

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lov**ereading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Painter of Silence

Written by Georgina Harding

Published by Bloomsbury

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lov**ereading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PAINTER OF
SILENCE

GEORGINA HARDING

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

First published in Great Britain 2012
This paperback edition published 2012

Copyright © 2012 by Georgina Harding

The moral right of the author has been asserted

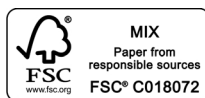
Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 3042 0

Typeset by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.bloomsbury.com/georginaharding

Augustin

Though he has seen photographs of cities he has never been in one before. In the dusk as the train came in it looked monochrome as the photos: black smears of road, grey walls, grey buildings angled across the sides of hills. The buildings appeared singly at first then massed, most of them solid but some hollow so that he could see through them to the sky as it darkened. Between the buildings there were the bare outlines of trees – still there were trees – but the forest was gone. He had been sitting with his back to the engine so he had had a sense of the landscape receding rather than of the city approaching. He had seen the land become forest, and then the forest became city, and then he closed his eyes. That way he could keep the land with him for longer. He held the memory of that land in his mind and he pictured himself disappearing into it, vertically, not moving his limbs but only standing like a post, sinking down into some long brown fold between the tracks and the wide horizon.

He had known all along that the train would not be stopping there. In land like that trains do not stop. They only pass through pouring out clouds in ribbons above them.

He has taken this train because this is where he means to come, to this city.

He does not open his eyes again until the last of the other passengers has gone. The carriage is quite different now, devoid of motion, a hollow space filled with stale grey air. He looks about him at the floor littered by the journey, the bottle stilled at last that had for so long rolled back and forth beside his feet. The emptiness seems etched with a grime that matches that on his fingertips. He rubs the length of each thin hand on the rough cloth of his trousers but that does not make them any cleaner.

There are two objects left on the rack above his head: his rolled-up coat and a small bundle. With an effort he draws himself up, reaches for the coat and puts it on, knotting the belt where it is far too big for his slight figure, then takes down the bundle. He starts to go. Stoops a second before the next row of seats and picks up a crumpled paper from the floor. It is a label from a packet of biscuits, a scrap of waxed paper printed in yellow. A sunflower, a ring of petals, bright yellow lettering. He pauses to smooth the paper out, to fold it precisely into half and half again and put it in his trouser pocket. Then he goes on to the open door, down the steep steps to the platform.

So many people there are in the world. The tracks run together line upon line and people pick their way across the lines or huddle on narrow platforms where they divide. There are many people going different ways. The

passengers from his train, spilling away along the platform. Others coming from the opposite direction, where the train on the next line stands with steam building ready to leave.

There is a great hall. Its roof is so high that the people seem small and dark and animal within it.

There are soldiers breaking through the crowd, running. He shrinks back beside a kiosk. The soldiers must be running after someone. No, they are running after the steaming train. The person they are after must be on the train – or perhaps, possibly, it is the train itself that they must catch. They jump on. The last one is pulled up by the arms and they are gone. They are not the kind of soldiers he is used to. It is some years since he has seen such uniforms. He is glad when they are gone because he does not like the images they brought back to mind.

He goes out from under the roof. The smell of the city is sooty and bitter as that of the station. There is a dark height of sky but no stars, and the people split off in different directions. He selects a street at random, walking along at the side of it with his shoulder close to the walls. Sometimes the walls break down into rubble and he hunches lower and feels an urge to scuttle across the space. He comes to a crossing, a street that goes up a hill. Though he is beginning to wheeze with the effort, some instinct makes him choose to climb. He comes to a monumental flight of steps, starts up one step at a time. Halfway he stops to rest. No people here. He drops his bundle and sits, hollow with fatigue, holding with one hand the cold stone of the balustrade.

A cough rises in him. He tries not to cough because he knows that it will hurt. After he has tried to hold it down the cough when it comes hacks at him all the more.

He stands again, bending slowly back down for his bundle. When he reaches the top of the steps he is still in the city. If anything he seems to be deeper into it since the buildings are larger and more imposing, the air as coarse, the stars as hidden. Streets fan out before him. Once more he selects the one that continues most to rise, as if in climbing he will find more to breathe. And here he seems to be right in his choice. This way there are big buildings but clear spaces between them, openings for cars to be parked or people to walk, grass and sometimes trees. It is good to step on to the softness of turf, on to rotted layers of another year's leaves. He finds a bench and lays himself down with the bundle beneath his head. Tomorrow he will start his search. When it is light he will write out her name and get one of all those people to show him where he might find her. He pulls his coat tight about him. He does not so much sleep as fall into a suspended state, body and breathing slowing, time fading, like a small creature chilling for hibernation, the chill broken at points through the night by fits of coughing that come with an internal searing heat but make his outer body shiver.

Consciousness returns with the dawn, with a vague yellow streak in the sky that his eyes catch like a hope.

With deliberate effort, as if it were some object apart from himself, he lifts his body to an upright position on

the bench. Just as he does so a girl walks before him. The girl wears a dark coat, a nurse's white cap. She appears to look his way for just a second as he moves. He has only a glimpse of her but he retains the image: a glow to her, the long eyes of an angel.

Is she real? If she is real, then did she not see him? He has the feeling that she did not so much as see him. If she had seen him her eyes would have shown it somehow. She might have come to him with care in her eyes, lips moving. Or she might, seeing him, have run away. Perhaps nobody in this city can see him. Perhaps he can no longer be seen. Perhaps that is what this numbness is, that spreads right across his body and into his brain.

