

# Transcribing Impatience

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*Here's an effort to keep a journal about something I dreaded, loved, and re-dreaded. It was years ago, but I bet it would be the same now. It's about recording, transcribing in some form or other, an experience out of one's ordinary...a kind of never again thing, maybe.*

*It took place in Brittany.*



**Saturday, January 22, 1994**

My first day of the water therapy I have heard more than so much about. I have a bad knee? A stiffening toe on the other side? Well, it will help, but only if I am willing to stay six days. Even if I notice later. Ok, I am game. I love Brittany, especially the old town of Carnac with its menhirs, its dolmens, and a good friend of mine, who lives near the ocean. Great: I'll try anything, once.

A large roundish glassed-in white modern building, marked with large letters in green—these are the theme colors, I gather: *Thalassothérapie*. A corridor leads to the connected hotels, with their menus posted.

To greet incomers in their coats and shoes, which will be traded in for a bathrobe and slippers, a few charming receptionists, full of smiles. Phantoms moving about in all shapes and white terrycloth robes with green trim. The doctor on duty with his intelligent angular face, asking questions in rapidfire order and dictating answers into his machine for his superefficient assistant, noiselessly padding in and out.

He is cautious about prescribing anything serious with my knee and foot, so all the water hoses are to be directed away from them.

I wonder what I am doing here. In one room—*Algothérapie*—you are covered with green algae, hot to the touch, wrapped in plastic, then in gold tinfoil and blankets, and left to macerate. In all the private rooms, you have to take your bathing suit off. I make a rather feeble joke about being marinated and ready to eat, becoming a mermaid and so on. The assistant laughs politely.

Next, after waiting fifteen minutes in the main hall between appointments—the part I learn to hate the worst—I climb into a hot pool with water jets. Then in a sort of gigantic bubble bath: “*le bain bouillonnant*.” Boy, it is boiling. I think desperately about Marat, stabbed to death during the French Revolution by Charlotte Corday.

Finally, I am sent to a bath in which a giant hose is trained on my back: this has the moving title of *Douches sous-marines*. I ask the girl, whose very red hands I feel bad about, if she is allowed to use gloves.

“No,” she says, “but it only hurts the first few days.”

Then I am allowed to go, with others, all bathsuited and hatted, into a large pool of hot sea water—the splendid *Piscine eau de mer*—where various men with masks and fins rush up and down.

In between appointments, the *tisanerie* is open. This is a white bar laden with little baskets, each filled with little sachets of herb tea, or “infusions.” You consult a list to match what you want to cure or help with what sachet will most properly work in that direction; it goes something like this:

*Tisanes and Their Therapeutic Virtues*

Cassis diuretic: eliminates urea and uric acid; anti-cold.

Indicated for rheumatism, gout, and arthritis.

Citronella: anti-spasmodic: a physical and intellectual stimulant.

Flowering Elderberry: diuretic, purgative; recommended for bronchitis, colds.

Green Anise: digestive; recommended for dyspepsia, calming.

Orange-tree: sedative, antispasmodic; indicated for insomnia, nervousness.

Queen of the Meadow: diuretic, somniferous. Indicated for any liquid retention, rhumatism, cellulitis.

Rosehip: well-being, intestinal tract, nervous system.

Thyme: decongestant for the respiratory tract.

Mint: tonic, digestive.

Verbena or Lime: sedative.

Camomile: digestive stimulant.

You choose your sachet, hand it to the smiling assistant behind the hot water container, who puts it in a cup, pours boiling water over it, and hands it to you. It burns if you move with it, so you trudge along very slowly in your white terrycloth robe with its green trim, your bathing suit and bathcap in your transparent bag edged with the same green color, clutching your paper or magazine chosen from the rack behind, into the *Solarium* to read, or down the hall to your next “soin” or treatment.

“Careful, Madame, it is hot if you spill it!”

I knew that. But I smile gratefully.

...

I have waited several times to try to see the doctor to say could there be something a little more helpful than the big bubble bath; he is always busy, the assistants are always smiling. You have to believe in the curative value of water and algae before this works.

What do I believe in?

...

