

Hope (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum)
July 11, 2008

They used a school. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge turned a school into an interrogation compound and four years later 20,000 people had passed through those school gates and four years later only seven made it out.

And I stand in the courtyard as monsoon clouds gather overhead, reading the sign that greeted them when they came in, reminding them not to tell lies, reminding them that they're traitors and vermin, that beatings and electric wire await them for their disloyalty. Most the people coming through didn't even know why they were here; they started with the teachers, the intellectuals...but after that it became indiscriminate.

Beside the sign stands a bar that held two ropes. Forty years ago, students climbed up for gym; thirty years ago prisoners were being hanged upside down by the same ropes until they lost consciousness, woken up by a dip in brine, and then the process repeated. In the three stories of the three buildings I can see students running around laughing, but the image is overcome by what happened after.

I walk into room after room strewn with photos: hundreds, thousands; men, women, children, represented only by the numbers pinned directly into their skin. Five, six-year-olds with bruised faces, young girls with barrettes still in their hair; young men and old men, women--their eyes say everything, their eyes speak of the fear and confusion and the prescient dread that those who walk into S-21 do not come out alive. These photos were taken when they first arrived; forty-eight hours later most of them couldn't stand.

We keep going, looking into the brick cells where prisoners were chained, with barely enough room to sit. Behind me are photos of those prisoners, their emaciated bodies covered in blood. The Khmer Rouge documented everything.

There are paintings from the few survivors, paintings of limbs stretched out and electric wire applied to genitalia and victims submerged upside-down in water to simulate drowning. The shameful irony of the latter makes me nauseous and I have to step out for air. I make no attempt to cover myself from the rain.

Our guide talks about her family, how she was ten years old when she lost her parents and brothers and sisters. And she keeps using the word "victims," and I hate that word, I want her to say "survivors," but these people didn't survive and they didn't escape and the telltale skulls are scattered in the Killing Fields around the city. Only a few dozen remains are left in a room at Tuol Sleng. When I walk into that room I think I can smell flesh or maybe it's formaldehyde but either way, it's death. It's death that's anonymous, their only names being "Male, 25-45, death by severe trauma to right temple."

I tell my students all the time, you have to use the bad for good; you take the bad and use it as a lesson, you use it to motivate you, to change yourself, to change the world. Right now, though, overwhelmed by the thousands of eyes staring back at me, I don't see how there can be good. I

don't see hope; all I see is cruelty and hate and suffering.

They used a school, I say, and I'm so overwhelmed by that thought that I have to turn away. They used a school and murdered 20,000 people and the victims didn't even know why and I can see it, I can see the horror in their eyes and there's no making sense of any of it because it doesn't make any sense and it never will.

I wrote in my journal a few weeks ago that I will never fully grasp hate or cruelty. It's not naïveté: I understand how people can hate, I understand why. I just can't accept that people *do*.

That night the four of us go to Heart of Darkness, a Cambodian dance club, and we dance for hours. And I reflect on the day, and the amazing days I've spent in this country. These are a people who have been through so much horror, have lost an entire generation, and yet I have never met a friendlier people. Their laughter is not pulled down by the past. Amidst strong drinks and roaring music, we exchange names, emails, and dance moves.

There is hate in this world, I know; there is still so much cruelty. And it's something I can never ignore. But if there's anything I've learned in my 26 years of life, it's that in the end, the good in humanity far outweighs the bad. In the end, through all the horrors that exist and have existed and will continue to exist, there will still always be room to dance, room to laugh, room to make a new friend.

I can accept that.

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