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Under the Wreckage, An Ocean

By M. Sophia Newman

At the farthest edge of San Francisco, beyond the westernmost border of Golden Gate Park, the Pacific Ocean licks a flat, sandy beach ringed with low walls. To the north is a heavy rock cliff, above which floats a vast expanse of blue sky.

That emptiness is a ruin. Between 1894 and 1966, the same view showed an enormous Victorian building looming over the cliff like a protective sentinel, facing out to the sea. It was the Sutro Bathhouse, a place so famous it still draws crowds over 50 years after its vanishing.

To think of it now calls to my mind another building that stood once but does no longer. It reminds me of the scene of an industrial atrocity in Bangladesh, and an image of ocean that struck me there and has remained with me since—a bizarre dream, an intuition I'm still trying to figure out.

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Even from a block away, the factory wreckage looked shocking. Up close, it didn't just look it.

On April 24, 2013, Rana Plaza, a nine-story factory building in Savar, Bangladesh, just outside the capital, Dhaka, had collapsed into a massive pile of shattered concrete. The building had been improperly constructed and poorly maintained, and the day before, some workers had walked off their jobs and called the media after massive cracks began to appear in a wall. But the bosses had bullied them into returning, threatening to withhold wages from the malnourished workers if they did not come in the next day. More than 3,500 workers had obeyed and been inside when the building collapsed that morning; 1,138 would lose their lives as a result, including 1,116 who died on the scene.

I was a mental health researcher in nearby Dhaka then, and my roommate, a Bangladeshi photojournalist, had been one of the first to document the atrocity. He began to bring images of the wreckage home every night, and for a week he and I would sit together in the late-night gloom of the apartment with his laptop throwing a ghostly glow against our faces. He'd run through the unedited scenes of corpses, ambulances, body parts. Often, his stories of the day would segue into complaints that the true extent of the carnage had been edited into oblivion by well-meaning news editors.

His complaints made little logical sense. The news media had already plastered images of the factory, with its massive concrete roof pancaked towards the ground, on front pages and TV broadcasts worldwide. In Dhaka, the public had watched a man caught between two concrete slabs die slowly, hour by hour, hallucinating that he was well and calling out for his children.

The New York Times had covered the story of Shaheena, a factory worker believed to be the last survivor left in the wreckage. She'd lain in a coffin-sized space for four days, conscious and talking, as workers tried to free her—then died in an accidental fire that began when a spark from the machinery cutting through the last piece of rebar ignited the tubing on the bottled oxygen she was breathing. Stories and images had indelibly cast the atrocity into public memory; I'd found them inescapable, even without factoring in my roommate's gruesome outtakes.

But his complaint didn't need to square with facts. Rather, it was an admission of his fresh trauma. Eventually, he asked me to come to the wreckage with him. The request was professional—he was still shooting images, and he knew I could get access to the site as a foreigner that he could not as a local—but it was also personal. Without saying it, he meant to tell me, the only mental health person he knew, that he couldn't be alone with his grief.

Perhaps action was inadvisable; there is a self-preserving urge necessary for working with trauma, I knew, and besides, I was not a clinician, but rather a researcher. But what he was suggesting felt inevitable. My life had already changed; he was suggesting that I look directly at what was altering it.

So, under a clear blue sky on the last day in April 2013, I met him at the disaster site.

However intense the news cycle, being at the disaster site was more so. For miles before the factory, the road was clotted with people—family members looking for loved ones missing in the atrocity; rescue workers who found it impossible to leave the place where they'd all snatched people from the edge of death; activists protesting the factory's deadly mismanagement. By the time I reached the factory proper on April 30, the crowd was a mass of bodies pressed tight—and yet, because I was conspicuously foreign, I stood out to many as a presumed member of the diplomatic elite. Soon survivors' mothers crowded close to me, holding out images of their lost children and pleading for my help. One perfect stranger, a short woman in a sweat-drenched *salwar kameez*, pressed herself against my torso, wept as though her heart were shattering, and wailed, *"Amar chotto bon!"* ("My little sister!") over and over. A sea of silent faces gazed with grave eyes at the spectacle of her tears. I could do little but touch her head of black curls, mutter softly in broken Bengali, and ease away.

