FLANDERS LITERATURE

Tell Someone

Rachida Lamrabet

An extract pp 186-199

Original title	Vertel het iemand	**Translation**	Dutch into English
Publisher	Polis, 2018	**Translator**	Laura Vroomen

p 186-190

The first morning after our arrival in Crouy, the commander addressed us at roll call. He was flanked by Officer Lamare, whom we thoroughly detested by now. We called him 'Officer Al-mawt', Officer Death.

Colonel Djinn was with them too. The commander made a rushed, agitated impression, as if he was sorry for the momentary suspension of hostilities. Our regiment had arrived when everybody was licking their wounds. The dead had been removed from the battlefield and buried, and now the survivors on either side had dug themselves in, as though they were getting a head start on what was in store for them by crawling into the ground themselves.

For now, nobody did anything.

The battle for the rivers had ended and word on our side was that it had been a resounding victory over the enemy, even though that enemy was still here. A few hundred metres away, still on French soil. It was a peculiar situation, in which war did not look like war and a victory was not actually one.

The soldiers who had been here for a while were scared to death that someone might get it into his head to fire a shot or throw a grenade and thus unleash hell once more, and so everybody lay low in the hope that the colonels and commanders would not become overconfident again and order the troops to advance, out of the trenches and into the open field, straight into the deadly crosshairs of the relentless and ruthless German machine guns.

We heard gruesome stories about the monstrous contraption. It tore apart row upon row of men. They dropped like flies, hundreds of soldiers at a time, without the man on the other side, operating the gun on his own, as much as getting cramp in his arms.

It was obvious that the Germans were far more advanced as far as weaponry was concerned, and all the French could offer in exchange were we, men from Africa. But we had no skin of steel, we were made of weak flesh. We could not stop a hail of bullets with our bodies, despite carrying amulets with verses from the Koran.

A young Algerian, Marzouk, showed us around in the camp. It was through him that we found out what had been going down on the battlefield in recent weeks. He told us that a regiment of Moroccan *goumiers* had arrived three weeks earlier, three hundred fearless men, who were sent straight from the ship to the battlefield. They were expecting an honest fight, man to man, and were unafraid. But they never clapped eyes on anyone. With their bayonets and horses they had to take on a hail of bullets from machine guns. They did not have a chance in hell.

The Algerians, French and Senegalese who had been in the camp for some time knew how the enemy fought. They could not protect themselves any better, but at least they knew what to expect.

The new Moroccans charged without looking up. Those who were not shot to shreds remained behind in a daze and not an inch of ground was regained.

'It's not the shooting and fighting that's the problem,' Marzouk said. 'The problem is the arms and torsos we have to retrieve from the battlefield afterwards and dump in a hole before carrying on as if everything's just fine.'

Marzouk took us to a room that had been set up as a mess. He greeted a man who sat smoking at one of the tables. The man gave a curt nod in return. We sat down at another table.

'He's one of the few survivors of the regiment of the Tunisians. He was lucky. After drawing lots half of his regiment were brought before the firing squad because they refused to follow in the Moroccans' footsteps. They didn't want to be shot to shreds by an invisible enemy so then the French shot them. An order is an order here, even if it pushes you to a pointless death.'

His stories made me sick. A'mmar prodded me in the ribs. 'Stop staring at that poor man.' But I could not keep my eyes off the Tunisian.

Marzouk offered us tobacco. We thanked him and accepted the tobacco. 'You're welcome. I've been getting more pay because I've dispatched at least 99 Germans.'

I was shocked, but could not tell whether he was serious or just joking.

'You're a lost soul,' A'mmar said. 'Nothing can save you from hell.'

Marzouk laughed. 'Bring it on. It can't be any worse than this.'

I said that salvation is always possible for those who repent. It reminded me of a story Abdelaziz had told me at the mosque, in a previous life it seemed, about a man who had also murdered 99 people.

I asked if they were familiar with that story.

Marzouk pulled out a pack of rolling papers and said he only knew his own story. He rolled his cigarette and muttered that that was tough enough in itself.

I told the story of the man who had killed 98 people, but repented and sought out a scholar to ask if he could be saved. The scholar was clear. For someone who had murdered 98 people, salvation was not an option. Thereupon the man drew his sword and killed the scholar.

Marzouk licked his cigarette and grinned with glee. 'And then he'd killed just as many as me.'

'That's right,' I said, 'but the murderer was still remorseful. He visited another scholar and asked him the same question and this one told him that as long as the sun rose in the east salvation was possible. But only if the murderer left his village at once, abandoned everything and never came back. So the man left all of his possessions and his family behind and took off immediately. But he had only just set off when he dropped dead. That's when the angels came to collect him. The angels from hell argued with those from heaven.

