

An Imaginary Tent

A REFLECTION ON A RESIDENCY WITH THE MEDICAL FOUNDATION
FOR THE CARE OF THE VICTIMS OF TORTURE (NORTH EAST)

GILLIAN ALLNUTT

Alan has lent me *A l'abri de rien* by Olivier Adam. Listen to that sentence: it is all vowel and awkward. It leaves you open to the wind. 'A l'abri de' means 'sheltered, screened, from'. 'A l'abri de rien' is nothing. An imaginary tent.

It is a novel about an ordinary Frenchwoman and her encounter with the world of asylum seekers at Calais.

I used to be good at French. I want to bring it back to the tip of my tongue. I don't want to talk through an interpreter. I want to work one to one. Several of the people I work with are from French-speaking African countries: Guinea, Cameroon, The Democratic Republic of Congo. And so I read this novel, to make it come back. But it doesn't come.

Now I know what silence is in French and English. It can be a stone. It can be a black hole, shared. It can be a place you come to where you say: "I'm sorry, I don't know what to say."

And this in a land of mobile phones. Every asylum seeker has one, with or without calling-credit. I've learned, with them, to use my own.

I've never dared to come to this place before. It is oddly companionable. At moments I've been grateful for the lack of a common language, for the dream of a common language.

I've been unable to forget this for over 20 years. It is from the Preface to *La Douleur* by Marguerite Duras: "*La Douleur* is one of the most important things in my life. It can't really be called 'writing'. I found myself looking at pages regularly filled with small, calm, extraordinarily even handwriting. I found myself confronted with a tremendous chaos of thought and feeling that I couldn't bring myself to tamper with, and beside which literature was something of which I felt ashamed."

I've remembered this because for a long time I had no idea of how to feel ashamed of literature.

La Douleur is what Duras calls a diary. It is April, May 1945. The war is ending and the camps are being liberated as she waits in Paris for the return, or any word, of her husband Robert L., a deportee. He is close to death when friends find and fetch him back from Dachau and then the diary deals with the extraordinarily slow and delicate process of bringing him back to life.

La Douleur was first published in France in 1985.

What has held me to this text is its point blank refusal of heroism; its honesty – "I've never met a woman more cowardly than I am"; its simply not sparing itself the reality of the end and aftermath of the war – "For seventeen whole days that turd still looks the same. For seventeen days it's unlike anything ever known". It reminds me of Heinrich Böll's *The Silent Angel* – also first published (in Germany) in the 1980s.

The clients I work with know what Duras and Böll knew and what their books know still. We do not talk about it, write about it. Endlessly I wonder how we honour it. I think we do, but, if we do, it is so slow and delicate and indirect and quiet a thing we do.

Friends have found a solicitor who will put in a fresh claim for asylum for this once silent young woman. She asks me, she is asking as many people as possible, to write a letter in support of her claim. She takes the Medico-Legal Report (MLR) out of her bag and rushes off to the kitchen to make coffee.

In my hand, perhaps a dozen A4 pages, stapled. I've had the outline of the story from her counsellor, yet what I read now – abruptly chills.

I want to copy this report, I want to take it home, I want to study it as writing. It is set out in numbered, short paragraphs, one for each step of the story. It is literally a matter of fact. Only the facts are so dreadful, so dark. It's the contrast between the matter-of-factness of the writing and the facts themselves that strikes me. It is like a ballad. So much is unspoken, so much happens in the gaps.

The MLR is based on an interview undertaken and written up by a GP.

Chekhov was a doctor; also William Carlos Williams.

Around the same time, in October, I agree to give two six-minute talks as part of a Quaker Quest event. The subject of the evening is *The Spirit*: I pin it down in notes that take the form of numbered, short paragraphs. This happens by itself.

A composer has a soundworld: for example, "the soundworld of Sibelius".

There is something that comes into being with each of the people I work with. It is made of what is said and what is left unsaid.

"The rest is silence." Since Shakespeare, always, there has been a lot of that.

What doesn't come as information, fact or story, freely given, comes perhaps as tenor, tone.

I listen, always, for it.

I listen, as if I were blind, with the pores of my skin.

It is how I listen, try to, when I'm doing meditation.

"[...] and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason –". Which, of course, is Keats in a letter to his brothers of December 1817.

She has always had difficulty hearing. In Sierra Leone, she went to school with blind and deaf children.

We think about peace, one morning in December.

"If peace were something you could touch," I ask her, "what would it be?"

In her hand, an imaginary stone. With her other hand she shows the shape and undulation of it, strokes it.

"It would be a galloping stone," she says. "A blind person would feel with their hands the up and down of the stone. And up and down is galloping."

We'll call the book *The Galloping Stone*.

And what is it about?

It is, I think, about the heart; about the recollection of the body, tortured, in tranquillity. About what comes of that.

Thirteen ways of looking at peace in the order in which they turned up.