Across the street, a half-finished building abutted the ruined factory. When I approached, the lone soldier at the entrance nodded at me and looked away, letting my skin color bypass official rules. I stepped into the dark interior, shuffling my sandaled feet through the dust.

My photojournalist friend was standing inside. He'd been around all day, shadowing soldiers as they tried to douse the fire still smoldering deep inside the wreckage. He'd finished up a little while before I arrived, and was leaning on a pillar, waiting for me. As I walked up, he slapped my outstretched hand hello.

Then he took me to the bodies, like I knew he would.

When it was still standing, Rana Plaza had abutted this half-finished structure's sidewall. Damaged by the force of the collapse and deconstructed by rescuers attempting to reach trapped workers, the factory building now yawned open like a dollhouse. The tableau it revealed was troubling. At one stairwell, the dust-covered, claw-shaped hands of a woman jutted out from between two heavy layers of concrete. She was pitched forward and crushed, with just the top of her head, a filthy snarl of long black hair, and her two reaching, rigor mortised arms emerging from the rubble. Her face was inside the wreckage, closer to the interior of the factory. Presumably, it was destroyed.

In death, her reaching hands seemed like a stark recrimination of the atrocity, not least of all because she seemed to have barely missed escaping from the crashing debris. For a moment, I imagined her reaching out as though wishing to be pulled out of the rubble and back to life. *Someone's little sister*, I thought, remembering the woman outside.

My friend stood a few feet behind me. "Don't stay too long," he said. I glanced back and nodded, and we walked away together.

Outside in the factory's backlot, I looked at the clear blue sky and said little, absorbed in the solemnity the occasion created. Far back in my mind, though, a wordless image tried to announce its meaning over the mental static of catastrophe. It would stay with me for years, lingering as though waiting for me to understand it.

It was very simple. It was the deep blue ocean at the Sutro Bathhouse Ruins.

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In the 1880s, Adolph Sutro, a Prussian-born businessman who'd made his fortune in railroad engineering, lived in a mansion at the western edge of San Francisco. On the beach nearby, he had noticed that the ocean waves traced an arc inland and carried water onto the black basalt ledges at a place called Seal Rocks. He built an artificial tide pool there to capture the water and the sea life it carried, meaning it as an addition to the private garden and beachfront he'd opened to the public.

Eventually, he hatched a grander plan: to direct these undulations of surf into swimming pools in which ordinary people in San Francisco could swim. The Bathhouse, opened in 1894, was that dream fulfilled.

Sutro spared no expense on the project, and the building was a marvel: a massive structure with cupolas, grand staircases, a promenade, an amphitheater, a museum, and live music every weekend. On the western face, a massive glass façade faced the vast blue horizon. In the high-ceilinged room those windows protected was the building's raison d'être: six saltwater swimming pools fed by the daily tides of the Pacific and warmed to a range of temperatures, open to the public for their bathing pleasure.

It's all gone now. Sutro died in 1898. In the 1930s, his son began to discourage the crowds from coming, realizing nothing could make the bathhouse profitable. Eventually, the building closed. In 1966, the last of a series of fires decimated the structure, leaving almost nothing behind.

The crowds still come, though, at a pace of nearly one million per year, to an area now known for its desolate beauty. In a half-hidden hollow between two natural rock walls, the massive breakwaters built to protect Edwardian bathers from stormy seas still stand erect. Concrete chambers that once held captured surf are now roofless, open to sky. Half-broken staircases lead nowhere. Plants grow wild in the salt air, resilient to the errant footsteps of tourists and hikers. The ruins break into dust and regrow into something new, and the only thing unchanging is the eternal rhythm of ocean waves.

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Why did the Rana Plaza wreckage call that place to mind? I began wondering on the morning after I first dreamed it.

From the start, I understood that my mind was creating a reprieve, of course. A mental place that I'd once been, that was utterly unlike the shocking roughness of a corpse-addled disaster area: I felt I should thank my brain for that.