I take a long walk with my black walking stick with its discreet faded silver trim, along the water. Bushes in yellow bloom, deserted beach.

**Sunday, January 23**

The Thalasso again. Everything more familiar. Between “*soins*,” I rush down to the swimming pool for fifteen minutes—I’m always hyper, I guess. At least today I didn’t have to wait for the doctor to appear between two visits: tomorrow will have to. I hate asking people to change things, and I am supposed to ask him to permit me some re-education training instead of so much sitting in the water stuff.

In another underwater treatment—*Jets d’eau sous-marins*—I find myself across from a portly man with glasses and a soured face. When the pulse of water hits his back, he smiles radiantly at the universe, to his own evident embarrassment and my delight. My back itches. I look out at the grey Breton sky.

I am now to lie down for the treatment with the buckets of hot green algae again—I gather I have to do this every day—I ask to have my arms left out. I hate being wrapped up in the plastic and foil like a mummy macerating.

“Ah, you should have told me you were claustrophobic!” says the attendant.  
“Should I open the window?”

“No,” I say, “but could you turn off the music?” It has switched from the classic choices played in the morning to some jazzy stuff, definitely not soothing.

“It is the assistants who program the rooms, Madame. You have the bad luck not to like this cycle. I will turn it off.”

When I have lain there long enough, I hobble in my plastic sheeting to the shower, to wash off the green stuff.

In the salt bath, my skin begins to itch again. In the “boiling bath,” absolutely nothing happens. In the bath where a hose is trained on your naked body, it is all very mild. I have the feeling that it is mostly in the large pool, where I do all the work, that anything at all is occurring. I remember being told that it takes six days before you have any feeling of progress.

After the treatment yesterday, driving out with my Breton friend Monique to a magnificent platter of shellfish. Tourteau, *araignée de mer*, *bigorneaux*, *langoustines*, *huîtres*: and clams set flaming with cognac. *Tarte Tatin* to follow; we needed no supper.

## Monday, January 24

Third day of Thalasso. In the salt bath, where the bubbles at one end turn yellow from the algae, I learn that you are supposed to wiggle about to maximize the effect of the water spouts. Much more fun. I meditate less on the fate of Marat in his bath tub, feeling less menaced. Find myself watching the white door handle against the blue door and hoping it won't turn yet. So I must be enjoying it.

Under the green algae, a scratch on my toe from the rough end of the swimming pool doesn't stop stinging; I think of so many little coffins with one of us in each. The masseur, with a face as intelligent as the head doctor, pulls on my leg until my knee screams out, and me with it; then on my stiffening toe until I scream again.

"Clench your teeth," he says, and gives it another tug. From the room to the side, a voice calls out,

"Hey, colleague, what are you doing?"

"Nothing broken yet," says the masseur.

After the warm swimming pool, I try the herb-laden heat of the *hamman*, so steaming that I am surpassingly grateful for the cold shower.

In the afternoon, a walk down the beach: golden sand, then a layer of grey sand next to the grey-green water, under the grey-blue sky. A Whistler-type seascape.

Cold *muscadet* with a large flat fish *au court-bouillon* for lunch, with a salad of endive and *mache*. The wonderfully buttery rich, deliciously unhealthy *kounig aman* for tea, hot from the oven.

At night to an old farm for some *crêpes au blé noir*. Wonderful sweet cider, made there. We sit by a fire. I am freezing, and have caught a cold from the hammam, where you sit in a herb-scented steam room, and then take a cold shower. I shouldn't have gone out afterwards. We joke: to "*hammaner*," like the Turkish in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

**Tuesday, January 26**

Thalasso fourth day—a little boring. I am very tired of the green algae, tired of the same high voices,

“Ça va, Madame?”

Yes, *ça va* ok, but four days would be enough. In between two “*soins*,” I go down to the large warm swimming pool, making my way in my rubber slippers—flop, flop—over the plastic sheet and past the men with their drills repairing something all this time, and all talking at once. Then back up to another room with yet another bathtub and someone with a hose.

