid.* pp59.

The following are excerpts from my interviews with the students in Rwanda. Many of the students expressed hesitation to speak with me, questioning whether I was trustworthy. Several commented that it was because I was a student, like them, that they agreed to participate in the project. I was, in many ways, an outsider in their eyes (white, female, wealthy enough to travel the world), and yet I earned their trust by being transparent with my intentions and by being a student.⁶ However, it is clear from the following quotations that it still very much mattered to whom the narrators were speaking.

⁶ The knowledge that I was their teacher’s sister also helped I’m sure.

SAFARI Jean de Dieu⁷

*Telling you my story, it was not easy, but you are a person I highly trust and I wanted to. But since I told you about my life before, during and after the war, it is as if you are holding my life in your hands, just there, and I don't really like telling anyone my story, but when I open my heart and tell you all my things, you have my life there, in your hands. That's why it was not easy.*⁸

Safari was a tall and sociable boy who had large crooked teeth but smiled all the time. He was confident and popular at Apagie Musha. When he came to be interviewed, he initially looked directly at me and the translator, Firmin, but soon became more introverted and looked only at the table or turned his head far to the left to look out the window. He ended the interview after forty-five minutes with “*If there is nothing else, maybe we can be finished.*”⁹ His oral history tells how he lost both his parents and four siblings during the war. At the time of the interview, he and his sister were being taken care of by his only remaining uncle, who Safari described as having been “*half killed,*”¹⁰ as a result of a machete wound across his cheekbone.

It was during the second interview, when I asked Safari about how he felt telling me his story, that his hands cupped together and he spoke, looking into them, in a language I didn't understand. He looked up, smiled and began to laugh. Firmin was laughing too, as he translated Safari's words. I sensed something big had just occurred, but couldn't grasp what yet. My next question was to ask about how he felt after leaving the interview.

Do you want to know if I regretted it, or the emotions I had? After telling you my story—when, for example, I told you I am an orphan. When I went back, I started

⁷ Rwandan names are traditionally written as the capitalized Rwandan/last name, then a first name. Rwandans do not have family names passed down but instead are given a Rwandan name and a French name at birth, then may choose an English, or popular name, when they are kids. They will go by any of the three names, or some combination in thereof.

⁸ Safari, J.d.D., June 4, 2008.

⁹ Safari, J.d.D., May 17, 2008.

¹⁰ Safari, J.d.D., May 17, 2008.

thinking more, rewinding, reflecting, remembering I am an orphan, and I even regretted telling you my story because there is nothing you can do for me.¹¹

When Safari held his hands together to demonstrate the fragility of his story, he was perhaps more aware than I was as to the limitations of oral history. There was nothing I could do for him, but to remind him of the loss of his family. I understood his metaphor to mean that his story was a gift that I should take care of, that I should protect, but he may well have felt it was another thing he'd lost.

KAYITARE Aime Sincere

Aime Sincere: My name is Kayitare Aime Sincere.

Q: Where were you born?

Aime Sincere: Gasawa district, Nyabagogo region in Kigali town.

Q: And when were you born?

Aime Sincere: I was born on the 18th of May, 1987.

Q: That's soon. Your birthday is soon. Are you going to have a party?

Aime Sincere: I invite you (in English).

Aime Sincere was an expert in tae kwon do with an infectious sense of humor who flirtaciously invited me to both his birthday party and tae kwon do competition. He was calm from the start, talking with Firmin and stirring his tea while I set up. He told his story graphically, but without struggle or difficulty.

Many things happened in front of my eyes. People cutting people with machetes, beating people with sticks, beating people, putting people outside under the sun to let them blaze there. For me personally, the interahamwe¹² came and said they were going to kill all boys, so my mother took me and dressed me in a dress. I was the only child left, all the others had died with my father. The interahamwe yelled for all boys, but I stayed with my mother because I was dressed as a girl. Boys were killed, beaten, cut with machetes, on the spot, in front of my eyes. After killing the boys, they started killing the mothers, then after killing the mothers, they said they would kill all the rest of the remaining girls. They killed my mother as I stood next to her...We were running, people screaming, I didn't have a

¹¹ Safari, J.d.D., June 4, 2008.

¹² The Hutu paramilitary organization that perpetrated the genocide in 1994. The word, in Kinyarwanda, means "those who stand/work/fight together."

*chance to say goodbye to my mother. I don't believe that anyone had the chance to say goodbye.*¹³

I took (and take) a beat. Silence. *And then what happened?*

I remember waking the next morning in the dark. For the first time, I decided to go to the school cafeteria for breakfast, so I dressed and walked down the hill, the dirt hitting the back of my ankles with each flip of my sandal. The air was heavy, almost smoky, in a way I've only ever noticed in Africa and on the way to airports for morning flights. I opened the metal doors with a creak, then a slam, and was transported into a room not unlike American high school cafeterias, but with less tables and more people and so much more noise. Aime Sincere excitedly pushed between the Dean of Students and a boy I'd never met to sit next to me. He filled my cup with porridge and waited expectantly. I took two gulps of the thick, floury, almost sweet, sauce to be polite before pushing it away from me on the table. Aime Sincere led the table in laughter, then taught me to say *ndahaze*, I'm full/satisfied. By the brand of laughter, I think the word referred to sexual satisfaction, but was funnier to teach me to say than was the word for culinary satisfaction.

¹³ Kayitare, A.S., May 28, 2008.

Alone: Together

On May 24, I guest lectured at the Kivu Writer's Workshop on editing techniques. Having spent four years working in publishing and more than that in writing workshops, I was scheduled to speak in the final slot. I had prepared a discussion on the importance of word selection, of the possibility of succinct language and intentional word choice to powerfully convey meaning. But, Cathryn, the instructor of an earlier session, got malaria and was throwing up on the balcony upstairs. I filled in, running a workshop like I'd learned them: talking less than the students, asking questions, posing writing exercises. About ten minutes in, the door opened and a new student came in. He wore khaki pants and a tan plaid button-up. His hair was short and his eyes dark. He quietly took a seat near the door.

I continued to teach as best I knew. There were a lot of "what do you think" reversals. The students were speaking, engaged in conversation, arguing with each other about how you know when a story is complete. The new student raised his hand.

"Excuse me, she is the teacher. Let's listen to what she has to say," he interrupted, directing the class to me.

"Well, what do you think?" I said. I thought I was so smart.

"You are the teacher."

"You'll learn more from each other than you can learn from me."

"So why are you the teacher?"

“Oh, I’m not. I’m just filling in for Cathryn. She’s sick.”

