

LETTER FROM HAITI

A woman feeds her community in Port-au-Prince.

by Jon Lee Anderson

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1 On the morning of Monday, January 18th, I set out with Frantz Ewald, a Haitian-
2 born painter, to drive into Port-au-Prince from the hilltop suburb of Pétionville,
3 where I was staying. It had been six days since the earthquake struck, and the city
4 was still in chaos. As rescuers hacked at the rubble, looking for survivors, residents
5 were out on the streets searching for water, for food, and for fuel. In Pétionville, a
6 gas station had opened for business, and that morning a long line of cars formed;
7 mixed among them were men and women on foot, holding plastic jerricans and
8 waiting anxiously for their turn at the pump. An elderly woman came up to the
9 people in line and asked politely for help. The charred corpse of a man, said to be a
10 thief, lay at the curbside across the street, in front of a bank. His head was crushed
11 and his legs were strangely folded behind him, and a small pile of rubbish was
12 gathering around him. As people walked past, they cupped their hands over their
13 noses and mouths because of the smell. A few feet away, young touts sold scratch
14 cards for a mobile-phone company to passing motorists.

15 Frantz and I were in his black Toyota pickup truck, and we had not gone far when we
16 braked to allow a group of teen-agers to cross the street in front of us. They were
17 being led by a tall young woman in a white tunic and a long black skirt. They trailed
18 behind her as if she were some kind of Pied Piper. As they passed in front of us, she
19 gave us a sidelong glance of polite recognition, and we carried on.

20 Four or five hours later, in the flatlands at the edge of the Port-au-Prince airport, we
21 saw the young woman and her followers again. She was standing amid a scrum of
22 onlookers outside the gates of the airport, where U.N. and American planes were
23 landing on the airstrip beyond the little terminal building. We stopped and hailed her,
24 and she spoke to us, surprisingly, in English, with a Southern drawl. She said that her
25 name was Nadia François and she was from Delmas 75—a neighborhood five miles
26 back up into the hills. She had come down, she said, in representation of some three
27 hundred people there who were in need of help. She handed us a paper with a
28 handwritten message that attested to her mission, signed and stamped by a Protestant
29 pastor. Nadia had led her group down to the airport after hearing that the U.S.
30 military was handing out food.

31 We told Nadia and her companions—there were nine of them—to hop into the back
32 of the truck, and we set off to look for food. Despite the rumors, which had attracted
33 several hundred Haitians to the road by the airport, to gather and stare hopefully, no
34 food was being given out there. We drove onto a nearby field where there were tent
35 camps and aid supplies, demarcated with a dozen or more national flags, but it was a
36 bivouac, not a food-distribution point. We asked a U.N. peacekeeper where to find
37 aid; he said he didn't know. Someone told us that food was being handed out at a
38 factory nearby, where the Dominicans had set up a base, and so we drove there.

39 The earliest and most visible relief presence in Haiti had come from the neighboring
40 Dominican Republic. When I first entered Haiti, in the early morning of January

41 15th, I had been waved across the border with a long stream of vehicles carrying
42 relief supplies. There was also a convoy of trucks, driven by soldiers, that were
43 inscribed with messages that the relief had been dispatched as a personal gesture by
44 the Dominican President, Leonel Fernández.

45 Now a vast international aid effort was beginning to establish itself. Humanitarian
46 assistance and rescue teams were appearing daily from all over the world—from
47 Spain, France, Russia, Israel, Venezuela, and Cuba, as well as the United States. A
48 team of yellow-shirted Scientologists showed up, as did one from the order of the
49 Knights of Malta. Countless tons of supplies had been flown in or were on their way.
50 But the distribution of food was scattershot, and every outlet was swamped with
51 desperate crowds. All over the city, banners and signs painted on sheets asked for
52 aid. Only the patient and motivated seemed to be getting it.

53 Nadia said she had grown up in Miami with her family. She was thirty-six, “going on
54 thirty-seven,” she said, and had been back in Haiti for only the past two years. I
55 asked her why she had returned. She gave a rueful smile and said she had “been bad”
56 and had had “immigration difficulties.” In the past week, she had become a principal
57 means of support for her community. Every day, she’d come into the center of town
58 and tried to return with food and other essentials.

