

WRITING EVACUEES

As a Team Manager for Adult Services, in July 2006 I wrote in my journal: *'I've had a week working with 36 Lebanese evacuees, now in a Loughborough hotel. It's been painful, exhilarating, exhausting, and I worry about what's coming next for them, feel responsible for them, being ripped from the land they love to here, safety but uncertainty. I'm responsible for treating them as humanely as I can, wanting it right for them, but admitting at the end of this week, really making it right for them remains outside my power. So to continue to do the best I can remains the task, the challenge. To remain human I suppose. To respond, be equal, to their humanity.'*

I felt driven to write a poem about them, but struggled with whether I was misappropriating their privacy by attempting to turn the unsayable into poetry. I found out more about 'ghazals' (see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghazal>; www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5781), a Persian form of poetry using couplets and repetition. I realized each couplet might give voice to the people I'd met, letting them speak for themselves: a sense of people talking to me, trying to express how they felt about the war, their homeland, being evacuated.

In giving them a voice I hoped to unloose their phrases from my head, to set them free onto the page. Writing their words meant I no longer needed to carry them, although it was a burden I'd been changed by, far outside my usual scope. I could tell their stories in the poem and, by doing so, both honour them and give myself some relief from an inspiring, disorientating, absorbing experience that I was only beginning to understand.

EVACUEES

Add these to all the other voices:

Rima says *We're here, but our souls are in Lebanon.*

The night we took them to the rough bed and breakfast
Bassima said *I am proud. I will walk the streets with my children.*

Minu says *When a door slams
we hear the bombs again.*

Nouha says *I won't look ahead. In Lebanon we say
you can only eat a bunch of grapes one grape at a time.*

Six years old, handing me a George the Fifth penny
Zacharia said *I found this in the grass.*

Yahia says *It aches along my jaw,
round my ear. I grit my teeth in my sleep.*

Salma says *Lebanon is full of rivers.
When it's over we'll take you there.*

Leaving to try his luck in London
Hilal said *In Lebanon we kiss three times.*

First published in *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development* by Gillie Bolton (Sage, London, 2014)

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