Everyone except the new student laughed. Later, I stood behind him in line at the lunch buffet, waiting for rice and beans and omelets filled with French fries. We spoke about the 2008 presidential primary. He wanted Hilary Clinton to win because she’s married to Bill. At 24, he joked that I should respect him because he was my elder. I watched him pile his plate high while he laughed, shocked, that I only wanted a scoop or two. His hands were delicate, shiny, like he’d never used them before. Never before bold, at the end of the day, I wrote my name and number on a torn sheet of paper, folded it, and put it in his front shirt pocket. He furrowed his eyebrow, pulled his head back.

“What’s this?”

“You don’t have to use it if you don’t want.”

“Ok.” He found a copy of the day’s schedule on the table, turned it over. *Adolphe Bagabo*, a phone number and email address. “You don’t have to use it if you don’t want.”

The next morning, I was back in Musha sitting cross-legged on the floor of the cafeteria watching Aime Sincere earn his next higher belt in tae kwon do. The entire school was packed into the room, struggling to hear the instructor’s commands over the pounding thunderstorm on the metal roof. The red dust had turned to mud but Aime Sincere’s uniform was pristine as he took his stance. Silence amidst the storm. My phone.

I quickly silenced the ring, turning bright red but not from expected glares. I had gotten used to Rwandans answering their phones at any time, in a memorial museum, when teaching a class, without thinking it rude, but I still did. A moment passed, the phone rang again. It was the same number, one I didn't recognize. I turned off the ringer. It began to vibrate between my leg and the concrete floor.

Aime Sincere bowed, and everyone stood, clapping, hesitant to leave the cafeteria to walk into the rain. I grabbed my buzzing phone and took it outside.

“Sara? Ya, it's me, it's Adolphe.”

On May 30, I told my friend:

so this guy adolphe is coming to a party with me tomorrow night. he's called a couple times and seems like a nice enough guy. it's not going to be anything serious, maybe just some making out tomorrow night. hopefully. he doesn't drink and while i find that admirable, it seriously impedes my plan to get him drunk.

project's going well. a girl cried wednesday when she came to see me. it was awful. otherwise, i've finished the hard interviews and now it's about the process of giving testimony, both spoken and written. the students are all fantastic and wonderfully helpful. i'm running out of money for the project. i bounce back and forth between incredibly depressed and invigorated. today i feel great, but yesterday i more than moped around the house all day. its like I can't do anything, can't move, can't cry, like i'm stuck in the middle of something that doesn't have a way in or out. the testimonies really get me down. the combination of the malaria medicine and the stories i hear are giving me some pretty scary dreams. but then the next day i'll be exhilarated with being here. the people are incredible, i'm in africa, and it's kinda fun.

Judgment

KAYONDE Daddy Evaniste

So many people could not understand how you could forgive someone who killed your friends, they thought there should be revenge. There are courts started called gacaca,¹⁴ where you judge those who killed other people. People from prisons come and are tried, some have served their time and are freed now... During the process of gacaca, killers said who and how they killed, you couldn't even imagine. You can watch and see their regret, what they are telling you and how they are behaving, you can see the heart of the person return like before they had killed.¹⁵

A look of hopeful desperation shot across Daddy's face as he spoke these last words, as if this was how he was able to forgive, to survive in a world where this could happen.

Daddy, a star volleyball player, looked like a praying mantis in his angles and sharp lines. He spoke confidently, looking at the translator, but never at me. He was jittery, impatient to tell his story, and once asked if we could move past the questions about his family and get to the topic at hand. He never seemed comfortable, always leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, did not gesture with his hands. He often looked at the table or out the window.

¹⁴ Gacaca: Once a month or so, I would walk through Musha, usually in search of good pineapple, only to find all of the townspeople, children, elders, prisoners in pink pajamas, sitting in the grass on the hill behind the Town Hall. After the genocide, prisons overflowed with people, and the country, struggling to put itself back together, was unable to hold trials for all incarcerated. Now, while organizers of the genocide are tried at the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, those who followed the orders to kill are being tried in traditional tribal courts where village officials bring the perpetrator in front of the friends, family and neighbors of those he killed. He is forced to give names and details of all his crimes, and then the community decides if justice has been done with his time already served.

Daddy was born in Nyamata, a town that saw the death of 100,000 people. The remains of 45,000 people are held at the memorial museum where the Nyamata Parish Catholic Church once stood, over 10,000 of whom were killed in the church itself. Daddy was taken with his family to seek refuge in Burundi and Tanzania during the war. His memories of the genocide are focused on the return to Rwanda and the discovery of mass graves.

If you could walk around, there were so very many holes and toilets filled with dead people, dead people everywhere, dogs were feeding on meat and flesh of people, even the hawks¹⁶ were full. Some Hutus stayed and remembered where our friends were killed and buried, so we went and took the bodies back. We could recognize people by their hair and skull and clothes.¹⁷

He spoke rhythmically, as if in a trance, and was undisturbed when a classmate came to the window of the house to see what was happening. Daddy looked into his hands as Firmin and I shooed the visitor away. He began speaking again without prompting.

UMUTONI Lydie

It is not natural to tell my story. It is a burden for me. When I come to tell someone my story, it doesn't leave my mind quickly. It takes me three days to forget what I said. I keep reflecting on what I said, on what happened. It is very burdensome. Yes, it kept haunting my mind. Haunting me. Even though it keeps haunting me, I think it is very necessary to tell my story because somehow I feel relaxed after. It is as if I had a very big burden, but after, the burden is reduced a little.¹⁸

Lydie, one of two girls I interviewed, was tall, thin, beautiful. When she gave her oral history, she leaned back into her chair and did not elaborate in her answers, resulting in many awkward pauses. It was unclear if she simply did not like to talk, or if she was holding back purposefully. Girls in Rwanda are not often given a chance to speak freely, but when Lydie interacted with

¹⁵ Kayonde, D., May 10, 2008.

¹⁶ Vulture?

¹⁷ Kayonde, D., May 10, 2008.

other students, she was sociable and outgoing. Her oral history consisted of one or two word responses to my questions, yet it was enough to leave her feeling “haunted.” Sitting across from her, intuiting her silences, I understood her narrative to represent memories that were running through her mind but lacking language. In an attempt to earn a longer response, I refrained from asking questions for about thirty seconds and I received the following response:

Because I was five years old, I can remember some events. I saw some people being killed, even my father became mad because of the things he was seeing. [Long pause] Another thing that I can remember is people being wounded. We went to hide ourselves in a church. Some people used to tell us they wanted to give us biscuits, that the RPF was there, but it was a trick to get us out and kill us. [Long pause] There are many [memories].¹⁹

On June 4, 2008, I followed up on her word choice, asking her what it meant to become “mad.”