59 At the Dominican food depot, a detail of Peruvian U.N. peacekeepers nervously
60 clutched acrylic shields and assault rifles as they tried to hold back a large crowd of
61 Haitians who had gathered at both sides of the gated entrance. The soldiers were
62 harried and flushed, and they yelled when we pulled up to talk to them, as if they had
63 been deafened by the noise of the crowd. We persuaded them to let us through, and
64 inside we found a tumultuous scene: trucks came and went, and civilians who had
65 slipped through the cordon mingled with Haitian police, Dominican soldiers, and
66 dozens of yellow-T-shirted volunteers for Haiti’s Ministry of the Feminine
67 Condition—a legacy of the populist Presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. An official
68 from the ministry was standing in the loading bay of the warehouse, where relief
69 supplies were being piled haphazardly onto trucks.

70 The aid consisted of plastic bags with the essentials to sustain a single family for a
71 day: rice, cornmeal, beans, sardines, and Vienna sausages. The official wore a
72 decorative print dress with a matching head scarf and large sunglasses, and she spoke
73 intently and continuously on a cell phone. Around her, arguments erupted as
74 unauthorized people tried to sneak through the final barrier to get to the food in the
75 loading bay. A fierce-looking woman wearing a bandanna came in and began
76 screaming that she wanted food. A soldier pushed her. She yelled at him, and he
77 shoved her again. He protested that the woman had been there the day before and
78 was making off with the supplies to sell them.

79 A hapless-looking Dominican Army colonel was trying to oversee the proceedings.
80 He gave Nadia’s group permission to take some food, and then added, a little
81 apologetically, that he was under orders to distribute food through the Haitian
82 government, and therefore could not take it directly to the people in the city. He led
83 us to the ministry official, who removed her cell phone from her ear and listened as
84 we pled the case. She looked sternly at Nadia, nodded in assent, and went back to her
85 phone.

86 We loaded the pickup with seventy or eighty bags and secured them with yellow
87 plastic cargo webbing, and then made for the gates. Outside, the throng was bigger,
88 and the soldiers had grown agitated. They yelled at us to go fast and not to stop for
89 anything, because the people would overwhelm our vehicle in order to get the food.
90 We gunned the pickup and made it past the crowd; on the way into the hills, we
91 drove cautiously through back streets. After a few miles, we stopped on a middle-
92 class street, fringed with shade trees, where there was a gap between houses at a bend
93 in the road. A crude patchwork awning of sheets and tarps stretched across the gap,
94 and underneath were a large number of women and children, living on mats that had
95 been laid over the pavement.

96 At the far edge of the awning, the street ended, and the ground fell sharply away.
97 Below, in a ravine twenty or thirty feet deep and about a hundred feet across, was
98 Nadia's community, Fidel—named after Fidel Castro, she said—where she and three
99 hundred other people normally lived. (Delmas 75, I realized, corresponded to the
100 street that ran past the ravine and appeared on city maps; Fidel itself was off the
101 grid.) It was a dry, stone-filled riverbed, filled with a geometry of cinder-block and
102 tin-scrap dwellings, one of which was her house, a twelve-foot-square cinder-block
103 structure that she rented for the equivalent of about three hundred U.S. dollars a year.

104 Most of the residents of Fidel had moved up to the street to sleep under the awning.
105 They were frightened by the continuing aftershocks, and did not want to be caught in
106 the ravine if there was another earthquake. Nadia pointed to a broken section of rock-
107 and-block wall on the far cliff edge; I could see the outlines of an unfinished
108 residential development there. Nadia said that the residents of Fidel had asked the
109 developer not to put the wall so close to the edge of the cliff, but he had ignored
110 them. During the earthquake, a section of the wall had collapsed on top of Nadia's
111 neighbor, hitting her on the head and killing her.

112 Beside the truck, Nadia called out for help, and soon a group of young men and boys
113 began to carry the bags of food down into a small rudimentary Protestant church, the
114 Église Pancotista Sous Delovy. The church, built into the side of the cliff, was made
115 of sheets of salvaged corrugated tin, painted blue and pink. The altar and benches
116 were down a steep concrete staircase, at the bottom of what seemed almost like a
117 well. As Nadia called out orders to the youths, the pastor, Jean Vieux Villers, vowed
118 that he would see that the food was fairly distributed; everyone seemed happy with
119 this arrangement.

