

# Because we cannot know

by LeeAnn Pickrell

Because we cannot know, we keep walking, keep getting up each morning, feeding the cat, drinking coffee. Because we cannot know I'm drinking coffee that morning in Thailand, not on the beach but just off, because there is only one spot where you can get real coffee, dark and rich, with what today is referred to as "chocolaty overtones" and coffee is more important to me than the beach. I was writing in my journal about the day before—a humid Christmas day—when my friend and I went to a bar in Ao Nang and drank cokes and ate Spanish peanuts. How sticky the afternoon was. Because we cannot know this is just another morning. No cat to feed because he is an ocean away. But coffee to drink. Just a day with its hours to fill. Like any other. Until the ocean leaves, draws so far back there is nothing left except fish without water. Because no one knows or remembers, we go to the beach, stand, watch. I don't have my camera. I never have my camera when it counts. I berate myself. I wonder if I have time to run and get it. Because we cannot know. We cannot know and so we walk toward the wall of white until the long-tail boats begin to flip. Until the water that seems to be moving so slowly seems to be rushing toward us. And what seemed so far away isn't. And then we ran.

The Moken knew. Not when the wave would come but that it would. And when it came, it would destroy everything in its path. They told the story of the wave that came. They passed it down, one generation to the next, one father to son, one mother to daughter. They knew when the wave was coming the ocean would go away first and the bays would empty. They knew when that happened to go to higher ground. They told the stories. They knew when the ocean went away, it was coming back.

We did not know. We ran to the beach to watch the ocean disappear, the bay empty. We stood and watched the ocean coming back. The wave getting bigger, rushing toward us. We took photographs.

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After the tsunami at Fukushima, the Japanese discovered stone tablets all along the coast, left hundreds of years ago to indicate the high-water marks of previous tsunamis. Inscriptions covered by centuries of progress that warned them never to build closer to the water again. "No matter how many years may pass, do not forget this warning."

