



Calais at the Crossroads

Record of Hope

Aquarelle by Peter Blodau

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1. Origin To Action	8
2. Arrivals.....	20
3. Warehouse and Woodyard.....	27
4. The Jungle Camp.....	35
5. A Community Of Souls.....	41
6. Departures	45
Further Engagement	51
Sources.....	53

Introduction

It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more

- Anna Frank, *The Diary Of A Young Girl*, July 15, 1944

'Activism' is a weary word, and as is so often the case with specialized kinds of experience it is a breeding-ground for misconception and incomprehension. What follows is an attempt to revisit the concept of activism, perhaps also to 'humanise' it for the growing many who are experiencing the urge to do something for a world in which that old comforter, 'never too late', is fast becoming a dangerous procrastination. It is addressed to the activist in all of us.

A parallel thread running through Record of Hope is the principle of 'radical hope'. The idea of radical hope was the primary instigator of this project, and is intended as an active and open exploration of a fundamentally human response to what may perhaps be viewed as the manufactured cynicism of social darwinism. The locution 'radical hope' aims to capture a quality of the heart that is able to 'be with' without 'separating from' or being 'neutralized by'. It is a loyalty to the possibility of the situation without shying away from the difficulty of it. This loyalty, in its wholeness, includes both the vision of another way and the taking of concrete steps to make that vision a reality. Crucially, it involves a powerful sense of one's inner ground—the 'rootedness' implied in the etymology of 'radical'—which is a necessary condition for not being overwhelmed. Closely related to the idea of 'caring identification',¹ it involves sustained engagement with reality beyond the narrow boundaries of 'ego'. As such, it may be thought of as active empathy through a process of inclusion of the other—forests, bioregions, the planet as a whole, other sentient beings. In its

¹ Drenson, A., Inoue, Y., *The Deep Ecology Movement: an introductory anthology* (North Atlantic Books; Berkeley, 1995), p.xxii

barest essence, it is a realization of care, where care is the strength to be with a difficult situation without separating from the harshness of it and without giving in to the temptation of viewing its harshness as the sole reality, and therefore being neutralized by it. Radical hope is the strength to act in a spirit of affirmative possibility.

Activists generally are considered to be front-liners, campaigners who work for justice and change. The stereotype many of us who have no direct field experience evoke when the question comes up is the radical left-wing eco-warrior or anarchist who takes on Goliathesque odds with an improbable degree of physical courage and an absolute sense of purpose. History abounds with the stories of individuals who found the courage to challenge intolerable injustices—the list would be endless—and there is no doubt that the world would be far worse off without their contribution. As more and more people heed the call to engage, to turn the course of their lives away from a more or less prescribed set of ‘choices’ towards a more liminal existence in which the plight of humanity and the planet as a whole are seen to be more important than the security of a single individual’s future, the old conservative view that we can consume without concern, extract without consequence, waste without want, and generally pursue a business-as-usual, profit-driven model of existence is proving to be a hideous lie. Many now experience the ‘rape’ of the land and the ‘torture’ of animals as just as much a personal violation as the persecution of vulnerable minorities within human society. We have entered an age in which the destruction of a rainforest by a mining company or the slaughter-for-profit of billions of farm animals every year in the US alone can be conceived of as equivalent to murder: we are already seeing the development in international law of the concept of ‘right of Mother Earth’, the violation of which will, according to its advocates, eventually come to be punishable by law. To say that we are developing collectively a capacity to feel the suffering of a sentient being called ‘the world’ is not just to propound a loose Gaian abstraction: it is to recognize that radical hope carries with it a radical sense of responsibility, and that a growing human consciousness can and must prove capable of acting for the world as a whole, if we are to survive at all. At the very least, this has to become the bearing by which we set our course as we head into the 21st century. Put differently, we are finding that the distance we interject between us and an issue when we place the onus of action on the radical ‘other’ is no longer available to us. We are discovering that the root of radical is buried deep within all our hearts.

In broadening, or rather loosening the scope of the word ‘activism’, the intent here is also to bring its field of reference into sharper focus. The concept of activism is problematic not only because of the stereotypes that typically attend it, but also and above all because in its lexical focus upon the action it leaves the field of the ‘spirit’, or intention behind the action, exposed and unclarified. If the essence of spiritual practice is to re-establish

a healing link between personal suffering and a universal concern for the world, then a healthy activism is a form of engagement that acknowledges a direct, conversational link between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’, where ‘conversational’ refers not to a notion of dialogue, or exchange of words between speakers, rather to the intimacy and complexity of a mutual relationship built over an organic arc of time. ‘Conversational activism’ is therefore a process of change that includes instances of result and resolution, success and failure, but is not defined entirely by them.

Change is a rhizome-like process that can be years in the making, or, in the context of major social shifts, generations. It is a tale of how a medley of rivulets becomes a body of water powerful enough to reshape continents. It describes a pattern of ripening that governs not only collective movements but also the life of individuals. Behind any shift in perspective—a movement towards a more sustainable lifestyle, say, or a choice to become vegetarian—or any major upheaval such as the complete dismantling of a previous mode of existence with all its relations, support mechanisms and inadequacies, there is an epic narrative of experience deeply lived. How does one answer a deep call to change? What does it take for that initial spark of inspiration to translate into concrete action? What complexity of soul-searching and life-experience is needed for a critical shift to happen? In responding to these questions we may find perhaps that in many cases there is far too much emphasis on the fact of change itself—so often an uncontrolled movement yielding unexpected outcomes—and nowhere near enough on the process that led up to the point of crisis. This process is the story that needs to be told because it is there that we learn about who we are and what we are capable of. It is there that we discover the radical within.