120 Fidel was settled thirty-two years ago, according to Verner Lionel, a neighbor of
121 Nadia's, when the area above the ravines was developed. Lionel was considered a
122 leader in Fidel, because, at fifty-two, he was the oldest man there. Like many other
123 men in Fidel, he was an itinerant construction worker and jack-of-all-trades. He had
124 come there in the nineteen-seventies, as a worker for a developer, a woman he called
125 Prosper, who allowed him to build a shack for himself in the ravine. "Mine was the
126 first house," he said. Friends and relatives of Lionel from the countryside followed
127 him to the ravine, and then others came. Today there are some eight hundred and
128 sixty people living there, according to Nadia's calculations. Haitians have big
129 families; international-aid agencies tend to estimate five or six people per family, and
130 some have many more. Nearly half the country's nine million people are under
131 eighteen.

132 Nadia waved to the many mothers and babies and children on the tarp and said
133 something had to be done for them. “The thing is,” she said with a tone of fond
134 disparagement, “these Haitians don’t know what to do.” The immediate problem was
135 that the people of Fidel ordinarily bought their water from a cistern truck, but it
136 hadn’t appeared since before the quake on January 12th, and so there was no longer
137 any easy access to water. (This problem was widespread; even before the earthquake,
138 half of the people in Haiti couldn’t reliably get water.) There was no food or
139 medicine, either, since there was no work, and no one had any money saved. These
140 people were poor; like many of their countrymen, Nadia included, they were living
141 below the poverty line and had been since long before the earthquake.

142 Haiti has been in a state of persistent struggle since it won its independence from
143 France, in 1804. It is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with seventy-
144 eight per cent of its people living on less than two U.S. dollars per day and fifty-four
145 per cent on half that. Its traditional exports, coffee and sugar, have collapsed, and
146 manufacturing has been in decline for decades. It has suffered riots and hideous
147 violence and depressingly regular political upheavals, led by a succession of despots
148 and cheats: Papa Doc, Baby Doc, the priest Aristide.

149 Amid all this, Haiti seems almost uniquely victimized by nature. From June to
150 October, it has severe storms and hurricanes. In the span of just two months in the
151 summer of 2008, it was walloped by Tropical Storm Fay, Hurricane Gustav, Tropical
152 Storm Hanna, and Hurricane Ike, which together left eight hundred thousand people
153 homeless and the country’s infrastructure severely damaged.

154 Haiti relies heavily on foreign aid, but little of that money contributes to sustained
155 development, and it has often been withdrawn for political reasons. Most of the jobs
156 are in agriculture; as exports have dipped, nearly a hundred thousand Haitians a year
157 have made their way from the country to Port-au-Prince. There they work largely in
158 the “informal” sector: as bellboys, day workers, shoe shiners, and street vendors.
159 Now even those jobs are gone.

160 One day, Frantz and I drove past the Port-au-Prince cemetery, on our way from the
161 small cinder-block judicial police headquarters, near the airport, that had become the
162 provisional seat of Haiti’s government. Bodies were everywhere in the city—lying
163 on street corners and sometimes dumped in the middle of avenues—and, at the
164 office, the mayor of Port-au-Prince and the director of the Ministry of Health had
165 both informed me that they were doing what they could to clean them up. Disposing
166 of bodies was, for all intents and purposes, now the extent of the Haitian
167 government’s capabilities. The Prime Minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, had told me that
168 seventy thousand bodies had been collected by bulldozers and dump trucks and
169 buried in four mass gravesites, in town and outside. One of those places was the main
170 cemetery.

171 As we approached, I saw three bodies lying face down on the dirt in a gap in the
172 wall. Two of them appeared to be women, one very young. The other bodies I had
173 seen in Port-au-Prince were distended and blistered from the heat. These were fresh,
174 with no visible injuries. They reminded me of photographs I had seen of victims of
175 death squads in El Salvador. An overwhelming stench permeated the air, even inside
176 the truck.

177 Lying next to the cemetery wall was a young man, drenched from head to foot in
178 blood; more blood had pooled around him on the sidewalk. He lay on his side, with
179 an elbow propped up on the ground so that he could cup his head in his hand. There
180 was a bright-red advertisement for Nino cell phones painted on the wall just above
181 him, and next to it a crucifix embossed within a circle. Frantz said, “I think he’s still
182 alive.” Several people gathered on the median strip to stare down at him. One of
183 them said, “He’s a thief. The police executed him and dumped him here. And those
184 people, too”—he indicated the fresh bodies. “They are thieves.”