The transcript is as follows:

Q: Last time you mentioned that your father went mad because of the things he saw. What exactly does it mean to go mad?

Lydie: Going mad is like being traumatized. I can remember he left us in the church, he went out, saying “I want beer I want beer I want beer,” being traumatized.”

Q: So what does trauma²⁰ mean to you? What does someone who has been traumatized look like, how do they feel?

¹⁸ Umutoni, L., June 4, 2008

¹⁹ Umutoni, L., May 17, 2008.

²⁰ This question was meant to address the fluid meaning of ‘trauma’ for survivors and scholars.

In recent years, perhaps as a result of the popularization of the study of the Holocaust and Trauma Studies as well as greater cultural awareness of human rights abuse around the world plus an exponentially dramatic populous, the word has problematically been used to exaggerate any ordinary grievance, thus desensitizing it from its meaning as Sigmund Freud described it. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes trauma as “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield,”^{20A} those which overwhelm human understanding. In an effort to cope with such a rupture, the shield reforms, trapping the traumatic event inside the survivor, and symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares, anger, irritability, and hypersensitivity, develop as these excitations disturb the unconscious. Cathy

Lydie: I'm not sure how I can explain that. It's like someone who has gone out of his mind, who has lost his knowledge but I don't know how I can explain traumatism.

^{20(cont)} Caruth writes in her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, that trauma is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.”^{20B} Thus, implicit in trauma is a difficult discussion between that which cannot be spoken and that which must be heard. The language of trauma is never sufficient, never complete or cohesive. The word ‘trauma,’ itself falls in this category, attempting to label and represent the unrepresentable. Dr. Ghislaine Boulanger, in an oral history interview on October 23, 2012, shows how the ‘trauma’ label can inhibit recovery:

I actually happen to hate the word trauma...I think it is wildly overused...And I really consider trauma to be something of massive significance...I reserve the word trauma for something that is beyond the reach of normal human experience as it was described in the words ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ for a number of reasons. One is, of course, that there is a criterion that you have to reach. I'm interested in people who survived an adult onset trauma generally, I don't care if they have reached criterion or not. Two, I just think that that diagnosis is thrown around too liberally. And three is that I think its a cliché. Just as I think the word trauma is a cliché. And sometimes when you turn on that cliché, you turn off really listening hard... I try to keep the adjectives like traumatic, like terror, like horror to a minimum when I'm working with someone because I just want to hear about what they've gone through.^{20C}

Some scholars have offered up ‘stress,’ ‘suffering’ or ‘terror’ as an alternative, describing the testimony to traumatic events as ‘difficult stories,’ but ultimately, any naming or framing of catastrophic events or their responses can only be a symbol or pointer to an event. Oral history allows us to hear the story of the event, no matter what category it falls under.

^{20A} Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961. Pp33.

^{20B} Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. pp4.

^{20C} Boulanger, G. October 23, 2012.

HARINDINTWALI Jean Damascene

When someone asks me what happened to me, I feel relieved and relaxed. Sometimes my heart, it is like a burden on my heart to tell them, but then I see the person cares about me and what I'm saying and I feel relieved. It is always surprising because it is very hard to tell what happened to me. It is not easy. With you, there was no problem, I could easily say what I had on my mind. But that evening, it was not easy to work for me. I couldn't revise [study] my [school] notes, my mind was busy with all the things I had been telling you. It was not easy at all. I did not revise that whole night, but the next day I needed to forget about that and study like other students.²¹

Jean Damascene was five at the time of the genocide, born with one eye turned out, which I am embarrassed to admit, put me at unease. He spoke quietly, playing with his fingers, not looking at me or Firmin. His father and mother were of two different ethnic groups and just before the war, his mother left Jean Damascene and his brother with their father in an effort to find a husband who was also Hutu. After Jean Damascene's father was killed, his mother's new husband found him and took him back to their home. Most of his memories of the war were of time spent with his brother hiding from the interahamwe in the forest and looking for food, and then of the physical abuse he has suffered at the hand of his stepfather since 1994 and the reaction of his Hutu family to his survival.

I remember during the time of the war, they used to kill the boys. One day, the interahamwe came and asked "are you boys?" and my brother told them we are girls. Because I was a small kid and I did not know better, I said "no, I am a boy." They came in, broke the door, and my mother said "please please they are girls," and we were saved. I remember on the roads we were very very dirty and I used to walk behind others on the road, once we met the interahamwe on the road with spears and they went to kill me, but I was so dirty they thought I was already dead. I remember when we went to my mother's house, my uncles were interahamwe, they had a plan to kill my brother and I, but my mother pleaded for them to let us live. I remember my stepfather took a pistle, like what is used to break nuts, and he pounded it on my back. It's what I remember most of all, that I will never forget.²²

²¹ Harindintwali, J.D., May 28, 2008.

²² Harindintwali, J.D., May 10, 2008.

Jean Damascene, the youngest of my narrators, told me stories of the worst nightmares and flashbacks. He was the only student who reported severe negative effects as a result of our conversation, but was also in the worst living situation at the time. His struggle was visible throughout the interview in the way he twisted his hands, tensed his back, turned his head, but he still came back to speak with me three times and also wrote his story for me, which he later said upset him even more than telling.

He was the narrator I had the most difficulty with, not because of the content of his story, but because of the demands he asked of me, the interviewer. Safari, I wanted to protect. Aime Sincere's experience underlined every interaction we had from that point on. Daddy avoided me. Their stories, separate and compounded, came to me in dreams, in silences, in the flash of a stranger's face on a bus, in the second before I wake, but Jean Damascene pushed me.

A few nights before I left Rwanda, Jean Damascene came to see me at my home. I brought him to the backyard where it was quiet. He silently handed me a letter in which he asked for money for school fees and clothes for his brother and half-sister and transport money for him to go home to check on them. He stood waiting on my porch while I read the letter. I avoided eye contact, focusing on the red dirt stains on my wallet, and I handed him a folded red bill, 5000RwF, or about ten US dollars. I spoke slowly and no louder than the crickets, told him this was for his family and school fees, not for his story.

