

# SALT

A series of works by Jo Garbutt

# Salt March

*"The Salt March - or 'Dandi Satyagraha' - was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in colonial India led by Gandhi after British officials introduced taxation on salt production and deemed sea-salt reclamation activities illegal. The 24-day march began from 12 March 1930 and continued until 6 April 1930 as a direct action campaign that was to give impetus to the Indian independence movement and allow women to play a more prominent role in the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement."*

So many years  
we scraped the salt.  
Sun - dried crusted layers  
heap on heap, borne from  
this small inlet of the vast  
Arabian sea.

Down on the shore,  
Where the waves break softly  
We harvest the brine  
Sea green, heavy with salt

A line  
long, languid,  
wandered from the waves  
Heads high, hands stretched  
up to steady  
jars of clay.

We walked to covered cottes  
Men lifted loads from our  
heads

then back to the shoreline,  
pausing

to watch dolphins leaping the  
waves  
waders foraging shrimps in the  
reeds  
and the spiny shells of sea  
urchins  
littering the shore.  
Troops came and scattered us,  
Shots and shouts  
Salt spilt on the ground  
Crocks of white crystals  
Cracked shards on salt-  
powdered  
Sands  
Time  
slipped through their hands

How can our Indian salt be  
theirs -

- Salt? seized from the sea  
dwellers?

They have their sea

Their island fortress

Their Brittania...

We raged beside the quiet  
waves -

Until a modest hero with a  
different band of men  
invited us to march, to  
struggle, to stand proud  
to recognise our rights,  
our womanhood.

That was just the beginning...

# A Place of Safety

She's lying there, she's  
lying  
alone on the shore  
One tiny foot thrust out  
beneath the shingle  
beneath the seaweed  
on the stones.

And I bend down  
Weeping  
I clutch my stomach  
a screaming silent pain  
And she's lying cold ...  
cold

We nearly reached the shore.  
We saw the beginning,  
the shape of an island.  
The motor braved rough  
and rolling waves,  
Water in the bows of the  
boat,  
Bags rolling, a baby slips  
from her mother's lap  
But we so nearly got there  
And then a wave

A gust of wind  
A wall of water  
And as we neared the shore  
The boat rolled, rolled like  
a...  
Like a ...??  
Rolled and dipped  
Salt stings my eyes  
The roar of the sea over my  
head

I look to my wife ... I grab  
her hand  
She is crying  
Talia Talia where are you  
Talia  
No sign no sound  
We look to the waves  
Under the water  
We scream  
Around us, all around us  
There is a crying and a  
calling

Now  
Now there she is  
Lying  
Half-hidden beneath the seaweed  
Beneath the shingle  
And I can't do... I  
What can I do?  
I can't  
I

Her mother keens and calls and cries  
clutches, clutches herself

My baby my baby

She reaches out

She reaches to touch the baby's hair  
tangled  
and matted and  
already stiff  
with salt.

## Salt in Winter (excerpt)

*This is an abridged excerpt from a work-in-progress, (working title "Salt in Winter") a novelistic biography of Henry Smith, sixteenth century philanthropist and salt merchant. Here, Henry Smith looks back at his father's life and the disaster that would eventually provide a catalyst towards his own success.*

I remember a great house... my uncle's house, my father told me, as we trudged up the avenue beside the cart. Combe Manor in Gloucestershire, countryseat of Sir Thomas Smith, wool merchant and one-time servant to King Henry himself. At this my mother tossed her head and declared that she would be glad to get down from this ramshackle conveyance, whatever the place or the company.

My father was jovial that evening; it was the last time I would see him like that. We sat late over venison, good red wine glowing in Venetian glasses... a great salt casket on the table, my face mirrored slipways in the gleaming silver.

Uncle Thomas was most convivial. He became animated as the evening went on, flattering my father, pressing him to more

wine, more food. It was all too apparent that father was in awe of Sir Thomas and Lady Katherine. I suppose he never felt himself to be their equal. And that night, although I was still a youth, I was aware of his eagerness to please and of my Uncle's condescension, the tone of his remarks.

I remember I grew hot, discomfited as my father's eyes moistened and his speech slurred, and he began to boast about his success, his boat, his new refinery on the Essex marshes... his plans to turn bay salt into good white table salt for the housewives of London town. And Thomas Smith selected a cut of meat with his knife and smiled as he handed it across the table

'Salt has been good to you, brother,' he said.

It was all exaggeration of course – I can see Thomas now, that smirk on his face, feeding my father's fantasies, spurring him on... whilst all the time he knew... he *knew*...

The next day a courier arrived with a letter, the news of gales across the east coast, heavy storms. There was whispering in the

passages, and at the household prayers my mother's face was white, her eyes down, whilst father looked somehow diminished ... and suddenly old. The visit was foreshortened; we seemed to be leaving in haste, without ceremony or prolonged farewells. On the way home, I learnt that gales had swamped the shore where father's salt- pans lay, that the brine had been washed out by the ocean, and every basket of salt destroyed.