But that was not the whole answer. The dreams that began soon after the visit to Rana Plaza have grown more complex, but each time they've returned these last five years, the gist is the same: I am back at the spot where I'd seen the dead woman, but it is a kind of shifting, Cubist version of waking-life reality. I can be in two places at once, and I am always in the same two: standing near the stairwell where I saw the dead woman and inside the wreckage itself beside her. And beneath that incredible crush of fractured cement, there is a revelation; there is no deadly lack of space and oxygen there. Although near the woman who I saw dead, but I'm never looking at a crushed skull. Rather, I can see the fine-boned face of a petite woman with dark eyes, who, in a non-reality that runs in parallels, is both trapped with hands jutting from the concrete—just the way I knew her in real life—and freely slipping into the edge of a great calm sea that has somehow opened beneath the ruined factory. I am side-by-side with this vanishing dark-eyed woman who I will never know and yet can never leave, and somehow, we are beneath this dark chaos of shattered concrete in a ruined place in an industrial suburb in Bangladesh, and yet eventually also on a cliff near a private hollow of sunny ruins, overlooking the vast, expansive, blue Pacific.

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What good is an ocean to people dying in an industrial atrocity? What good is the ocean to people, like the garment workers at Rana Plaza, who have never seen one? Does it matter to the families searching for their loved ones in wrecked concrete, or to a photojournalist so traumatized he soon lapsed into addiction, or to the many garment workers whose lives are still threatened by rampant corruption and neglect right now?

Does it benefit anyone's mental health that a researcher studying mental health would be preoccupied with an image so hard to explain? In what sense is the peaceful feeling of the dream—so wildly out of place with the lasting public outrage over so many people dying of negligent homicide—correct for me to imagine? What right do I have to dream a dream like that?

I have never been able to answer those questions. I've realized that, if the dead woman is bound for the ocean depths, then I am as one of the long-ago Sutro Bathhouse bathers used to be: watching the sweeping drama of the deep blue sea from behind a high glass wall, dipping into it only in warm, filtered pools in which one can drown but is far more likely to float. Whether in real wreckage or in dreamed ocean, it is she who has ceased breathing, and I who have merely watched.

After Rana Plaza, I wrote a research article on the trauma of the people there, then another on the overall field of disaster research. As years passed, I read innumerable news articles on Rana Plaza and other disasters: poorly constructed buildings that collapsed in Mumbai, the outcome of an earthquake in Pakistan, the Grenfell Tower fire in London. I've also listened to mental health clinicians in professional settings, and—perhaps because they are focused on sickness rather than beauty—none have mentioned this reaction to trauma as a possibility. Never once have I seen or heard a hint of someone reacting to an atrocity like this. No one tells this story.

So, I, too, have not told it. To stay here on the far side of safety is a weird gift of circumstance. It is privilege; it is luck. To dream of disaster with such strange, desolate beauty seems almost inexplicable. Five years after Rana Plaza collapsed, this is the only thing about the atrocity I've never mentioned to anyone.

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No dream requires social correctness, though, and this one reoccurs as though waiting for my thoughts to catch up to its intuition. Slowly, I think I've caught on.

If the Sutro Baths once stood for opulence, civil pride, or the beating-back of the natural world into a form fit for human pleasure, then today it is a monument to time and decay and to what is eternal. To visit the ruins is to know for a fact that surf, sand, and sky are conspiring to reclaim the last of Sutro's grand architecture, and that they will succeed. The message is clear: even the grandest, most outlandish things eventually give way. Nothing—neither achievement nor disaster—lasts long on this Earth.

Yet in the empty hollow were the pools once stood, the ocean still rises and falls in the steady rhythm it has kept since before Rana Plaza was built and fell, before Adolph Sutro came and went, before San Francisco or any part of human civilization was built. We are not eternal, but it is.

Combined, the two things make sense of something that occurs at the end of each dream.

Eventually, the woman and I always end up standing side by side on the cliff, before a great baffling grandness that is the liminal space between reality and imagination. I'm always between an immense desire for this blameless Bengali woman to not slide away into that sea of death, to return to life, to never have been murdered in the first place—and yet also the utter lack of need for things to be other than they truly are. She looks at me with her perfect unruined Bengali face, and she is telling me without words that the suffering of the living is a small wave on the surface of vast blue peace, and that beneath even the most horrid suffering, *nothing is wrong.*

And although in the dream, as in waking life, I know all about the insane injustice that goes on and on, the moral need for such terrible violence to cease being imposed on everyone like her—somehow, despite all that, I believe her.

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