* * *

Each Saturday I had three or four interviews with Rwandan survivors scheduled. When one was finished, they would go and find the next and send them to me. I spent the moments between

interviews cleaning cups and talking with the interpreter about his bus ride from Kigali, American politics, how snow feels on the back of your hand. When the last student left, I paid Firmin and then called my roommates to let them know they could come home, changed my clothes and went to the volleyball court down the street. I did this every Saturday. The court would be crowded with students four lines deep, some still in their school clothes, khaki pants and a white button-up shirt or polo, others would be wearing jeans and a t-shirt with some logo or slogan for a product they don't even sell in Rwanda. Girls would be huddled together, laughing and chatting. The boys would be cheering, dancing, from the sidelines. I watched the same students who gave testimony each Saturday spike the ball, yell for friends, flirt with crushes. There was joy.²³

²³ An email on June 5, 2008:

Adolphe. He lives in a super swank neighborhood with his adopted mother and three adopted siblings. The property has two houses on it, a big one where his mother, brother and sister live, and then he and his older brother, Kevin, live in a smaller house that has a tv and dvd player. So he and I are sitting in the living room in the little house and we are flirting but not really touching in any way. He asks me to come into his bedroom with him, and I'm not sure. I want to sleep with him, of course, but the difference of cultures and not wanting to seem like the easy American makes the decision a little complicated. He asks again and I change the subject and then he asks again. It's weird, I'd rather he just kissed me. So I kiss him. We slept together, and it wasn't bad, he's got potential. When we were done, Kevin knocked at the door and Adolphe went out to talk to him. Kevin, also exceedingly good looking, comes into the house, so I put on some clothes and come out to be polite. Kevin is going to go shower, so he's in a towel, Adolphe hasn't put on clothes yet, so he's in a towel, and I'm sitting there dressed and awkward. Eventually, we all go outside and the neighbor kids come over to play and Adolphe, Kevin and I just hang out talking about nothing. It was really nice. It was the least uncomfortable post-sex I've had in a long time. He called last night after I got back to Musha to tell me his mother realized she forgot to give me bananas, and he asked if he could send them over the phone. He's adorable and funny and we are actually incredible similar. His dad is a drunk, he hates parties, he loves Michael Jackson. He's a freelance reporter and is organizing a music festival for July 4th (Liberation Day, when the RPF took control of Kigali). He knows I won't use the word "love," so he keeps asking me if I more-than-like-him yet. It's cute.

This is crazy. I just met this kid a week and a half ago. I've seen him four times, slept with him twice, can't stop thinking about him. I'm supposed to be in Rwanda to do this project, which has taken a serious backseat to this new romance of mine. I need to focus. Sara, focus.

In the above narratives, the students all expressed initial hesitation in speaking with me to narrate their past. They questioned whether I was trustworthy and what my intentions were. Daddy, Aime Sincere, and Lydie eventually related that they felt relieved after telling their story, while Jean Damascene, who was more comfortable in the beginning, was left unable to study or go about his normal activities. Safari, holding his hands together and open, as if to collect water, told me that I had his whole life in my hands. This image is exactly what Laub is pointing at when he discusses the relationship between the narrator and listener to traumatic narrative. Whether the narrator ultimately feels relief or is left reminded of the traumatic event, a journey has been taken in the process of narration, one that changes both its participants and their relationship. No matter how one comes to trauma, or how deep one delves, what matters is that there is no turning back:

The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on.²⁴

These questions were omnipresent during my time interviewing in Rwanda, and I have continued to struggle with the same questions since returning to New York.

²³ (cont) I'm infatuated, that's all this is. He raises his right eyebrow when he's thinking about sex. He remembers everything I say, and calls me on my shit in a way that's not offensive, but kind of inspiring. He told me he thinks that I try to live other people's lives and I should be more of my own person. If anyone else had said that the third time I met them, that'd be it, but for some reason when he said it I actually started thinking about it. I'm not sure I agree with him, but I'm aware of it in a different way. He wants me to teach him to swim.

²⁴ Laub, D., op cit., pp72.

Intermission: New York, 2012: A Bit of Theory

I think partially in search of validation for my struggles, in fall 2012, for a project at the Columbia University Oral History Master's Program (OHMA), I began interviewing trauma professionals, focusing on the path that led them to work with survivors of trauma and what the side effects of this work have been. Questions were focused on secondary traumatization, a psychological reaction to listening to the stories of trauma that in many ways mirrors the effects of experiencing a traumatic event. Interviews were completed with two psychoanalysts, a psychiatrist and a social worker, all working primarily with trauma survivors. Each narrator spoke, regardless of prompting, of their reaction to hearing stories of trauma, and how it impacted their life and their support system.

Hadar Lubin, MD

Dr. Lubin co-founded the Post Traumatic Stress Center in New Haven, CT, where she works with her husband, so she is in the unique situation of having her family involved with her work and its difficult matter. Together, they have developed a method of treating trauma that relies on the immediacy of disclosure of the traumatic events and treats the traumatic stress rapidly, as though it were a cancer, using several specialized techniques. But there is a toll.

The negative part of it is at the end of the day, I am drained. No matter, I've been doing it for twenty-three years. Twenty-three years I've been doing intensive exclusively trauma work, not a little bit of this, a little bit of that, that is mitigated. There is a toll. At the end of the day, I'm very very tired. I've noticed definitely some degree of numbing. For probably close to twenty years, you couldn't get me to any violent movie, any horror movie, anything that would frighten me is not something I'll chose to do as an entertainment. I don't have the distance, the aesthetic distance, that you have before you get to the real deal in the real human life experience that you can do when you go to a movie. Say, hey, it's just a movie, it's ketchup, it's not blood, or it's fake blood. When you hear those stories day in and out, you don't have the distance anymore. Occasionally I will have a nightmare about some horrific story. My kids knew all along growing up—now it's not that complicated—that when I come back from work, I need just five minutes to go to my room, change, not to interact, come down (it just happened

that my bedroom is on the second floor), I come down and then we can talk. They cannot immediately engage me, I need to transition. I have a half an hour—little more, thirty-five minutes—commute which was a blessing because it takes me that time to unwind and transition from one place to another, from home to work or work to home but definitely there is a toll.²⁵

Ghislaine Boulanger, Ph.D.

I was collecting data from veterans in the Red Desert, which is near Las Vegas I think. We were at a Veterans Administration conference. I was with a guy who was a psychologist but had been in the Marines. And he was very admiring of this study that we had done, which was great, it was great to have his approval of this important work that we had thought we had done. I guess this was 1984 because this study had already been published and I—we were in the Red Desert, we had gone for a hike, and we were sitting at a picnic table. This place in Las Vegas was near some kind of airbase and suddenly, these planes come zooming in from overhead and Tom and I both pitched under the picnic table together. And he said, what the hell are you doing here, you weren't in Vietnam. But you know, I had heard so many stories that there I was...I think that perhaps I have acquired an imagination for disaster. I'm ahead of what people are going to tell me because of all of these experiences that I've heard from people. And that is stored in my memory. I'm probably a more sober person than I was when I started this work. I think I know something about the limits of evil that I wouldn't have even imagined if I hadn't been exposed to them through people's stories.²⁶

As a result of her in-depth work with stories of war when researching experiences of Vietnam veterans, Dr. Boulanger reacted to the plane as would a veteran, despite never having been to war. Those stories were “stored in her memory,” and led to a secondary trauma response, however, it does not take the repetition of these stories to inspire reactions.

