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FLEFF Essay

**A Topography of Banda Aceh:  
Notes from a Journey<sup>1</sup>**

Writers, especially novelists, invent the environments in which their stories unfold. We create characters and their families, we shape structures of lives, and we form the sentences thought and spoken. To us, the environment is a myriad of fluid and complex variables in which the topography of emotions, family, culture, and power is as real as the topography of nature's oceans, deserts, and mountains. Our narrative suggests what to incorporate and what to leave out, and we know that the more exact the story's environment, the more likely it is that our work will ring true. Once in a while, we may emerge from the dream that is our solitary work—imagining worlds—to take a breath and consider the real world, the true setting in which we live. It was just such a break that sent me to Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in May of 2007 to interview tsunami survivors and, a few weeks later, returned me to Ithaca, New York, with a sharpened, more substantial perception of what *environment* suggests.

An earthquake that measured 8.9 on the Richter scale and occurred sixty miles off the coast of Sumatra caused the tsunami that ravaged Banda Aceh. At the epicenter of the quake, grinding tectonic plates shifted the earth's crust beneath the ocean floor along a 750 mile stretch and displaced billions of gallons of sea water. As a result, massive waves traveled at a jetliner's speed of 500 miles per hour and assaulted Banda Aceh fifteen minutes later, and arrived 2,800 miles away at the coast of Somalia, seven hours later. Banda Aceh, the closest major city to the epicenter, endured the full force of the earthquake and tsunami. The shoreline near Banda Aceh retreated one mile, out of the approximately 89 villages that made up Banda Aceh, 41 were

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destroyed, and 61,605 people out of a general population of 264,618 lost their lives. The earthquake and the resulting tsunami are, of course, natural disasters, and in this way they comprise the most obvious and traditional aspects of environment as perceived by physical attributes. Aside from shifting the map on the ocean floor by several meters, the tsunami rewrote the geographic landscape by carrying away miles of beaches and sand, killing vegetation, transforming fertile land to useless fields, and etching white salt deposits on mountains several stories high. The tsunami, an astoundingly powerful natural force, transformed the physical environment of the city of Banda Aceh into Hiroshima like scenes.

Yet, Banda Aceh, as a place, a culture, a moment in time, is not defined by the tsunami and, further, the city is more than its physical presence; its environment is not merely prescribed by what nature has wrought. The city is a people with a history, a topography of place and sounds and smells. It is, I am discovering, like any other place, a virtually limitless environment that includes abstractions as varied as blurred boundaries and competing narratives, and includes particularities as diverse as the power struggles in civil society and the inequities of disaster relief. Like the novelist who makes decisions about what elements of an environment to incorporate in her story, the traveler makes choices about what to see, and often, what is seen only becomes clear when the journey is over. It is with this in mind that I consider the topography of Banda Aceh.

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Banda Aceh is a city of camouflage, where things do not appear as they seem. It is the provincial capital of Aceh on the island of Sumatra, and it was viciously fought over by colonial powers, especially the Dutch, and heroically defended by the Acehnese people. Accustomed to the grand, Victorian architecture left behind by the English in the British Empire's former cities like Lahore, Pakistan, I searched for the colonial architecture of the Dutch. Early on, a Dutch

building that now houses police headquarters was pointed out to me, but I was distracted by the inevitable appearance of Aceh's famous mosque and my camera was never ready when we drove by. Indeed, the defining architectural moment in Banda Aceh is the Baiturrahman mosque. The city's majestic monument overwhelms its surroundings; it is beautiful, but out of place in Aceh's otherwise unpretentious environs. In media coverage of the tsunami, the mosque received much attention as a place where thousands of people sought refuge from the water.

Despite visiting the mosque twice, I only learned details of its history on the day before my departure when I visited the city's museum and the story sat inside three glass cases in the form of models. The Dutch burned down the original mosque in 1848 after they'd already once been humiliated by a failed attempt to conquer Banda Aceh. The mosque they destroyed was built of wood, a square with a multi-layered roof, like a pagoda, and it had no domes or minarets. Seven years later, the Dutch rebuilt the mosque in their image of a befitting mosque, and the architect designed a building with one dome and no minarets conceived through his vision of Mughal architecture. In the third model stood the present day grand mosque, five domes and two minarets later. It had been expanded by a central Indonesian government whose motivations appeared suspect and contradictory, both an assertion of control over a population with which it had been at odds since achieving independence from the Dutch in 1949 and, perhaps, also a token gesture at reconciliation.

A few weeks after my return, a conversation with Acehnese friends revealed that the Dutch had left their indelible stamp on the city in ways I hadn't seen. The Dutch fear of the Acehnese, specifically their strong sense of community, led them to destroy the original mosque's surrounding gardens and, quite literally, push back and break up the former dwellings that had grown up around it. In their place, the Dutch inserted roads and lined their perimeter with officer's barracks, buildings which are now utilized as various offices, like the Aceh Institute which was my work base in the city. The landscape of the city, almost sixty years after the Dutch departed, belongs not to the Acehnese, but to the calculations of the Dutch.