I wonder now what it must have been like for him, as storms swept his dreams away with the salt pans ... all that beautiful salt, stacked in the panniers, brought to the markets in London, salting the fish, salting the meat, salting the bread. Poor father, it destroyed him. He didn't last long after that. Salt - his pathway to success - became the route to his downfall.

Once my father was dead, we had no place to call our own. The bailiffs took it all. And the next visit to Combe came after weeks of petitioning. Weeks when Sir Thomas was silent, impervious, it seems, to my mother's pleas. I think my Uncle Richard might



have persuaded him to do something for us, not that he ever acknowledged it ... perhaps it was my cousin Griselda... I don't know. Anyway, once my mother was admitted to Sir Thomas's household we were relegated to the lower orders – not amongst the more menial servants but still below the salt.

# Yarls Wood

*More than 1,500 women who are seeking asylum in the UK are locked up in immigration detention centres every year, often for indefinite periods and without knowing when they will be released.*

Yarlswood ... I realise now that I was expecting to see guard dogs

- great grinning Alsatians, teeth bared – and heavily armed

officers. But on first impressions the place wasn't too bad.

I left the office early in the morning and drove down with Sally,

finding the way without too much trouble, in spite of Harry's

warning that it was behind an industrial estate in the middle of

nowhere. That was certainly true, the middle of nowhere bit, miles

of pleasant countryside then warehouses and office blocks rising

like some random ocean liner on a sea of green fields.

The only thing that distinguished the detention centre from the other buildings was a high barbed wire fence. Actually, now I think about it, it also stood out as irredeemably drab. Brown blinds, brown doors, what was so wrong with a bit of colour here and there?

We had nearly an hour's wait before we were subjected to fingerprinting, photos, searches... finally we were taken through security to the visitors' lounge.

Nesima was sitting at a table, waiting for us. There were only two days to go before her deportation, and we were afraid that she might be hysterical. But she was curiously undisturbed, insisting that God would make it impossible for UKBA to take her out of the country, that she would somehow be released at the last minute. This was a little worrying, but we suggested –tentatively– that God could look after her back in Lagos, that there were people we could contact, the Red Cross might help, a pastor in Manchester had a brother in one of the churches there ...

She gazed at us reproachfully, her large brown eyes widening at the thought that we might not have the faith to believe in her release.

I asked one of the officers about Nesima's travel details, explaining that we wanted to arrange for her to be met at the other end.

'We can't divulge that at this present moment in time.'

'Could we call you perhaps?'

'We won't have those details. The plane does not fly direct.'

'Do you know the route then?'

'We are unable to release that information.'

And now, back in my flat, one day to go before the plane leaves, I pull my dressing gown tighter, hug my arms that won't get warm, try to fight the voice in my head,

'Did you do enough?'

I did what I could

'There's always more...'

There's only so much one person can do

'Perhaps you should have taken more care of her ... called her more often ...'

Oh come on, she had a care worker – besides, she said I was like a mother...

‘She said that about a few people’

I put my mug down and walk into the hall where I stare into the mirror.

I went to that decrepit high rise in Ardwick and met her when she had nowhere to go.

‘But you didn’t trust her, did you?’

No, I didn’t.

‘Only there must have been something about her ... .you agreed to help ...’

Whaddya mean ‘something about her,’ she’s a human being for God’s sake ...

I stick my tongue out at the face in the mirror.

Listen - when I first met her and she showed me the broom cupboard she’d slept in for weeks and I looked into the anxious face of her friend who had next to nothing for herself and was so

sorry that she couldn't help anymore because her landlord was suspicious and might throw her out and I noticed that Nesima was not angry about this but actually grateful for the help she'd received, well then I suppose ... yes ... I felt there was something about her... and now she's probably at Heathrow already. Is she still expecting God to show up? What will she do once the truth finally dawns?

I stop, out of breath. Somewhere there's music, I've left the radio on ...it must have been on all the time, but now I listen, properly aware. Of course, I've sung this ... was it last year or the year before? I grab my mug of tea and trail upstairs, listening to the sad quiet melody of an old spiritual song,

‘Deep river, my home is over Jordan,’

I remember now, I remember finding it hard to get through, particularly when we got to

‘Oh chillun, don't you want to go, to that gospel feast

That promised land, the land where all is peace.’

I sink onto the bed. They sing the sorrows of the world ...

thousands upon thousands of half -naked brown bodies toiling in the sun, flinching from the whips of the masters, grieving for the ones who never reached the shores, tightly packed in stinking ships whilst white men held handkerchiefs to their faces and turned away in disgust. Filthy blacks, sell them on, march them off, strike them down ...

But still they will sing! Exhausted faces turning to the sun as it sets over a thousand skies, determined voices raised in an almost inconceivable hope and in a hundred years, two hundred even, when they ask for your help, when they've crossed the sea again in sheer desperation what will you do?

Oh Nesima ... Nesima ... I'd give my life for you.

And I'm raging inside, a silent scream of pain for all the Nesimas, the Isabelles, the Eijatus, the Abduls ...

Produced to coincide with Ruth Barker and Hannah Leighton-Boyce's exhibition at Castlefield Gallery from 9 March – 29 April 2018.

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