You remind me of a couple of interviews that I did with people. One was an amazing woman from Rwanda—I went to interview her in the jail [for people seeking political asylum at JFK International Airport]. She had slipped across the border and hadn't been in jail [before], but she had been raped...And there was something about the fact that we were speaking French that I felt very moved by her very early on. She was sitting much closer than you and I are—and you and I are pretty close—but we were sitting caddy-cornered at a small table. And we were just in the tunnel—I could not pull myself out of it. I know that there was stuff

²⁵ Lubin, H., November 9, 2012.

²⁶ Boulanger, G., October 23, 2012.

going on over the loud speaker that I wasn't taking in. At one point we both leapt up when she told me something, spilled water all over us. I left there completely—I couldn't drive myself back to New York for a while. I had to sit and pull myself together. I think it's when you don't expect it, I should have expected it, but it was a one time deal, it so much counted on this interview...It's really interesting that you make me think of this because when I realize it, it's when I'm not in the safety of my office—when I'm opening myself up to a flood of experience that I am taking out with me that is not being titrated for both of us—it's very hard to manage.²⁷

It is not surprising that stories of abuse are difficult to hear, but what is both shocking and in some ways, comforting, is how lasting its effects are on the listener, no matter their training.

Hands crossed
against my chest,
the moto turns,
gravity shifts

The personal impacts of working with difficult stories are well known and experienced among the community of professionals that helps survivors of trauma. Vicarious trauma is similar to the notion of countertransference that occurs in the normal psychoanalytic event, but it can mirror some of the symptoms of trauma such as nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance and hyperawareness, to effectively traumatize the listener.²⁸ Charles Figley argued that “some forms of stress, although themselves not life threatening, are so demanding on the witness and helper that they might induce emotional coping responses very similar to those of the traumatic stress

²⁷ Boulanger, G., October 23, 2012.

²⁸ For further reference, see:

Herman, Judith (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence---From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books. pp136-147.

Laub, Dori. (1992). “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.

Wilson, John P. (2004) “Empathic Strain, Compassion Fatigue and Countertransference in the Treatment of Trauma and PTSD.” *Living With Trauma, Working with Terror*. ed. Knafo. New York: Jason Aronson.

response itself,”²⁹ and has deemed it “compassion fatigue.” Compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatization, is a direct reaction to indirect trauma.

Burnout is conceptualized as the gradual depletion of resources with the residual effect of inefficacy while compassion fatigue or secondary/vicarious traumatic stress is conceptualized as the rapid insertion of fear associated with the psychological material or others encountered in the work setting.³⁰

This fear commingled with a genuine and altruistic desire to help, if not managed properly, can manifest in several ways, including both a numbing, or distancing of self, or, at the other extreme, an overinvolvement or potentially unhealthy rawness to the material. Both of these extremes lead to inefficacy in helping, as a numbed helper is desensitized and less empathic to the survivor, but the hypersensitive listener cannot always concentrate to hear. By no means do all trauma professionals and listeners of traumatic narrative experience vicarious trauma, but in order to continue doing this work, we must all find ways to manage the material we hear and the effects experienced. In addition to their clinical training in the subject, professional mental health workers have a structure of supervision groups and mentoring relationships to work through difficult stories. Yet, oral historians, human rights aid workers, and students of trauma do not have the same built in support systems. To that end, Dr. Judie Alpert has recently begun fascinating research on what she calls academic traumatization.

Judith Alpert, PhD

There's the literature on vicarious traumatization—this is different. People may not have been traumatized, or they may have been traumatized, but they take a course on trauma and the course really can be traumatic...If I'm showing a film which I think is disturbing, I'm looking around the room to see how people are reacting. I try very hard to be very conscious of what's going on. I think it's really crucial. I'm thinking of one time where I was talking about child abuse reporting and I told the students, I'm going to give some examples and if this is

²⁹ Stamm, B. Hudnall, Craig Higson-Smith and Amy C. Hudnall (2004). “The Complexities of Working with Terror.” *Living With Trauma, Working with Terror*. ed. Knafo. New York: Jason Aronson. pp374.

³⁰ Stamm, *ibid.* pp374.

too much for you, you can feel free to walk out of the room at any time. The student didn't walk out of the room but there was a couch in the room and she laid down on the couch in the fetal position. So when I saw that, I stopped, and I said, let's take a break, and we all took a break. Then I went over to her and I walked out with her and I had another student who I knew she was good friends with stay with her. She was upset, and I talked to her that night on the phone, we spoke for a while.

You know ,the people who usually have the most difficulty are usually the people who haven't dealt with their own traumas in their lives. There are people who do take courses on trauma who have been traumatized. In fact, most people who are drawn to trauma have had trauma in their lives and if they haven't dealt with it, the trauma that they are hearing about can somehow trigger their own trauma and get them involved.³¹

Later in my oral history with Dr. Alpert, she asserted that *“you can't go through life without experiencing trauma. I mean, you just can't. I don't know of anybody who hasn't experienced some trauma.”³²*

Is the prevalence of trauma in our lives and the lives of others what fuels an interest in trauma work, is it pure altruism, or is it a search for knowledge? In addition to the strong desire to help those experiencing great suffering, several of the trauma professionals interviewed spoke of an excitement to working with trauma for many reasons. Dr. Alpert saw the work of recovery as a challenge: *“It's exciting when things start to change, when you can solve some puzzles... [It's] exciting, to see somebody totally turning her life around and suddenly owning her agency. It's really thrilling.”³³*

Andrea Cole, MSW

Part of the interest for me is that [trauma is] hidden. Generally people don't walk around saying, ‘by the way, this thing happened to me and that thing happened to me and by the way...’ but, it's so pivotal in someone's life. I know for me, losing my boyfriend [to illness] was the pivotal moment in my life. It's the one thing that

³¹ Alpert, J. October 3, 2012.

³² Alpert, J. October 3, 2012.