185 During the earthquake, hundreds of prisoners had escaped from the national
186 penitentiary, just a few blocks from the Presidential Palace and the cemetery. The
187 fugitives included hardened criminals and some of Port-au-Prince’s most violent
188 gang leaders. Looters—thousands of them, by some reports—had overrun the Grand
189 Rue, the main commercial area, and other places in the city. The police were hard
190 pressed to respond, having lost half their force around Port-au-Prince. I had heard
191 reports of police shooting thieves and of looters killed by vigilantes. There was
192 gunfire at night in the neighborhood where I was staying, and at one point rumors
193 spread of nocturnal kidnapers who were stealing people’s babies to sell for
194 adoption, supposedly abducting them as they slept in the streets outside. One day, I
195 saw a man tied to a pole, hacked up by machetes and beaten to death with rocks.

196 The man on the sidewalk twitched; his chest rose and fell slowly a couple of times. A
197 yellow bulldozer came up the street, and a rough-looking man, walking in front of it,
198 directed it toward the three bodies lying inside the cleft in the wall. The bulldozer,
199 amid great noise and fumes, scraped them up into its iron beak and then, in several
200 violent motions, rolled them into a mound of yellow dirt that rose some fifteen feet
201 inside the broken wall. Within a minute, the bodies had vanished. The bulldozer
202 came along the sidewalk and lowered its beak. Before it could scoop up the wounded
203 man, though, the worker directing operations walked over. Seeing that the man was
204 still alive, he waved the bulldozer away. As it roared off, we asked him what he
205 planned to do about the wounded man. He said, “I am only responsible for the dead,”
206 and walked away.

207 When the quake hit, Nadia had tried to run out of the ravine. She was halfway up the
208 crude concrete steps that led to the street when she heard screaming from near her
209 house. She ran back, and saw her neighbor lying dead under the pile of cinder blocks.
210 The neighbor had a seven-month-old boy. “I said, ‘Where’s the baby, where’s the
211 baby?’ and we saw him lying there on the ground.” She had managed to toss the
212 child clear just as she was buried by the blocks. “A woman picked him up and gave
213 him to me,” Nadia said. “He was covered with blood, and there was also blood on his
214 socks. One arm looked dislocated, and one of his legs, too, and he had a swelling on
215 his head. I was scared he would die in my hands. He kept trying to go to sleep, and I
216 was trying to wake him up.” Nadia went looking for his relatives and found his aunt,
217 who lived in Ravine 75, a few blocks away from Fidel. “After, I went outside and
218 sat, and I was crying, because I didn’t know what happened to my boyfriend.” Her
219 boyfriend, a young man named Kesnel Jean, had left earlier in the day on a bus for
220 Jacmel, a town on the southern coast of Haiti. He had not been heard from.

221 That night, “after it stopped,” Nadia said, she walked down to Delmas 36, about
222 thirty-five blocks away, to see if her cousin and his family had survived. They had,

223 but what she saw of the city—“a lot of houses down,” and people dead and wounded
224 everywhere—saddened her. Nadia recalled that a rumor had begun circulating after
225 the disaster struck. “The Haitians started saying that it was the U.S. doing an
226 experiment that caused it, because they wanted to take over Haiti. But I know it’s
227 God’s work, because if it was the U.S. that did it, then did they also do the
228 earthquake in California a few years ago? I tried to tell them it don’t make no sense.”

229 In the next days, she continued roving out of Fidel. “On Wednesday, I walked all the
230 way to downtown and back up, looking for my boyfriend. I saw dead people lying
231 around,” she said. “I saw one kid who had tried to run out of a building, and it
232 smashed down on him, and all you could see was his face and one of his arms. I saw
233 looters taking things and throwing them down from one building that was destroyed,
234 and I took off running, because I didn’t want to get taken by the police.”

235 It was in those initial sorties of hers, looking for Kesnel and for her relatives, that
236 Nadia had started searching for food. She told me, with a kind of fierce pride, “I
237 never suffered in the U.S. for things like food and water, so I don’t think I should
238 have to in Haiti.” She brought the food she found to Pastor Villers, to be stored in the
239 little Pancotista church until it could be handed out.