Aceh is known as the land of resistance. After fighting the colonialists for independence, the Acehnese people fought the Indonesian state and oil companies like Exxon in a battle for autonomy and rights. It culminated in a 17 year conflict that pitted GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or the Free Aceh Movement) against the Indonesian military and its militias. A peace accord was signed in 2005 when the destruction of the tsunami brought the warring parties to the negotiating table. During the conflict, estimates suggest that 15,000 people died, at least that many went missing, and hundreds more were raped. As a novelist studying Aceh, I was interested in the narratives of conflict survivors who, unlike tsunami survivors, are victims of political rather than natural forces.

In one group interview, I spoke to two women who were wives of disappeared men and a young man of twenty-two who'd been a boy of fifteen when he was imprisoned and tortured on the suspicion of belonging to GAM. He was held for eight months and was routinely beaten, in addition to being electrocuted and having his head held down in a drum of water. The wives said that in retrospect, they were able to finally make peace with their trauma, not only because of the peace accords, but because they had not seen, and therefore could not imagine, the perpetrators who took away their husbands. The quiet young man sat apart in a corner and interrupted the women to insist that while he was pleased there was peace, he could not forget the injustice. His body doesn't let him forget, he said, it is marked with scars and hearing loss. Because he has seen his torturers, he said, his anger has immediate targets. The wives mention their children and share stories of how they came to love their husbands. They suggest he marry, and in response, he shyly chuckled and said one day he might.

But the contour of his narrative—false confessions beat out of him, sounds and smells in his jail cell, a lingering fear of men in military uniforms—suggest that seven years after his imprisonment, he cannot escape the men who arrested him in the middle of the night or the other men who held his head in the water. They live, like mountains blocking his view, in the

topography of his mind. Their presence defines how he perceives who he is and who he might one day become.

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My first impression of Banda Aceh, the place, is Vietnam. It is the Vietnam of movies, not a place I've ever visited, and I am uneasy comparing a real city to cinematography. On the road from the tiny airport to the city twelve miles away, the vegetation is thick, the green is vivid and lush, sparkling rice paddies are carefully sculpted, low hills gently surround. The road is narrow and bustling stalls and shops spill onto it. I am reminded of Rawalpindi, Pakistan, a city a few miles away from where I grew up, and my impression of Banda Aceh blends the Vietnam of the movies with the Rawalpindi of my childhood. The day is hot, the air is saturated with humidity, and I wonder if I am smelling the sea.

A minute or two before the tsunami reached the coast of Banda Aceh, the tide pulled away from the shore and exposed the seabed. Swarms of children, thrilled with their luck, ran to collect baskets full of stranded fish before being devoured by powerful waves taller than buildings. Along the coast, two years after the tsunami, the geography of the land is marked by the devastation. Beaches are stripped of sand, boulders have been swept inland, gouges of rock face are missing from green volcanic peaks, a low lying hill, its own peninsula jutting into the sea, has been carved into two. Fishing boats lie half buried in sloughs of mud, too battered to be anything but abandoned. Away from the coastline and against the intensely green backdrop of the mountains, there is a single tree, thick with limbs and branches that are the silver and bare of a New York state winter and the skeleton of a California fire. Another tree, willowy except for a burst of green palm fronds thirty feet into the air, stands virtually in the sea, but alive. Every so often, far from the road, mounds of hills are marked with the grayish-white residue of ocean salt more than half way up from the ground. More than anything, the wounds on the hills make it

conceivable that water once rushed into the flatness between the ocean and the hills and carried a cargo of scrambling children and their houses back into the sea.

Along the coastline forty-five minutes west of Banda Aceh, there are checkerboards of concrete floors where houses once stood. Driveways begin and end in spurts and lead nowhere, stairs stop in mid-flight, and a section of turquoise bathroom floor holds a shallow toilet bowl still intact. The only evidence of former bridges are odd pillars peaking above water and the makeshift wooden bridges nearby that the driver uses. Pieces of old road lie ripped from the earth, resting perpendicular to the coast, and further along, hints of asphalt appear and disappear underneath the water. In one area, the rough road is littered with a zigzag of obstacles—tires, wood, garbage, stones—villagers have placed there in protest to slow down traffic because they have not been compensated for the land appropriated to build the road. Along vast stretches of coast line thousands of saplings have been planted to replace absent vegetation. Millions of pounds of debris were trucked out of Banda Aceh in the cleanup effort. Much of it ended up in designated fields that now look no different than others lying outside the city and near the shore. The debris was unloaded onto waterlogged fields and much of it didn't require burial; it simply sank deep into the ground without leaving a trace.