³³ Alpert, J. October 3, 2012.

happened in my life that affected me the most, that was it, but I don't go around saying to people that I meet on the street, 'by the way, my boyfriend died when I was twenty-two years old you know.' Trauma is about the most painful thing that people go through but it's also very hidden... Because I'm having a bad day today because I had like ten flashbacks or I'm having a bad day today because I had a nightmare or like me, I'm having a bad day today because I saw a guy on the street that looked exactly like my boyfriend who died, you know. But we don't like to talk about those things.³⁴

³⁴ Cole, A. November 6, 2012.

umubeshyi

buki

Lessons About Water

On June 24, 2008, a mass email:

We left off with me acclimating to life in Africa, struggling with water issues, the kerosene stove, cooking, cleaning, bathing. In those respects, I have conquered my troubles admirably. Fetching water is common practice. The water pump is up the street and down the hill a bit, always crowded with kids from the village or students who think it's hilarious that I carry water. When I started getting water (in Kinyarwanda, to fetch water is to voma), I could carry one jerrycan (20 liters) but I had to stop to switch hands a few times on the walk. I would voma and get a lot of it on my pants, which was embarrassing and wasteful. About a month ago, I upgraded to a jerrycan in each hand, which helps with balance, but it hurts my fingers, so for a while I had to stop two or three times. But now I carry two jerrycans without stopping even once between the pump and my front door. It might not sound like much, but I am wonderfully proud. They did move the water pump at our house so we could get water at home, but it only worked for one day before springing a leak and flooding the garden. They have since turned our water off again, but someone did come and build us a beautiful concrete block around the pump to prevent the neighbor kids from playing on it.

I have perfected the bucket shower. It only takes me two cups of water to wash my hair, and I am able to collect all of the dirty water, which we later use for flushing water. It still takes me a full cup to clean my toothbrush, but oh well.

My cooking has improved greatly. Where I was just cooking pasta with onions and tomatoes before, I can now cook chili, guacamole, curry, pizza, and once I even made deviled eggs. We eat tons of vegetables, sometimes with rice or pasta. We make terrific salads with all sorts of vegetables I would have never eat at home, for example, cauliflower, avocado, cabbage, tomatoes, sometimes even cucumbers. We have been buying cheese lately, which is called Rwandan gouda, but tastes a lot like nothing.

Starting the kerosene stove is one of my favorite activities. We use the stove to make tea and cook lunch or popcorn. We have a charcoal stove as well, but it takes a while to start, so we only use that for making drinking water and pizza. The kerosene stove is fun because it is all these little pieces you have to take apart then light the wicks, then put the pieces back together without burning yourself. When you are done cooking, you close the kerosene valve and blow out the fire. Easy, no problem. Today, however, I took some water off the stove to make tea, turned off the kerosene valve but when I went to blow out the fire, it exploded. Huge,

atomic cloud shape of fire and smoke flies up directly into my face, then dissipates immediately. Amanda yells from the house to make sure I'm okay, which I am, but I am standing shell shocked in the kitchen, envisioning my face with serious burns, or at least black with soot. I come inside to look in the mirror, and no burns, no soot, but my hair is standing on end, a bit crispy and my eyelashes have been singed. Even now I'm still deciding if the proper thing to do would be to trim my eyelashes, as now they are sort of white and look like they have split ends. It's not a good look for me I think. When Lisi came home from school, she asked what was wrong with me and I told her: "I lit my face on fire."

Bugs don't bother me as much anymore and I am learning a lot about nature. Some spiders only have four legs and the other day I saw a slug at least three times larger than any slug I've ever seen before in my life. Sausage flies are harmless, as are these funny angular looking bees that live outside my window. Mosquitos don't even bother me much anymore, perhaps because I am often dirty and thus unappetizing. The malaria medicine is a treat- I have developed an intense fear of persecution on Mondays and Tuesdays and my dreams are quite vivid and bizarre.

My room here is small, but has a window that doesn't leak so I can't complain. Before I moved in, I scrubbed propane stains off the floor and swept the walls. The next day, I bought a mattress at the market, attached it to the back of a bus, then carried it up the mountain on my head. I have a lovely pink mosquito net and three woven Rwandan baskets for my clothes and other things. I sleep on my mattress on the floor, which has been fine until just recently Amanda has found some fresh mouse poo in the bathroom. If the mice here are anything like the slugs, I'm a bit worried about coming face to face with him in the middle of the night. My sister says that's why I have a mosquito net, but having seen what a mouse did to their thick plastic peanut butter container, I hardly think a thin pink net is going to keep him from attacking. Still, no sign of him yet.

There is a family of owls who live in the roof above my room and I saw one with a fairly large animal in its mouth, so here's hoping that my last two weeks in Rwanda will prove mouse-less.

Lisi has also started sleeping with her mattress on the floor, as we broke her bed last week. A few times a week, we all climb into Lisi's bed to watch a movie. Lisi and Amanda mark papers while we watch and I hold the plate of pineapple between them. Last week, we settled in to watch *Igby Goes Down*, Lisi with her pile of tests to grade, and Amanda with her computer and two large biology books. We hear a slight cracking sound, but think little of it. The phone rings, Mom has called to ask Lisi some questions about the trip we are planning to South Africa. Promptly as Lisi hangs up the phone, the crack gets louder and the bed falls to the ground.

And so we learned that three muzungu, two computers, two textbooks,

300 tests and a plate of pineapple is much too much weight for Rwanda. I have never laughed so hard.

In more serious news, I completed my project last weekend. I spent May and most of June interviewing ten students between the ages of 18 and 22 about their experiences during the genocide, with specific focus on memory, survival, and the process of telling. The project was exciting, challenging, and exhausting. To begin, the gathering of students was a bit complicated. I had an information session in French that intrigued zero students. It was disappointing, I felt like I had come all this way to do a project that no one wanted to participate in. Within about a week though, a few students found me on the street and told me they wanted to help me, but the language was going to be a problem. I decided to get a translator, as neither my French nor the students' is particularly good, so the interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda and English. Ten students came first to give testimony and talk about their experiences before, during and after the genocide. Nine of those students came back for a second interview to talk about the process of testifying, and five students even wrote their stories on paper for me and came to a third meeting to discuss the differences between telling their story and writing it. I transcribed everything, which was interesting but tedious. Due to the translation, I found it difficult to give the specific language and word choice the focus I wanted to, but I was able instead to watch for changes in body language. My transcriptions note volume of voice and speed of telling. I comment on where the participant was looking when they told their story as well as what they did with their hands. Amanda thinks I should give up on Trauma Studies and become a lie detector. Upon completion of the project, I wrote up an evaluation for myself, what worked, what didn't, what obstacles I came across, what was easier than expected. Then last week, I threw the students a party. I bought fantas and bananas for everyone to thank them for their help. These were ten incredible students who took a chance on me, told me their most private thoughts and experiences and trusted me blindly with their stories, and I will never forget the faith they put in me or their generosity and kindness.