240 It wasn’t until two days after Kesnel went missing that he arrived back in Fidel,
241 injured in one leg but otherwise unharmed. When the earthquake had struck, his bus
242 had crashed; a U.N. vehicle was also in a wreck nearby. Many passengers had been
243 killed, he told Nadia, but he had been pulled to safety by the U.N. people. He had
244 managed to hire a motorcycle to get partway back to Port-au-Prince, and had hitched
245 a ride the rest of the way.

246 On the coastal road leading west out of Port-au-Prince to Léogâne—an old plantation
247 town that had been almost entirely destroyed in the quake—I stopped one day at the
248 home of Max Beauvoir, Haiti’s preëminent *houngan*, or vodou priest. Beauvoir’s
249 rambling complex was situated in a shady glade of tropical trees—an unusual sight in
250 this part of the country, which, like much of Haiti, has been largely deforested. The
251 coral-rock wall in front had partly collapsed in the earthquake. A section of his
252 temple and an open-air kitchen had been damaged, too, but his home was intact.
253 Several statues of vodou gods overlooked the garden from the parapets of the
254 buildings.

255 Beauvoir, seated at a round table beneath the trees behind his house, greeted me
256 graciously. A tall, handsome man with deep-set, intense eyes, he had a pair of huge
257 Rottweilers at his feet and a pack of Marlboro Lights on the table, which he drew
258 from as we talked. He said he was upset about remarks made by the American
259 evangelical preacher Pat Robertson, who had blamed Haiti’s tragedy on a pact with
260 the Devil. “I feel that Pat Robertson missed a very good opportunity to close his
261 mouth,” Beauvoir said. “What is needed most in Haiti now is certainly compassion.
262 A tragedy like this is the fault of nobody, and to look for fault is ridiculous, and it
263 seems to me that was not very intelligent. It would have been more intelligent on his
264 part if he had simply shut up.” Beauvoir was also upset about the mass burials of the
265 earthquake victims. Tens of thousands of unidentified human bodies a day were
266 being bulldozed into the ground without any ceremony, and he wished for a way to
267 bring greater dignity to the process. “We all have a part of God in us, and our bodies

268 should be disposed of in a decent way. The way they are doing it, picking them up
269 and putting them in holes, it's undignified.”

270 I told Beauvoir about the bodies I had seen dumped at the cemetery, and he nodded.
271 On January 16th, he said, he had been summoned by Haiti's President, René Préal,
272 to an emergency cabinet meeting, along with the Prime Minister, the police chief,
273 and the surviving heads of the Catholic and Protestant churches. At the meeting, the
274 leaders had discussed the unravelling security situation in Port-au-Prince. “We
275 decided we had to deal with them in an emergency way,” he said. “Beginning on the
276 seventeenth and for the next two weeks,” criminals were to be treated “as in an
277 emergency.” I asked him if this meant capital punishment, and he said it did:
278 “Capital punishment, automatically, for all bandits.” Some of the looters were taking
279 what they desperately needed, and from places where it wouldn't be missed. And
280 some of them must have been supplying those too sick or badly injured to fend for
281 themselves; Nadia couldn't have been the only one tending to a community. Others,
282 of course, were stealing out of greed and opportunism. But this seemed an impossible
283 distinction to make, especially for a beleaguered and diminished police force.

284 I asked if such license could extend to the killing of a young girl, and mentioned the
285 girl whose body was among those dumped at the cemetery.

286 Beauvoir nodded. “It could include anybody.” He seemed to think of such harsh
287 treatment as a lamentable necessity. “I personally regret this,” he said. “I regret all
288 death. I regret the many calls I have received asking for help. I regret that people are
289 still trapped in their houses. I regret the earthquake we had this morning.” (Earlier
290 that day, an aftershock registering 6.1 on the Richter scale had rattled Port-au-
291 Prince.) I told him about the young man I had found shot and left for dead, and how
292 it had been American soldiers, in the end, who had taken him away for medical
293 treatment. I told Beauvoir that I had tried to follow up on his case but had been
294 unable to find him. This, too, he said, was regrettable. “But if you want to look for
295 him, I can tell you, go and look in the graves.”

296 The Haitian government has denied ordering the police to use extrajudicial means to
297 deal with looters. But when I told Nadia what Beauvoir had said, she wasn't
298 surprised. A few days earlier, a policeman who lived in Fidel had told her and her
299 neighbors, “If you catch a thief, kill him.”