Exercises in the water: you hold on to the bars, sit as if on a chair, and extend your legs, cross them over, raise them to your chest. A good-humored enormous man with twinkling eyes to my left has had a back operation and is concerned about not hurting himself. My world focuses on his back. Then and more enjoyable, on the grey sky out the window.

Before today is over, I detest the robe, the transparent pack where my bathing suit is wetting my book.

I am a bad sport. I knew that.

On my return home, walking by the grey-green sea, with the evening lights on the golden sand. I photograph the clouds. Signs explaining you cannot walk on the beach because of the explosives found there.

In the evening, a dinner full of discussion, around a painter, recently successful, where we joke about Voltaire and his garden, and consume a *lieu* of gigantic proportion, steamed with fennel, and a salad of *mache*, endive, and walnuts, with walnut oil. I love Brittany.

### Wednesday, January 27

I see the masseur again. Gentler this time, but after questioning:

*"Eh bien, madame,* how was it walking on your right foot yesterday?"  
And hearing my answer,  
"Not so hot," he smiles and says, "I imagine. You'll have to..."—making the  
sign of scissors cutting...

He tugs less on the bad knee, smiles, and puts everything in order. He is wearing a tiny gold cross.

In one of the massage baths, I find myself meditating less on Marat, and more on the series of French words for spoiling you with care. They are all precious and curly, like deodorants, and all sound like sticky candy: *"dorloter," "câliner,"* and so on, like the word for whispering I have always hated: *"chuchoter."* I remember my son Matthew hating the word *"susurrer"* for sipping something. I miss my children, my friends, New York.

In the afternoon, on an excursion to the Island of the Monks, *"L'Île aux Moines,"* I find myself tongue-tied with the group of French *"curistes."* Some are profiting from the *Semaine de minceur*, where for a reasonable sum, you can live in the hotel, have a complete thinning menu, *and* complete thalasso-care.

They give me the menus for the thinning and the regular food, about which they all are enthusiastic.

The island is lovely, with camelias and mimosas in bloom, tiny houses whose characteristics the guide points out carefully. Sea captains have two-story houses, fishermen have one-story houses with a bedroom—houses which can be adjacent to each other—and the far-apart houses of the farmers, with no separate bedrooms. We see a cromlech from 6000 years ago, the upright stones set in a circle. Megaliths, with their low entrances for the very short Bretons from so long ago. A little church, where one of the windows has an impossible marking: *"Saint Arthur."* There is Saint Barnabas, with a stone. Saint Peter with two sets of keys instead of the fish he usually carries in Brittany. We take a tiny ferry, for 15 francs; I sit outside and pretend it is a long trip.

**Thursday, January 28**

Last day of the Thalasso. I can't say I am sorry. I arrive four minutes late, and the assistant with the algae scolds me twice. And then finally announces the catastrophe:

"You came late and so I cannot leave you in the algae as long as I am supposed to. YOU WILL MISS THREE OR EVEN FOUR MINUTES. Someone else is about to come."

"Well, I am happy to be delivered," I say brightly, with no result.

What I should have said, to arouse her sympathy: "I am here precisely because it hurts to walk, and so I walked slowly."

But the complexities of my sarcasm would surely be lost in this foreign language. Then the hoses are trained on me, in my next (seemingly useless) appointment. I go down to the pool like a mammoth bathtub, and still have time before my next and next-to-last session. I read the paper, sit under a lamp in the Solarium, lie under the purple lamps in the Aerosol, weigh myself, drink a hibiscus tisane all pink, and finally it is time for *Re-Education Piscine*. This time for my back. We twist from side to side, back and forth, under the supervision of someone who seems as laid-back as I feel. Or is he bored? One more trip to the pool, more of the *jets sous-marins*, where you push against the pulsing water, and I am through.

I walk home along the raging sea, in the fierce wind. Everything is green and loud. I sit on the rocks, feel myself swept by the current, and meditate what to say to my three-hour class on surrealism in Paris tomorrow, after the long train ride back to Paris tonight, and resettling in my little room with its old beams on the Ile Saint-Louis. My knee hurts. My toe hurts. I am glad to be back in my temporary home.



**Epilogue**

To my astonishment, I no longer needed a cane... *Sic transit...*