

Musings about the poet, writing, life... (2)

From the Internet: 'According to Dr. Watts (who is Dr. Watts? – I tried to Google him and found far too many, even a dentist), optimism and hope aren't the same thing. Optimism is more a matter of prediction. Hope is more a matter of attitude," Dr. Watts tried to explain the difference between the two.'

I don't know about Dr. Watts, may he be a very happy man, but I am an optimist *and* full of hope. 'So why do you write so many sad poems?' Do I? Perhaps I do. Some. Every optimist full of hope must have dark corners in their soul that aren't jumping up and down with joy. Neither are optimism and hope the denial of the shadow side of life. We are living in one big shadow now. And you can, of course, either wring your hands and whine that 'nothing will ever be the same again' or know that we humans are infinitely adaptable and that, as always, we'll find a way out. If we live on water we'll learn to swim.

Optimism and hope don't exclude anger, and I am full of it. My whole life has been a struggle to see fairness applied in all things. When I was only little—we are talking around about six or seven—I often would take sides in the disputes of little kids with their teachers or with each other, and would argue the case of fairness, honesty and correctness. I learned to shut up some because in the end everybody made up, while I was left out in the cold as the troublemaker. As you can see, I am still smarting. Whoever sees the world with a loving heart and optimism and hope today is bound to not only be angry but frustrated to the rafters. So many truths out there and nobody listens. But now, here, is neither the place nor the moment to take this further.

Just saying.

Sometimes my poems reflect the part of me that won't shut up. But mostly I turn stuff over in my brain and my heart. For example my childhood, my parents, WWII, my travels, fairy tales and legends, the different cultures I absorbed, my life in London where a great number of my roots are still embedded, having been married there, having my children, and 'becoming' (to use Michelle Obama's book title—it's just right for me in this context).

And that brings us to a question a reader/writer friend asked me recently: "In how many countries have you lived, and does this influence your writing?" Of course it does. It must. That's the nature of the beast of going out into a road in which you've never been before, stepping on soil you don't recognize, drinking water that comes from rivers you have never seen, eating 'alien' food you never tasted before, being at a party where you just see smiling faces, hear sounds that come out of people's mouth, drinking and laughing and not understanding one joke, not one phrase, perhaps not even one word. It's shocking. And one day the pain stops. And on that day you are beginning to reinvent yourself—and that's a healthy thing. Your truths have shifted, your perception is other.

It is vital that at one stage (or more than one) of your life that *you* are the foreigner, the one who tries to integrate, the one who doesn't quite fit. Yet. The one they look at and wonder about. You

are the 'different' one. You'll be marked by that experience and will forever be welcoming and including, helpful and forgiving, understanding or trying to understand the alien creature who came from a different planet to yours for whatever reason.

They might be black, brown, pink, green or purple, and right now we aren't even talking about religion. Rabindranath Tagore is said to have said, "There are as many ways to God as there are people on this earth." Quite.

I have a relationship with the creator, and it's not even a woman. It's an energy made of pure, unconditional love. Thing is, on 26 December 2000—how could I ever forget that date—I was operated on a brain tumour of cosmic proportions. Big, in other words, but thankfully benign. Still, it was a major of which I don't remember all that much for obvious reasons. That was in Madrid.

One day I suffered tremendous headaches and high fever, and the doctors were looking for meningitis. One of them (I'll be forever in his debt because he didn't give up, he needed to find out what caused my symptoms) eventually found a monster of about three-and-a-half cm that made its presence felt after having grown for about 14 years without me knowing anything about it, not even headaches warning me of its presence.

Clearly the op was a success, or I wouldn't write these lines. But I did flatline there for a moment and in that time I met up with the creator. Or did I? It was a space filled with a soup of love that made it difficult to want to go back. But I knew I must. Floors below the operating area, in the cafeteria and in my hospital room were all my loved ones. I owed them.

This experience makes it easy not to fear death (about which I wonder in some of my poems) and simple to understand the creative love force of the universe without giving it names or rituals. It certainly doesn't include preaching, or religious wars, 'because my way is the only one'. Rabindranath got that one right.

Oh, yes... in how many countries did I live? Let's exclude those where I spent considerable time but was, by definition, a tourist.

The first one was Finland, where I stayed for about a year, supposedly cooking for my aunt. We both stood in the kitchen trying to get the gut out of herring I just bought at the market. We felt very clever when we realized we couldn't cook it as it was. We also tried to cut a chicken into pieces with rose secateurs. Mind you, we both learned a lot. In Finland I reinvented myself for the first time.

I had 'licked blood', and the next year saw me in Paris. I was a terrible au-pair and feel sorry for the family who had to suffer me. Since my mother always insisted on doing everything herself, I didn't even know that under the beds, if you didn't vacuum, accumulated something strange and fluffy and rather unpleasant looking. Being an only child, I had no idea what to do with a five-year old. And being selfish, I only wanted to be in Paris. Au-pairing was only an excuse, after all.

And in Paris I was, and what a wonderland it was. So many names of streets and place where I had travelled in books, via postcards, photos, illustrations, art... I did my literature final on Balzac, I followed in the footsteps of Paul Verlaine, Marcel Proust, Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, Victor Hugo and so many more, artists from other countries, who lived (and often died) in Paris in abject poverty but free in their creativity.

In Paris I wrote heartfelt, melancholic, poetic prose. I had to be home at night and felt the pulsating city doing her stuff without me... agonizing. All Parisian life was passing me by while I was babysitting in Louveciennes (Parisian suburb). Anaïs Nin lived there once.

I almost forgot what came next: Antwerp, where huge cargo ships and gigantic oil tankers crossed the roads in the harbour when the bridges were pulled up. My 'pension' was in the old part of town. Madame had—apart from the bar/restaurant/pension where I stayed in one of the cheaper rooms at the back—an haute couture business. It was rumoured that she had made her money while running a whorehouse in Paris during the War. She once was a model short and asked me at the last minute to fill the gap.

First shock was changing in one's undies in complete backstage chaos, with men milling, photographers snapping, girls bitching, and make-up being applied on the hop. It was the winter collection, and suits in those days were complicated affairs with buttons and waistcoats, gloves *de rigueur*. I did one round in one small show room (forget cat walks), about 50 elderly (or so they seemed) clients on delicate gilt chairs fingering the cloth of your garment as you went. One had to elegantly (and fast) pull off new kid gloves—well, trying to—in order to unbutton the jacket to show the lining... it's a bit of a haze, even now. I did one round, panicked, dressed and disappeared, palpitating. That was the beginning and end of my career as a model. Madame never quite forgave me.

There must be a poem lurking here somewhere.

Watch this space. More to come 😊