300 Nadia spoke English and Spanish and Creole, but, she told me, she felt more
301 American than Haitian. When I asked her what her favorite television programs
302 were, she laughed and said, “Oh, ‘The Dukes of Hazzard’ and ‘Punky Brewster’!”
303 Her mother took her and her siblings to the U.S. when she was six, on a boat with
304 other Haitian illegal immigrants, going first to Cuba and then to Florida. Her father
305 was in prison in the United States, and joined them when Nadia was fourteen. Soon
306 afterward, she caught him sniffing cocaine in the house, and he had tried to beat her.
307 Her mother threw him out. When she was still in high school, he shot someone and
308 escaped to Port-au-Prince. Not long afterward, she heard, he was shot dead after a
309 drug deal in Delmas 33—about thirty blocks from where she lived now.

310 As a child in Miami, she had wanted to be a marine or a model. “My mother kept
311 promising to take me to Barbizon, but she lied, she never did.” Nadia smiled. Life
312 had been difficult. Her older brother, she explained, had fallen ill after a vodou curse
313 was put on him. Her mother had returned to Port-au-Prince to nurse him, but he had

314 died. Nadia's mother had brought the illness back with her, and died soon afterward.
315 That was in Nadia's senior year of high school. She graduated, but after her mother's
316 death she and her sister had had to move out of their rented house.

317 For a time, she said, she studied "H.R.S." at Tallahassee Community College. When
318 I asked what that meant, she said, "Human resources services," uncertainly, as if she
319 couldn't quite remember what the initials stood for. She had also studied
320 cosmetology, and got a certificate for call-center work. She had three children, two
321 by one man and one by another.

322 In 1992, she was arrested and spent five and a half years in prison. The charges were
323 for forging a Treasury check and for armed robbery. She told me at first that she had
324 been arrested in a car that had a gun in it which didn't belong to her. Then she looked
325 at me and said, "I fell in with the wrong people." After prison, she was deported. In
326 1999, she returned to the U.S., hoping to see her daughter, who she said was being
327 abused in foster care. She was picked up by police for entering the country illegally,
328 and spent seven years and one month in the federal correctional institution at
329 Tallahassee. In June, 2007, together with other detainees, she was sent by special
330 plane back to Port-au-Prince. They were greeted by Haitian policemen, whose faces
331 were hidden by masks, and placed in detention. "I was afraid, because I didn't know
332 what to expect," she said with a shudder. "I don't know why they had to wear
333 masks." After a couple of weeks, a cousin came to fetch her. Not long after, she
334 rented the small house in Fidel and had been there ever since, earning a little income
335 by cutting women's hair.

336 Nadia hadn't seen any of her children since her last arrest. Her youngest had been a
337 baby when she went to prison. All three had ended up in different foster homes.
338 Nadia's greatest wish was to return to the States with her nephew (the son of the
339 brother who had died in Haiti), to be reunited with her children, and to have a job. "I
340 can work at anything, I don't mind what," she said. "They say that if you pay your
341 dues you're supposed to be given a second chance. Isn't that right?"

342 When I arrived to see her one morning, Nadia was on the street, talking heatedly with
343 the woman who sold water, sugarcane, and soda from a hole-in-the-wall shop at the
344 end of the street, where everyone from the ravine congregated. Nadia was loudly
345 admonishing her in Creole. It went on for some time. The day before, Nadia
346 explained, the woman had taken receipt of some boxes of Chinese rice that had been
347 intended for her. The donor was a Canadian man whom she had stopped as he was
348 driving by; she had persuaded him to bring food for her and her neighbors, but he
349 had apparently returned while Nadia was away. The shopkeeper said she had already
350 handed it out. "So she claims," Nadia muttered disgustedly.

351 When I asked Nadia how the people of Fidel had come to regard her as a leader, she
352 said that it was because she spoke English. Then, harshly, she added, "And because
353 I'm the one searching for help while they're sitting on their sorry behinds."

