

Other Echoes

Adèle Geras

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About the Book

Last night I dreamed I was in another room. Shreds of the dream are still with me . . .

Flora is convalescing in her English boarding school's grey sanatorium. To while away the hours, she begins writing down the story of the time when she lived in the tropical paradise of North Borneo.

She uncovers memories of a place where brilliant flowers and exotic, poisonous creatures were at first her main concern. But that was before she discovered the empty house on the hill, and learned the truth about the tragic wartime events that affected the whole community.

A magical, evocative novel that will transport you to a landscape of vibrant colours and scents.

OTHER ECHOES

Adèle Geras



RHCP DIGITAL

To Norm

* *

' . . . Other echoes
Inhabit the garden.
Shall we follow?'

*From 'Burnt Norton' by T.S. Eliot
(Four Quartets)*



This room is almost completely white. The curtains and the bedspread are blue, the linoleum is brown, but apart from that, everything is white, from Sister's starched coat (which would probably creak if she ever sat down) to the little button on the bedside lamp. It's not what you might call a riot of colour outside the window, either. Grey-green grass, grey sea, grey-white clouds thick over the whole sky. Grey. November.

Last night I dreamed I was in another room. Shreds of the dream are still with me although I have been awake for some time, and for a while after I woke up, I couldn't remember where I had seen such a room: high and dark, with the sun sloping through the slats of shutters on to a polished floor. Near the ceiling, the fan turns and turns, stirring up the air, heavy with heat, clicking and whirring its black blades. The room is full of echoes (is it empty?), and there are no ornaments and no carpets, only one photograph in a frame standing on a table near an oil lamp, which has a pattern of ivy leaves cut into the cloudy glass. A man's voice is singing, far away, and piano music runs rippling like water over stones. In the few seconds between sleeping and waking, I heard the words of the song, but they are gone now, leaving hazy images, flashes, feelings in my mind of things I cannot completely capture or describe: a sense of spring, and sadness, and unrequited love, dissolving pictures of small flowers growing beside a stream, of a girl with long hair combing it out in the sunlight, and of a mill-wheel turning. A voice in my head

spoke suddenly, and so clearly that I began to turn my head to see who was talking. Of course, there was no one in my little white room, but I remembered the voice. I recognized it. It came from the dream, or from somewhere in my memory, or from the memory of the dream. But what words were spoken? The words have faded, but I knew the room then. I remembered it all.

Perpetual rest is exhausting. Sister brings me restful things to do.

‘Here’s a jigsaw for you, dear,’ she said yesterday, and the watch that hangs from a ribbon pinned to her stiff bosom bounced about as she put the box on my table. ‘A lovely picture of the countryside. Just the ticket.’

There are over five hundred pieces, and most of them are blue. Those that are not blue are mostly green. How am I supposed even to begin? And is it worth the effort of finding how they all fit together when I don’t even like the picture? I hate jigsaws, I’ve decided. The result is generally hideous, and anyway beyond my control, and how to achieve a result is beyond my intelligence.

It would be pleasant to be going into a decline. A wasting disease would be very romantic, but alas, I am only tired. They call it nervous exhaustion. The entrance exams for university have taken it out of me. (Taken what?) I should probably still be in school with the others, killing time till the end of term, the end of my schooldays, quite possible the end of my childhood, had I not fainted (dramatically, and, I like to think, elegantly) in the middle of Mozart’s ‘Ave Verum’ in chapel on Sunday.

So now I am resting in the Sanatorium. The San, which is what everyone else calls it, evokes Malory Towers and other fictional boarding-schools, so I prefer to give it its full

title, and imagine that it is an establishment for tubercular poets set high in the Swiss Alps. It is a square, grey building, like a young child's pencil drawing of a house: triangle of roof, square windows set one above the other, rectangular door in the centre. The Sanatorium is five minutes walk from the Main School, along the gravel path, past the Nissen huts and the hockey pitches, past the tennis courts and the gardening sheds, the last outpost of the school empire.

* * *

The Head brought some embroidery silks and a tray cloth patterned with flowers. A present from my friends. She doesn't look like a Head. Her fingernails are red, her suits tweedy but stylish, and her hair is short and of that particular shade of grey that says to the observer 'I am chic' rather than 'I am old'. Where are the hearty, frumpish, bunned and gowned schoolmarms of my Enid Blyton days?

The Head said: 'Embroidery is very relaxing I believe.'

I said: 'Thank you very much.'

Thank you, indeed! Maybe it was Kaye's idea of a joke. Maybe Miss Travis had suggested it and they didn't dare tell her. Maybe they really don't know how hopeless I am with such things. Maybe no one but me has any idea of how grubby, tangled and generally disgusting that tray cloth will look the minute I slip the shiny black paper bracelet off the first tidy little skein, thread my needle and make the first, tentative stab into the linen. And I probably will start on it. I always start, because before the beginning, an Ideal Tray Cloth hovers in my imagination: pearly satin stitch, perfect cross-stitches like rows and rows of tiny stars, all in shimmering rainbow colours, and the back almost indistinguishable from the front - my own work. After a few hours I will remember I cannot embroider. The tray cloth

will end up thrust into the depths of my workbag, to lie forever in the company of half-done bits of tapestry and a sad little piece of something or other that I was once sure I was going to knit. Still, unlike the jigsaw, you never know. Perhaps this tray cloth will be the one, the one that comes out right in the end. You never know.

When Miss O'Neill came to see me, I asked her for paper. Lots of it. She returned the same afternoon with three fat exercise books.

'I've brought you these,' she said, smiling. 'I hope they'll do. Whatever are they for? I'm sure you're not supposed to be writing, taxing your brain. What will Sister say?'

'I won't be doing any work, I promise. Just writing.'

'A story? Poems?'

I thought about this.

'Memoirs,' I said.

Miss O'Neill laughed.

'At your age?'

'Memories, then.'

'That's something else again, memories. Memories of anything in particular?'

'No,' I said, 'nothing in particular. I shall just start, and see what happens.'

I was lying of course. Blank pages give you the illusion that they are empty, that anything can happen, any wonder, fable, adventure, romance that you care to invent can be put down; but it is not so. There is always something there, waiting to be written, and ever since the dream, the dream about the room, I have known what it is I want to say.

* * *

Chris, or Vinnie or Steve, would tell a different story, perhaps, but this one is mine, and I shall tell it as truthfully

as I can. I have been thinking about it. I remember many things. Sometimes, I can see whole scenes in my head, unrolling like sequences from a film; but eight years have passed since those days, and maybe it was not all as I remember.

When I think of the story I am about to tell, it seems that the bits and pieces floating about in my mind resemble the interlocking chips of wood in Sister's jigsaw. Some are easily fitted together, others I will have to move around to see where they fit in, and still others are lying face down, so that I cannot see what is on them, nor where they might be placed. Perhaps I will turn them over as I write, and then they, too, will have to be found a place in the pattern. But the whole, the pattern, the beginning, middle and end, are all there. It's not like making a patchwork, where you are free to select this design, this fabric, this contrast. Nor is it like a mosaic, where you can choose the colours and the order of the colours and make decisions about what the picture will be like. I have to find the pieces and move them around until they fit. The picture is already there.

I have hardly thought about Borneo at all for years. I have a few ornaments that have survived the twice-yearly burial in a roll of regulation school socks in the top of my trunk: a little turquoise-blue china horse rearing up, almost airborne; a statuette of an old fisherman holding a yellow fish; and a small sandalwood box with a curly, spiralling dragon carved on the lid. I don't notice these things on my chest-of-drawers any more. I never even look at them. They're there, that's all. I will look at them again when I leave here.