One party wanted to take him to heaven because the man was on the road and had shown remorse. The others believed the man was destined for the fire, because he had not reached his destination and had not yet earned his salvation. In the end, God had to intervene. He ordered the angels to measure the distance the man had travelled from his village, and then the distance he had yet to go to his destination. If the man was closer to his destination, he would go to heaven; if he was closer to his old village, the angels from hell could claim him. It appeared to be a foregone conclusion, since the man had dropped dead after just a few steps and still far from his destination. But without the angels knowing, God ordered the earth to stretch, so the distance the man had covered between his village and the place where he was lying dead became much longer than it really was. Then he ordered the earth to shorten the distance between the man's destination and the place where he lay. And so the man made it to heaven after all.

'Hmmm,' A'mmar said.

Marzouk slowly blew out the smoke from his cigarette. 'If I were you, I'd hurry back to where you came from, because over here the earth doesn't listen to God.'

It was the boys who asked me to write everything down. At first, I refused. I did not see why I would want to waste my time recording everything. Seeing the French write they would come and badger me. 'Write it all down. You're the only one who can. Look at the French, they're writing it all down. You'd think they're waging this war just to fill their notebooks. Do you think we get a mention in their letters? You must write about us. What else is your knowledge good for? Write!'

A'mmar dug me in the ribs and pointed to a French soldier who had retreated to a corner where he carefully pulled a grubby notebook from his inside pocket before jotting things down with a blunt stub of a pencil.

'Has he fallen asleep or what?' Tijani joked, because sometimes it took forever before the pencil, poised above an empty page, formed a first, hesitant letter, the beginning of a word, of a sentence tasked with reporting on our life here on this strip of land that we were supposed to defend against a silent and so far invisible enemy.

I asked A'mmar why it was important to him that we too wrote about the things we experienced here. I had a suspicion that he valued it because the French were doing it. Everything the French did was important because they did things differently from us. In our eyes the French were no ordinary people. As if they were better than us, as if they knew things we did not know yet.

A'mmar said the French were teaching us to shoot and march, but that they were keeping their language to themselves, because it was even more important than learning to shoot and march. That stayed with me a long time.

Everybody dismissed A'mmar's observation, because they reckoned that learning to shoot was many times more powerful and effective than learning to read and write. But the more I thought about his claim, the more I became convinced that he was right. We were not being denied the language of the French for nothing; there had to be a reason. We were excluded because there was something we were not allowed to know.

While at the barracks in Salé, A'mmar was convinced that the French were slipping ground-up ass's ears in our food, which should make us just as indifferent and docile as those beasts. The ass's ears would stop us from questioning our orders. And nip any interest in their knowledge, their language and their technology in the bud. We would just do as we were told. That's why he slid his dinner over to me one time and watched, seemingly unperturbed, as I quickly shovelled it in with relish and without any questions. I was afraid he would snatch the plate away before it was empty. He was positive I would bark like a dog if the French were to ask me. His protest lasted the grand total of one meal. Famished, he wolfed down the next. 'We're the French's asses anyway. So I might as well not be a hungry ass.'

Some boys thought that the French who kept diaries wrote down verses from the Injil, their big holy book. They believed that these verses protected the French soldiers against bullets like an invisible shield. A'mmar told us that when he worked in the port of Dar El Beïda, a priest used to come for fish. The man always carried a small bible with him. When A'mmar asked him why he took the book wherever he went, the priest replied that it protected him from evil.

'So you want me to write down verses from the Injil so the bullets won't get you?' I joked. Nobody laughed at my joke and so I wrote, on strips of paper, a verse from the Koran for each of them.

They cut a piece of fabric from their trousers or shirts, carefully sewed it around the folded paper and carried it around their neck on a string, or tied to their belt. They kept it close to their body at all times, genuinely believing that these hastily scribbled verses from the Koran would keep death at bay. And so I thought I had done what was expected of me. But before long I was buttonholed again by boys who could not even write their own name.

A'mmar harassed me the most. 'Write that I, A'mmar Hajjaji, born in Azib de Midar in the year 1895, lay an ingenious ambush on 14 November 1914 and singlehandedly dispatched at least ten Germans. Say I've been given a medal.'

To shut him up I told him what I had heard from Marzouk, the Algerian soldier we were both friends with now.

'Marzouk said that in his country the men who returned with a medal were forced to eat it. You hear that? Men who act the hero over here and are prepared to take bullets for France will have to swallow more metal upon their return home.'

A'mmar rolled his eyes. He did not believe me.

'How can you eat a medal?' he said. '*Uqsimu billah*! Those Algerians with their tall tales.'

'I don't think it's a fib,' I said.

'*Safi*, leave out the medal, don't mention it. Besides, I haven't received a medal yet, lying is *haram*. But write that we are real warriors like our ancestors the Imazighen and that we're saving the French from disaster.'

I looked away.

'What? It's true, isn't it? Can you see the French win without us?'

A'mmar was an intelligent young man, but at times I wondered if he realised what we were up against. He seemed unaware of the fact that we were fighting a war, a real one, and not the children's game we used to play barefoot in our villages.

I said that if he really wanted me to write something about the victory I would write about the German lad who had died before our eyes a few days ago. A'mmar had certainly not forgotten the kid, because he had turned deathly pale as he watched him die. Tijani even cried.