The tsunami narrative has multiple modulations, and the natural devastation is, perhaps surprisingly, only one reality. In contrast, and in shocking discord, the scenery is awe-inspiring. There is the stark beauty of Aceh's endless coastline, the colors, a green inexplicably rich with life, the sky an ever changing painting of gorgeous cloud formations, and the white-capped deep blue sea rhythmically licking the shore. In yet another instantiation, the tsunami relief effort has left its mark on the topography of the land as much, if not more, than the tsunami itself. Thousands of houses have been built in settlements and styles that do not resemble what they have replaced. Placards abound, nailed into wooden posts pounded into the ground by aid agencies taking credit for construction, and the conglomeration includes USAID, Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief, Turkish Red Crescent, and the Austrian Red Cross. Each house, many of dubious

construction, has a sign near the doorway to announce its donor. Blue, yellow, red, and black water tanks inundate the city, Plan, Oxfam, Care imprinted in bold letters for all to see. Driving through the area, eyeing thousands of houses laid out in different neighborhood configurations, their roof colors associated with specific donors, it is possible to think of disaster relief, the mad and powerful rush of people, money, and resources, as a frenzied, over-financed game.

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Along a double lane road that leads toward the airport and away from the sea and the city, there is a large, seemingly empty, field. It is two football fields long, and not nearly as wide, and walking on it quickly reveals that it has been torn open by backhoes and closed again by bulldozers in the process of accommodating 46,718 bodies. Lambaro, the mass grave, has been gouged and filled with truckloads of bodies five or more layers deep. The land rises and dips with almost every step, the crevices camouflaged by tall grasses and scattered vegetation. Every few yards splitting bamboo poles fly small triangles of flags to mark the boundary of the dead. In the aftermath of the tsunami, Lambaro is the landscape of a Banda Aceh that has survived the reshaping of its environment, acknowledged its dead, and persisted into another day.

Five miles from the sea, in the western suburbs of the city, sits a ship as large as four stories tall and one football field wide. It looks like it has fallen from the sky to the ground, but the ship was carried inland to a residential neighborhood by the force of tsunami waves 40 feet high. Swirling uncontrollably as the water receded, it obliterated everything until finally coming to rest upon four houses. For many weeks, surviving residents lived with the stench of trapped, decaying bodies. The neighborhood has accepted the ship as its own, bending a road around it and rebuilding next to it. A few surviving houses are flanked by others that have been cleaved open or flattened, all lying in the shadows of manic construction. The ground is littered with the floors of destroyed houses, three white tiles amidst the crumbs of others, a corner of a bathroom

floor. At the end of my stay in Banda Aceh, I discover the counterpoint to the narrative of the ship's destruction in conversation with a psychiatrist in Banda Aceh's mental hospital. A former neighbor of hers was in Kapal Apong when the ship arrived. She said that during the tsunami 700 people clamored on the ship to escape drowning.

The tsunami tasted like salty filth, smelled like gasoline, sounded like a fleet of jets, appeared almost black, and was as unforgiving as steel. As told by tsunami survivors, the narratives of the morning of December 26, 2004, are spellbinding. At first, I think that each interviewee, especially the women, are natural born storytellers and I wonder about the oral tradition of Acehnese storytelling. Then I realize that the structure of their stories, the apex in each of them is a terrifying given: the loss of a loved one and their own miraculous escape from death. While novelists struggle to discover the arc of their stories, the stories of survivors have an enviable natural shape that builds, peaks, and resolves and, sometimes, as a way of maintaining composure in agonizing interviews, I concentrate on that reality rather than the sadness being revealed, the excruciating loss of five children in the blink of an eye, the inability to hang on to an ailing mother, the failure to reach a drowning sister. All the stories have the structure of loss, terror, and escape in common, but they also share the reality of shifting, blurring boundaries, a profound disorientation where in a matter of minutes, water is land and land is water, breathing is possible and then it isn't, people live and then they don't. A disorientation of such magnitude makes it possible for the driver of a car at an intersection to slowly drive directly into the oncoming wall of rushing water, first hitting the young girl shouting to him, "The water is coming!"

The fundamental reality of Banda Aceh is not death, but life. On the streets, young girls in jeans and t-shirts ride motorbikes, giggling when their colorful veils slip out of place. Every weekend, families stroll around Baiturrahman mosque holding hands and taking photographs. In the bustling markets, groups of laughing friends drink coffee together. I was invited to lunch in a middle class neighborhood the tsunami had reduced to abject poverty. The wood house was

thoughtlessly built by a relief agency without a kitchen and with large cracks in the walls and floors. Using a makeshift kitchen in the neighboring ruins of their destroyed house, my hosts, a brother and sister who'd lost children, spouses, parents, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and cousins, prepared a gastronomical feast fit for royalty. A world cup badminton match played on the television and everyone eagerly awaited the result. In an environment where faith is defining, people believe God's will responsible for the earthquake and tsunami. Along with the conflict survivor struggling to overcome immense injustice, all Acehnese defer to faith in their graceful resumption of life.