354 Fidel was not especially hard-hit by the earthquake; other than Nadia's neighbor and
355 a couple of women farther down the gulch whose house crumbled and injured their
356 legs, it experienced none of the ravages that destroyed so much of the city. But, in
357 the absence of a viable economy and national infrastructure, it was still a hopeless
358 place, a symbol of Haiti's deep and persistent problems. Many of the men in the
359 neighborhood seemed to sit around most of the day. Some played dominoes to pass

360 the time. There was no work for them, and would not be until the aid money for
361 reconstruction created jobs. Lionel Verner hasn't had construction work for a long
362 time, he said; he sells cell-phone scratch cards to make a living. He has eight sons
363 and no wife, and he makes twenty to thirty gourdes—something less than one U.S.
364 dollar—a day. Nadia explained that before the earthquake a small bag of beans
365 sufficient for a family meal cost twenty-seven gourdes, a bag of rice about fifty. By
366 now, prices had risen substantially. Verner said that he and his sons usually ate one
367 meal a day: spaghetti or rice, and sometimes cornmeal mash with beans. Since the
368 earthquake, Nadia and a large group of others from Fidel—those sleeping under the
369 awning—had begun cooking a collective evening meal in a large pot over a charcoal
370 fire, right on the street. They wasted nothing. Some of the blocks that had fallen on
371 Nadia's neighbor had been repurposed as a base for a washtub. Nadia had stored the
372 baby's disassembled crib.

373 On January 25th, twelve days after the earthquake, Nadia asked me to go with her to
374 the Pétionville Country Club, a nine-hole golf course studded with flamboyant
375 orange trees. There was a displaced-persons camp there, she said, and the American
376 Army was giving out food. Nadia said she had found the camp after she noticed U.S.
377 military helicopters and followed them "to see where they were going."

378 At the golf course, we walked onto an incongruously clipped lawn at the second tee.
379 Ahead of us, spreading out over the slopes of the hillside, were thousands of shelters,
380 made out of every conceivable material: bedsheets, sacking, plastic, and in one case,
381 a greenish plastic printed with the words "Caution: Contains Infectious Biological
382 Waste." Small tent-shops had sprung up, including one that sold wigs and hair
383 weaves, and another in which a young man with a tiny generator was recharging cell
384 phones.

385 The aid was being dispensed by Catholic Relief Services, and Nadia stopped a C.R.S.
386 worker as he trotted through the crowd, an Irishman named Donal. Although he
387 looked busy and exhausted, he listened patiently as Nadia made her appeal. He
388 explained that he could do nothing for her until she first went to their office, in
389 Delmas. A team would be sent to survey the ravine, and if her claim was accepted
390 then food could be given. The camp had at least twenty-five thousand people in it
391 already, Donal said, and the number was swelling by the day. Because there were no
392 latrines, everyone was defecating in the open, a major health hazard. There had been
393 three rapes, and he was worried about fires. C.R.S. was trying to cope, but it was on
394 the verge of being overwhelmed.

395 Nadia nodded sympathetically, but she was relentless. "So what do I have to do?"
396 she asked. Before she let him go, Donal had told her where to get help and supplied
397 her with his own cell-phone number.

398 At the C.R.S. office, Nadia found a tall, amiable Oregonian of thirty-five, Lane
399 Hartill, who got her a chair and a bottle of drinking water and listened intently as she
400 described the situation in Fidel. C.R.S. wanted to help as many people as it could, he
401 told Nadia; the agency had already brought in sixteen hundred tons of food, and it
402 planned to put people back to work by hiring them to clear rubble.

403 Hartill offered to come with Nadia to survey Fidel himself. When he arrived, he was
404 amazed that there were people living in the ravine. "What do they do in the rainy
405 season?" he asked. "They get wet," Nadia said.

406 Back at the office, a waybill was drawn up that authorized Nadia to go to the C.R.S.
407 compound across town and collect a hundred and fifty buckets of food, a hundred
408 and fifty hygiene kits (buckets containing towels, soap, sanitary napkins, and
409 detergent), and fifty cases of drinking water. Nadia went off on a motorbike that
410 belonged to a young man who lived nearby and soon returned with four small pickup
411 trucks.

412 While the trucks were being loaded at the C.R.S. compound, Nadia cracked jokes
413 and flirted with a contingent of Nepalese U.N. soldiers who were on guard there. She
414 was overjoyed at the supplies. When she returned to Fidel, Pastor Villers threw open
415 his church doors, and soon there was a stream of boys and girls and men going to and
416 from the trucks, carrying the C.R.S. buckets and water and stockpiling them on the
417 church floor.

418 Nadia moved back and forth, issuing orders. She told people to line up, and, using a
419 list of names she had compiled in girlish handwriting, she began to call them
420 forward.