On July 6, 2008 I spent what I thought would be my final night with Adolphe. In the six weeks we spent together, I had taught him to float at a hotel pool on Lake Kivu, then acted as a kickboard so he could practice using his legs to move through the water. We hiked through the woods to Mount Kigali, past a pile of trashed water bottles, to lay on a forest floor carpeted with pine needles. We took the last bus back to Kigali and I fell asleep on his chest with his arm around me,

the first time we showed affection in public. I threw him a 25th birthday party, the first birthday party he'd ever had, with cake, presents and a homemade birthday hat.

In the Rwandan tradition of speech-giving, he stood to speak of the women who raised him. "So I know that Maman, Umutoni, Didi, who has given birth yesterday—"

"Gave birth," I interrupted.

"Ya, who gave birth.—Sara, who really loves me. I know that. I'm sure of that. Before I couldn't be sure that someone loves me. I'm speaking me, me, me, selfish, but it's my birthday."

On July 7, I left Kigali on a flight to Dar es Salaam. Still dark out, Adolphe and I took separate motos to the airport to carry all my stuff. I remember he had a headache. I rushed inside, past an empty waiting room and through the smoky warm smell of Kigali mornings. I was crying by the time I got to the check-in counter. Massive flubbering tears, unstoppable against the roll of single ply toilet paper I took from the airport bathroom. Child-like can't-breathe sobs interrupting the conversations of the group of tourists headed to Tanzania on safari. On the ferry to Zanzibar, I sat on the front deck, exhausted and empty, my sunglasses keeping the splashes of ocean from hitting my face.

| |
|---|
| Was it the stories, or was it the boy? |
|---|

Over the next three days in Zanzibar and the following three weeks in South Africa, I stopped crying, made a plan to reverse my acceptance to graduate school in New York, got all the way to the airline to cancel my ticket home and book a

December 13, 2008
I want to hear him laugh
in the same room.

oneway back to Rwanda. He wrote to me and called me *sweaty*, sweetie. I couldn't afford the ticket. I didn't dive.

Back in New York, I found an apartment with a slanted floor and a fireplace. Adolphe was becoming a successful musician, his first song was a hit on the radio in Rwanda. He got a job working at the radio station as a disc jockey and was able to quit working at his uncle's fabric shop. I was getting my Master's in Trauma Studies, hoping to use the interviews I had done as a basis for my research, but feeling distance from the material.

I wrote out some of my favorite text messages on bright blue post-it notes and taped them to the back of the only gift he'd given me, a traditional Rwandan string instrument turned souvenir, a carved out piece of wood with a painting of a farm scene on the inside, ruining the sound.

August 20, 2008 5:32p. i mean, i'm sure that i'm crazy about wolcott.

August 23, 2010 6:57p. I think about you all the time, day and night you are my only love. so worthy so special to me. never forget that. i love you. adolphe.

When I went back to Rwanda in May 2009, I lived at his house. His mother taught me how to make ugali and snuck me to prayer circles. I was told it was a birthday party, so I followed her through the city to a house on a hill. Caterers set up tables outside and a woman as round as a ball welcomed us in English into her home. No one spoke to me until we were all holding hands and singing. I sat

against the wall of the room, unwilling to kneel in the center, the hand of the preacher on my forehead, while the room prayed for me.

“No, thank you.” I insisted. “Next time.”

Unfortunately, I fell for the trick again a week later at a surprise birthday party. The preacher brought along a translator, a woman who had worked in Washington, who wasn't fooled by my feigned interest.

“Sara, are you a Christian?” I shook my head no.

“Are you religious?” I shook my head no.

“Do you believe in God?” I smiled, begged her not to tell. She interrupted the sermon with laughter, and immediately told the entire prayer group that Adolphe's mother brought a heathen.

One night, Adolphe and I walked for hours to a danceclub where his cousin could get us in for free, but somehow we danced with strangers.

The weekend before I left Rwanda for the last time, we traveled back to Lake Kivu, where a year before, he learned to swim, where, on a piece of driftwood, I realized I loved him. On the morning we were headed back to Kigali, he ran to buy the bus tickets while I packed up our stuff. He came back to the hotel room,

sweating from the run, and handed me the tickets. I shoved them in my pocket and finished making the bed. He stood there waiting.

“What?”

“Buki, look at them.” That smile.

The first ticket said Mr. Bagabo. Ticket from Gisenyi to Kigali. The second, Mrs. Bagabo. Same route. I got engaged on a bus ticket.

He asked me twice more that day, once after I massaged his shoulder, another after I got him a candybar.

Three days later, at the airport, we had the perfectly cinematic kiss goodbye. A woman walking by said in Kinyarwanda a traditional phrase that literally translated means that you can't be hungry with a kiss like that. Adolphe explained that it meant that with a kiss like that, nothing else mattered, all was right, nothing could be wrong. He saw me tear up, and told me he would miss the way I looked at him cause he could see how much I loved him in my eyes.

This part speeds up but remains slow, like rotting fruit.

I flew back to New York at the end of May 2009, moved out to Brooklyn with my sister, finished grad school, spent three months unemployed, depressed and far away from a man who let me imagine a life. I memorized sixteen number chains of international phone cards so we could talk each day. He would pass the phone to his brothers to say hello, he'd ask about my sister. We promised honesty, all could be forgiven except dishonesty, it was the deal from the start, so when he told me he kissed Cathryn at a party, I forgave. I wasn't looking for serious, but he made me want serious with him.

In February 2010, Adolphe began seeing a field hockey player from Connecticut who was in Rwanda working for the PeaceCorps. On May 9, 2010, after not talking for days, he called me on a five minute break from the radio station to tell me it was over. I hung up, cleaned the bathtub, and cried in the back row of IronMan2. The next day, I remember begging him for ten more minutes, just ten.

The only connection between these stories, one of love and heartbreak, another of trauma, vicarious trauma and traumatic narrative, cannot be chronology. And it cannot just be me.

BAGABO Adolphe

I never asked Adolphe what happened to him during the genocide because I didn't want him to feel like one of my interviewees, I didn't want our relationship to be based in that, I didn't want to ask. But over the two years of our relationship, through basic conversation, I learned that his mother was raped and infected with HIV during the war. His uncles were killed. At eleven

years old, he ran into the forest lined with pine needles and hid there alone for weeks. I don't know how what he ate, how he survived. He said he got sick. When the war was over, he ate cookies thrown off tanks by American soldiers.