If peace were a bird.
It would be the swallow that migrates from Russia to winter in Iran.
It would be the wild duck.
If peace were a building.
It would be the grave of the son of the Prophet Muhammad in Abadan
where many soldiers slept during the war and no bullets came.
If peace were an animal.
It would be the lamb. "Hit him and go."
If peace were a mode of transport.
It would be a coffin.
If peace were a vegetable.
It would be fresh spinach eaten, after a glass of milk, for breakfast.
If peace were a colour.
It would be the green of the Prophet Muhammad's hat.
If peace were a tool.
It would be a needle with a very small eye.
If peace were a smell.
It would be that of jasmine around our house in Kut 'Abdollah.
If peace were a person.
It would be an old man, like my uncle, quietly spoken, able to impress
the people.
If peace were a memory.
It would be between four and six o'clock in the morning in my garden
when the sun rising gives me more and more confidence.
If peace were something about my house.
It would be the lotus tree in the yard in the heat of the afternoon
when small angels pelt me with the fruit.
If peace were made of cloth.
It would be the clean white clothes of the pilgrim who approaches God.
If peace were an instrument.
It would be an Arabic violin making night music for Suleyman.

I watch him write it out in Farsi where it becomes a wild bird that waits.

He talks about the *griots* whom he loved to listen to, reciting the history of the great families of the region, including his own. They would offer their services or you could invite them into your house for a party or wedding.

Griot. "A member of a class of travelling poets, musicians, and folk-historians in North and W. Africa; a praise-singer."

Genuine *griots*, he says, are from two families: Kouyaté and Diabaté.

I ask him to draw me the *kora*. It looks a bit like a theorbo. It sounds like a piano played underwater. It is beautiful. It has caught my ear on the radio and at the MF Centre in Newcastle where music plays much of the time. I buy a couple of CDs, more or less on spec, and discover

Toumani Diabaté.

I still listen to some things over and over – as I listened to *A Whiter Shade of Pale* so long ago. Sometimes I dance. Dancing alone can be the body's way of listening. There are tracks here on *The Mandé Variations* –

There is music I call “music for being taken down by”.

Some of my best poems.

But it doesn't really matter whether writing comes or not. The music takes me to a place in myself where knowing and feeling are the same.

It is *un embarras de richesses*.

My father is reading us *Little Grey Rabbit*. One of the pages is torn down the middle and half of it's gone. The right hand half of every line is gone. Regardless my father goes on reading and turning and reading. And now at the page he is reading as hard and as fast as he can. And now all the gone are gathering gathering; at the wire crowding; all over again. “Daddy, read it again.” Our piety gone. We can't stop laughing. We'll never settle down.

A Friday in March. She's walking me back to the road where I'll know where I am. We're crossing the derelict playing-fields. We'll pick up her son, on the way, from the school in Tilery Road.

Tilery. 'A place where tiles are made.'

Tilery. A nursery school, a name, a field of stones.

“She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression.”

But Mary Lennox, sallow difficult child, goes looking for the secret garden and finds it.

“‘How still it is!’ she whispered. ‘How still!’

“Then she waited a moment and listened at the stillness. The robin, who had flown to his tree-top, was still as all the rest. He did not even flutter his wings; he sat without stirring, and looked at Mary.”

In the beginning, months ago now, we talked about the difference between a diary for appointments and a diary where you can put down anything and everything.

I can only think of *The Diary of Anne Frank*: it is safely in the past, but it ends so unhappily. I consult with the counsellor and come away from our conversation thinking I'd better not.

I wait.

I listen at the stillness.

What alights is *The Secret Garden*. I go to Waterstone's and buy it. I discover, to my shame, my chagrin, that I've never read it. I must have seen it, serialised, on television.

In spite of the Raj and Mary's rude treatment of her Ayah in the first few pages, it turns out to be right.

What alights later is the Sisterbook. We both like that: the name unites us. In the Sisterbook she writes about *The Secret Garden* and what in her own life, past and present, it lets her think about.

The loss of her people.

The son here with her.

The street children in the cities of Uganda: “[...] they have no blankets to cover themselves,

never have a shower, no shoes on their feet, no proper dresses.”

That Friday in March it's almost light. It's raining. It's a quarter to seven in the morning and I'm picking snowdrops from my garden.

I wrap them in damp cotton wool and put them in a sandwich-box and put that in the bottom of my rucksack and take two buses to Middlesbrough.

I run a workshop with a writers' group all morning.

On the way back I get off the bus in Stockton. I walk to the edge of the town centre, past the house rented by Justice First where I usually meet and work with her, and cross an invisible line into a wasteland of factories and warehouses that were, demolished now, and a great gasometer. I go on past two bus-stops, as she told me, and right onto the long straight estate road where the houses are being emptied gradually. Green metal grids cover the doors and windows of houses where the people have already been moved out.

Though my body is alert and knows exactly what is happening all around it in the street, the world is empty, there is hardly anyone, the wind blows.

I open the sandwich-box and see the snowdrops have survived.

She claps her hands and exclaims: “Marry's garden! Marry's secret garden!” – her first Lugandan shaping, shortening, the vowel.

For a moment I'm taken aback. I hadn't even thought of that. Then I'm ashamed to know that, busily, I have let break in me the link between word and world.

She's given it back to me mended, whole.

What's literature?

I still believe that when I was a child it saved my life.

The Galloping Stone ed. Gillian Allnutt is available from www.newwritingnorth.com and the whole cover price of £5 goes to the Medical Foundation. Gillian Allnutt's *How the Bicycle Shone: New & Selected Poems* is published by Bloodaxe.