A thread of determination pulls him to his feet. His coat is sodden with dew. Such a weight of dew. The coat was always too big and now it is too heavy. He unties the belt, shrugs it off him. It is so stiff with the wet that it sits up on the ground like some half-melted figure of wax. He feels light without its load. He does not attempt to pick up his bundle but leaves it there on the bench. Eyes to the ground, arms across himself, he shuffles the way the angel has gone.

They find him on the steps of the hospital just as the nurses are coming in on their morning shift. It is clear by the dampness of him that he has spent the night out but it might be anyone's guess how many previous nights he has spent outdoors. Certainly it does not appear, from the state of him, that he has lived a settled life or even fed regularly

for a long time. He is frail as a fallen bird. Did somebody bring him or did he find his own way? In these days it is best not to question such things. However the poor man has got here, he has come just in time.

The first few days they do not even attempt to ask him who he is. For most of those days he is either unconscious or so feverish that they cannot expect to get sense out of him. In his delirium he moans and cries out with strange animal cries, covering taut eyes with hands that seem too big, out of proportion with his emaciated body, scrabbling bone fingers across the sheets. But then the fever passes. His horrors appear to abate and give way to vacancy. The nurses come to his bed and see his eyes open and calmly staring beyond them, where there is no more to see than the cracks in the paint on the ceiling or the motes in the sunlight. Good morning, they say, or how are you today, but his eyes do not budge, as if the ceiling or the motes were of more interest than they themselves. You're looking better now. You were in a bad way when you came in. It was touch and go there. We were afraid for you. But he does not appear to care, does not so much as shift his stare towards them. Where's your family? Is there someone we can contact?

His clothes were burned because of the lice in them. All that he has left are the boots he was wearing, holed, broken-laced, the leather worn with his history or possibly the history of some other man who had them before him. They look as if they were good military boots once but this man does not look like a soldier. He carried nothing else

that could tell them anything about him but only a number of pieces of paper folded into a trouser pocket.

It was the ward sister Adriana who supervised his admission. When she found the papers they were so neatly folded and bundled that she thought at first that they must have some value, as if they were money or letters. But when she opened them she saw that they were nothing – no more than old tickets and labels and torn scraps – so she threw them away. In the other trouser pocket she found an acorn and a purulent rag that he had used for a handkerchief. That, too, was nicely folded, even though it was gummed together with phlegm. The handkerchief was the first thing to go into the incinerator. The acorn she put down on to the duty desk.

Adriana had completed the details on his admission form as best she could. Name: unknown. Address: unknown. Comments: carries no identification documents. No possessions, not even a coat. Date of birth? Hard to tell when a man was in his condition, but a young man still. By the things in his pockets she would think him only a boy. She rolled the acorn beneath her fingers. Recalled the pockets of her son's trousers when he was eight or ten: how when she did the washing she would turn the pockets out, the intimacy of the action like feeling into a burrow; and then if there was anything that mattered she would put it down beside the rest of the laundry and try not to forget to give it back.

* * *

Adriana stops beside his bed when she passes on her round. He is asleep, wheezing softly but breathing better than he has in days. Or perhaps he is not asleep, or he has been woken by her presence so close by. He opens his eyes and looks at her.

‘Can you tell me your name?’

‘Do you have a mother somewhere?’

‘Don’t you think you could eat a spot of lunch today?’

By the look in his eyes she thinks that he understands yet he makes no attempt to speak. He seems to watch and yet his lips are clamped tight as if they were only painted on his face.

This man will be about the age of her son. She has seen his body as once she used to see her son’s, every inch of it. Two of them had washed him after he came in, when she was showing a student nurse how to wash a man. They had shaved him and disinfected him of lice. Then with soap and water they had gently sponged his neck, his chest, his back, his crotch, his frail limbs one by one, as if he were a baby or a corpse. His thinness was pitiful. There were sores and bruises on him, but these were superficial marks that would heal before long and disappear. Nowhere on his body was there a scar. She had noticed that. That has been a rare thing for her, in her profession, to see a young man who has got through all of the war and these years after without one scar.

If she had time, she thinks, if there were not so many here demanding her attention, she would sit on the bed by his feet and talk to him a while so that he got used to her voice, and give him time to talk to her.

‘Tell me if you need anything, won’t you? I’ll be back later.’

At least she has made the offer but he is quite motionless. She cannot picture him asking for anything.

She puts her hand on to his. Really he is like a boy there, huddled on his side as they had laid him in the narrow bed.

When it is her night shift Adriana sits at her desk and knits. There is enough light to knit by but no more. Sometimes when she comes into this ward at night she feels that the air is heavy with diseased breath, as if it is the sick themselves who are the source of darkness; as if that is what they exhale when they cough and even when they lie still, the dark exhaust from used bodies. Sometimes there are patients who die in the night, quietly, their souls slipping away in the darkness with their breath. She finds them after dawn. Thin light penetrates through the half-curtained windows, and the atmosphere in the ward seems to thin with it like an escaping mist, and she finds a body laid out with a face pale as paper.

This night the stillness has been broken by the young man’s nightmares. Every now and then she feels she must go to him. She puts down her wool and needles and goes to calm him with soothing words and with a cool touch on his brow that seems to soothe better than any words. The cries he makes in his sleep sound to her like moans from a time before speech. They resemble no language that she can understand.

An idea comes to her.

* * *