I knew these things and despite not wanting it to be a part of the relationship, his experiences and the experiences of my narrators were intrinsically linked to the way I loved him. I am not proud to say that on his skin, I saw the scars of his past and the past of his country, that in my mind he has become a representative, a figment, a fantasy. He had survived and could love, which meant that my narrators could, which meant there is place inside a person for both the stories of trauma and the love that transforms it.³⁵

³⁵ That love exists after trauma may seem like an obvious point, but survivors of massive or prolonged psychological trauma have often disagreed. Judith Herman, in her seminal book, *Trauma and Recovery*, writes that “commonly the patient has the fantasy that she is already among the dead, because her capacity for love has been destroyed.”^{35A} The traumatic event causes such rupture, of self and of world, that an emotion as primal as love may be fragmented. Susan Brison writes in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, that

Trauma can obliterate one's former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions...The inability to feel one's former emotions...leaves the survivor not only numbed, but also without the motivation to carry out the task of constructing an ongoing narrative.^{35B}

The challenge of building a complete and ongoing narrative is where the listener comes in, serving as a container for the trauma testimony while the survivor integrates what happened with what is happening, and what is to come.

Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self. Her relationships have been tested and forever changed by trauma; now she must develop new relationships. The old beliefs that gave meaning to her life have been challenged; now she must find anew a sustaining faith.^{35C}

^{35(cont)} Herman likens this both to a refugee entering a new world and an adolescent, testing the boundaries of relationships and intimacy. She suggests that through the therapeutic or narrator/witness relationship, the narrator might be reminded of “soothing imagery,” or even one “caring, comforting person,” an “image of attachment that has been salvaged from the wreckage.” Is there a relationship between the “second adolescence”^{35D} that survivors experience on their path to recovery and a becoming, or coming into self narrative?

It is in adolescence that issues of identity and intimacy are explored. The self develops as a result of who we are and what we’ve experienced, and how it develops dictates the nature of any and all relationships we are to have. In the case of a trauma narrative, that experience is so large and monstrous that it overwhelms and cracks any previous narrative or understanding of self. A new narrative, history, representation, emerges and a self is (re)built. Are there overlaps, then, between survivor testimony and *Bildungsroman*, the coming of age story? These stories mark the change from child to adult; there is a progression, transition. The protagonist embarks on a journey, inspired by curiosity or a quest for knowledge, and discovers values, morals, maturity. Perhaps it is the process of recovery, of bearing witness, of telling, that could productively be classifiable as a *Bildungsroman*, the result a new self risen from the ashes of innocence and idealism.

^{35A} Herman, Judith (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence---From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books. pp194.

^{35B} Brison, Susan J (2002). *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp50.

^{35C} Herman, J., op cit. pp196.

^{35D} Herman, J., ibid. pp205

Repair

During my time in Rwanda, I developed methods of distancing, such as the ones Drs. Boulanger and Lubin spoke of above. Yet with the passage of time, the walls come down. In March 2013, I attended a conference at New York University entitled *Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in Trans-generational Transmission of Trauma*. In a session on legacies of genocide, Taylor Krauss spoke and showed video testimonies recorded by the nonprofit Voices of Rwanda.³⁶ I had seen these testimonies before, as I have followed Mr. Krauss' work for years. Our visits to Rwanda had overlapped, though we only met several years later in New York. The lights dim in the conference room, I had a visceral reaction to the words in front of me, a reaction I had long since shut down. I can only describe it as anxiety, wreckage, loss—the second in a dive right before you hit the water, when you are sure it will never come. At once I was pleased, encouraged that I have not hardened as a result of this work, but more so, I felt vulnerable, no longer separate, no longer safe. I immediately wanted to see Adolphe, another emotion I hadn't felt in years.

I was shaken. I left the conference, directionlessly³⁷ pushing past the wind and undergraduates, frantically scribbling notes with frozen fingers. The notes, fragments themselves, were as follows:

I kept distance from the students. Adolphe symbol of trauma for me, not because I heard his story but cause I loved him. Because he was there. As part of this project I imagined going back to see them, him (are they the same?). With testimony (cause I was young? Cause they were?), you hold the stories, they are a part of you and become you. We are pieces of those we've loved, lost, forgotten, heard. A record of a moment.

³⁶ <http://voicesofrwanda.org/>

³⁷ Though ultimately pointed where we all aim, to better boyfriends, lovers and friends.

I offer this as some sort of conclusion, faulty, fumbling, or otherwise. As is apparent in this passage, this paper, this project, once again, the personal, the subjective, overwhelms. Oral historians are co-creators to the process of narration, and an awareness of the self, its limits or involvement, is necessary to ensure authenticity. My personal narrative from 2008, presented in these pages as a mess of the stories I heard, the people I loved, the meals I cooked, the theories I absorbed and supposed, the books I read, can be heard on the audio tapes from Rwanda. As quoted earlier, Dr. Laub wrote that “testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.”³⁸ The survivors were speaking to me, to this.

In his fragmented and magical text, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot pleads, “let us share eternity in order to make it transitory.”³⁹ Let us *share*. It is the sharing of oral history, of the journey of telling and listening to traumatic stories, and of personal narratives, and it is a sharing of resilience, combating solitude and making meaning.

We constantly *need* to say (to think): that was quite something (something quite important) that happened to me. By which we mean at the same time: that couldn't possibly belong to the order of things which come to pass, or which are important, but is rather among the things which export and deport. Repetition.⁴⁰

The traumatic experience must both be validated in its importance and recognized as something that does not fit within the frame of narration, of understanding, of time. Though repetition and sharing, one hopes that the memory of the traumatic event can be exported, expelled or sent away, and deported, or sent home, removed from where it should not be. It is enough to make the unbearable bearable, the burden less, and to once again live within time.

³⁸ Laub, D. op cit. pp70.

³⁹ Blanchot, Maurice (1995). *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. pp146.

⁴⁰ Blanchot, M. ibid. pp9.

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Oral Histories

2008:

Byukusenge, Janvier

Harindintwali, Jean Damascene

Kayitare, Aime Sincere

Kayonde, Daddy Evaniste

Safari, Jean de Dieu

Uwamahoro, Irene

Uwimana, Jackson

Uwizeyimana, Jean-Marie (JMV)

Umutoni, Lydie

2012:

Alpert, Judith

Boulangier, Ghislaine

Cole, Andrea

Hadar, Lubin