The boy had soft, smooth cheeks like a child and as he lay dying he kept looking at us with grim despair as if we were supposed to pull him from a swamp. We were terrified of him and everybody relaxed when he finally breathed his last.

A'mmar thought I always complicated matters. He said it had always been like this, that there were no winners without losers. We did not have a lot of time to ponder this, because we were being sent towards an insatiable fire that could not get enough of men and stones. Our minds seemed to have been taken over by a dark force that gave us no other option than to kill and destroy. Was A'mmar right after all? Had the French given us something to eat so we would mindlessly follow orders, even though we knew it would not get us anywhere? Or at least nowhere good?

I wondered how many more men we would have to kill to arrive in the land of victory. We would have to shoot a path to their victory.

Countless strong, healthy lads would have to perish. Boys who, like me, had a name, a mother and a father. A home somewhere far away. I felt sick at the thought that we would get used to killing. That there would come a time when we no longer walked around in a daze for days, as we had done after our comrade Simoh and that young, beardless German died before our very eyes.

So what was there to write about? That people were dying here? I did not want to fix those images and feelings in words because I feared they would nestle deep inside my mind and contaminate my body. Simply forgetting everything was better. But that forgetting took a big effort, perhaps an even bigger effort than the writing itself. I dreamed about dying horses.

I should have carried on refusing, but the boys kept badgering me and eventually I gave in just to be rid of their nagging. I was convinced that in no time they would lose all interest in this writing business, so I could stop. And sure enough, the lads were soon preoccupied with other things and no longer regarded the French soldiers jealously whenever they produced their diaries. I could have stopped writing easily enough. But I could not stop writing. A compulsion had taken hold of me. It was a peculiar experience. While writing I became detached from myself, or so it seemed. Writing gave me the same high I experienced when I learned to read at the sheikh's.

I was no good as a soldier, even though I wore the same uniform as my comrades and I was just as well armed. I did not want to die and could not hide it, unlike the guys who charged when they were ordered to. I cursed them for that blind zeal. And yet I followed them when they charged, because I was nobody on my own; I was an animal that wanted to stay with its herd, even if the herd was running towards its demise. Only when I wrote did I feel like myself again and did I have the feeling that I was somebody.

I stayed close to Tijani and A'mmar when we were sent into no-man's-land, as if their shadows offered me protection. If fate were to get me, at least they would be nearby. I secretly hoped that something would happen to me before it did to them. I could not imagine this unbearable life without them.

Simoh had already died by then. We had left him somewhere on the edge of a village. What I remember about that fatal day is that even summer failed to take any notice of us and our dead man. There was a lightness in the air that made everything quiver with happiness. Aside from the upturned, dark soil under which Simoh was buried, all things appeared to be in their rightful place. I remember staring and staring at the clear blue sky, endless it seemed, like a sea without waves. When I returned my gaze to the humid, dark earth, it occurred to me that it would not be unthinkable that within a few days a shoot would come up and a man would be born. A strong man who would reach for the sky. But everybody knows that men do not grow from the soil.

I began to write, because I did not think the boys' concern was entirely unfounded. Our memories were unreliable. We forgot a lot, even the important things. We had forgotten what day Simoh had died. We had forgotten the name of the village where we had buried Simoh, somewhere in a field among the poplars.

The village priest had not wanted Simoh to be buried in the consecrated graveyard beside the church. We in turn had objected to the cross they wanted to plant on his grave. Finally, our officers gave us permission to bury Simoh in a field. With his head turned towards the qibla. And since nobody else knew how to do it, I recited the prayer for the absentee.

His death had changed something. The lads were no longer quite so boisterous. As if they had been slapped in the face. Dying and being put in the ground here became real; never going home again became real. We were all sombre when, late in the afternoon, we walked out of the village and left Simoh behind.

I knew that if we got out of here alive we would forget more than just the name of the village where Simoh lay in the ground. We would forget how the gunpowder lingered in the air long after the shooting had ended, and how rough the blankets felt to our skin. *Nasiyan mansiya* we would be, forgotten and never remembered, like Maryam, may God have mercy upon her soul. When she was delivered of the prophet Isa, she wanted to be forgotten and never remembered, as long as she found relief from those terrible birth pangs. 'Would that I had died before this, and become a thing forgotten, unremembered,' Maryam said. Maryam, of whom the French had a porcelain statue, only to leave it in the mud when they were forced to run for their lives.

After everything we had been through the greatest punishment would be to be wiped from the memories of the living. I did not want to be *nasiyan mansiya*. It was a fate I wanted neither for myself, nor for my comrades.

I began to write and soon came to the conclusion that I did not have enough words to describe everything. How many words do we have for fire? For darkness? For dying? Everybody dies in his own way. Some die calmly, as if about to go to sleep. Others claw at the mud or reach for the sky. Not every darkness was equally dark. There was a darkness that soothed me and a darkness that terrified me.

I did find the words to describe our lives and not be totally forgotten and unremembered. That's why I would like my sister to receive this notebook, so she knows what became of us.