Read more:

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/02/08/100208fa_fact_anderson?currentPage=all#ixzz0jBENMpxJ

POSTCARD FROM VERMONT

Batless

by Elizabeth Kolbert

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421 Bats have tiny bones. The radius, or forearm bone, of *Myotis lucifugus*, commonly
422 known as the little brown bat, is about an inch and a half long. Its circumference is
423 not much greater than that of a pine needle. At Aeolus Cave, in Vermont, the ground
424 is littered with bat bones. There are so many of them—thousands upon thousands—
425 that you can't take a step without crunching them underfoot.

426 The other day, Ryan Smith and Joel Flewelling, of the Vermont Fish and Wild life
427 Department, were standing on some bat bones in Aeolus, gazing at the ceiling. They
428 were accompanied by Susi von Oettingen, a biologist with the Fish and Wildlife
429 Service; David McDevitt, a representative of the Nature Conservancy, which owns
430 the cave; and Sebastian Frank, who is Smith's brother-in-law. Frank was filming the
431 trip for a local public-access TV channel. He said he didn't know when the film
432 would air, but he promised that it would be "long and arty."

433 Smith and Flewelling were running a bat census. When they found a cluster hanging
434 from the ceiling, they would count each bat and call out its species. By the light of
435 her headlamp, von Oettingen would record the results.

436 "Two lucis," Smith said, using the shorthand for *Myotis lucifugus*.

437 "Two lucis," von Oettingen repeated, writing the number down on an index card.

438 Set into a mountainside in the town of Dorset, Aeolus Cave used to be the largest bat
439 hibernaculum in New England. As recently as 2007, it was estimated that almost
440 three hundred thousand bats over-wintered there. Then white-nose syndrome, the

441 fungal disease that has laid waste to bat populations all across the Northeast, swept
442 through. By the winter of 2009, the population in the cave was plummeting so fast
443 that Vermont officials began to wonder if, by the end of the season, there would be
444 any bats left. They arranged to send corpses from Aeolus to the American Museum
445 of Natural History, so that at least there would be a record of the animals' genetic
446 makeup.

447 Smith and the rest of the group continued to work their way deeper into the cave.
448 Many of the bats hanging from the ceiling were dead, their toes still hooked to the
449 rock. They were dry and shrivelled, like little mummies. Smith skipped those in his
450 count. Von Oettingen gestured toward a crack in the rockface. Apparently, at one
451 point, there had been dozens of bats hibernating inside it. Now there was a layer of
452 black muck studded with toothpick-size bones. She recalled seeing, on an earlier visit
453 to the cave, a live bat trying to nuzzle a group of dead ones. "They're very social,
454 you know," she said. "It just broke my heart."

455 Since white nose was first discovered in a cave near Albany, New York, three years
456 ago, it has spread to ten other states. In that time, the fungus has acquired a scientific
457 name, *Geomyces destructans*, and
458 has been shown to be related to another fungus, *Geomyces pannorum*, which causes
459 skin infections in humans. It seems that bats can pick up white nose from other bats,
460 and also from the environment. But a great deal about the fungus remains unclear. It
461 is not known where it came from, or exactly how it kills bats, or even for sure
462 whether it does. (White nose could be an opportunistic infection that is a symptom of
463 some other disease.) Nor has anyone come up with a way to combat it. In many
464 hibernacula—the disease seems to afflict bats only during the winter—the mortality
465 rate has reached over ninety per cent. It is believed that white nose, or whatever
466 white nose is a sign of, has wiped out at least a million bats, and probably many
467 more.

468 Aeolus Cave has one main chamber, which is tall enough for a human to stand up in.
469 In an average winter, it used to shelter three thousand hibernating bats, and the count
470 took an hour. This time, the census was finished in twenty minutes.

471 "Let's head out," Smith said when he reached the chamber's back wall.

472 "That's it?" von Oettingen asked.

473 "That's it," Smith replied.

474 "There really is nothing else to count," von Oettingen agreed. She tallied up the
475 gures: eighty-eight *Myotis lucifugus*; one *Myotis septentrionalis*, commonly known
476 as a northern long-eared bat; three *Perimyotis sub.avus*, or tricolored bats; and
477 twenty bats of indeterminate species. The total came to a hundred and twelve.

478 "That's one-thirtieth of what we should have seen," she said. "You just can't keep up
479 with that kind of mortality."

480 Everyone filed out of the cave, over the tiny bones.