Actions performed or experiences sustained within the private sphere of the individual need not be viewed as any less radical or impactful than those performed or sustained in the public domain. Standing up to domestic violence is every bit as poignant or courageous as facing down social injustice; likewise the action of freeing oneself from addiction. This should prompt reflection on what is in fact meant by activism: the person who negotiates their way out of a depression does so for us all because there is ultimately no difference between their fragility and ours. Above all, for the purpose of this Record, such a reflection should include a consideration of how human experience is presented in public discourse. What stories are considered important, and how are they told? If our purpose is to redeem ourselves from the narratives of despair we are so unremittingly subjected to by the media, and the obsolete cultural paradigms the media so often represent—a call we hear with growing insistence—we need to reconsider and perhaps reclaim our right to and capacity for storytelling our past. Through telling stories we recover not only a sense of what happened (the stated purpose of most media), but also a sense of who we are in ourselves and in relation to others, and what we can learn in the process of living life’s

events. There can be nothing more radical than facing as individuals the narratives that define us in a spirit of genuine concern for where we are headed collectively.

The question of how to live with hope in times of desperation and crisis is an open inquiry running through these Records. Often, when we refer to the human condition, we mean the human plight, what we are caught up in: climate change, desertification, mass migration, environmental degradation, freshwater shortage, war, famine, epidemics, biodiversity loss. But the human condition is not just about our material circumstances. It references a general consensus about where we stand in relation to the world and ourselves within it. What does it mean to be hopeful in a time of crisis? What does it mean to be a full and natural human being in the face of the stark realities we are facing? Hope, in the words of a book that has become a touchstone for this project, is a “renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.”² It is fieldcraft for spiritual survival, and we are looking here to those operating on the front-lines of the human condition for initiation into its secrets.

What we offer here is personal narrative dealing with issues of universal concern. The narrative has undergone an editorial process, but the purpose has been to allow, as far as is possible, the original voice to speak through the written word in a manner that captures the sketchy, grainy, pungent texture of intense direct experience related in conversation. The voice presented here is an activist’s, not a refugee’s, but it is hoped that the voices of the thousands of people caught up in the crisis in the camps of northern France and elsewhere are nevertheless present. The separator symbol used below and through the text is the Roman numeral for 10,000, a tribute to the estimated 10,000 souls who inhabited the Jungle camp before its final demolition in 2016.



² Tippett, K., *Becoming Wise* (Penguin, 2016), p.11



Kate Evans, [Threads from the Refugee Crisis](#)

1. Origin To Action

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

Calais has been a focal point in the current wave of migration for two decades. The first camp was established by the Red Cross with the help of the French government in Sangatte, about a mile from the Eurotunnel entrance, in 1999. By 2002, the camp had a population of around 2000 refugees, mostly from Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, but was cleared under pressure from the British government amid concerns about the number of illegal immigrants entering the UK. Following the Le Touquet agreement signed between the British and French governments in 2003, the UK effectively established a hard border on French soil. Barbed wire fences went up, land was flooded and hundreds of police officers were deployed. Most of the refugees moved into the surrounding woods and established an illegal camp which came to be known as the 'Jungle'. The term derives from the Pashto *dzhangal*, 'forest', and is one of a number of names that came to be attributed to Calais squats over the years. Other names include Africa House, Tioxide Jungle, Leader Price or Sudanese Jungle, and Fort Galloo. The camp was razed in 2009 and most of the 1000 residents were arrested, only then to be released with nowhere to go. But the refugees kept coming, and by 2014, when Jungle II opened, they were arriving from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, Chad, Eritrea, Iraq, Albania, Senegal, Kurdistan, Libya and Ethiopia, with the biggest communities often being those from East Africa and Afghanistan. By

early 2016, when the first part of the two-phase demolition of the camp was implemented, it is thought there were around 5,500 people living in the Jungle. By the Autumn, in spite of the demolition of the southern part of the camp earlier in the year, the population had swelled, depending on the estimate, to somewhere between 8 and 10,000. Today there are an estimated 700 refugees sleeping rough around Calais.

The summer of 2015 saw a flood of grassroots support in the form of donations and volunteers coming to Calais. Our first voice, Joe Peloquin, joined them a year later, volunteering at the so-called ‘Warehouse’, the hub of volunteer operations leased by [Auberge des Migrants](#), a French aid organization that has been active in Calais since 2008 and continues to provide aid in and around the Calais area in partnership with Help Refugees, Refugee Community Kitchen, Refugee Youth Service and Utopia56. Joe comes from Rhode Island, on the eastern seaboard of the US. In 2012, aged 23, he left his job as a computer programmer to embark on a period of exploration, and in 2013 embraced a life of nomadic activism and inquiry in India, Israel/Palestine and Europe. Following his experiences in Calais in 2016, Joe went on to play a role in the creation of Humanity in Action, a ‘meditation in action’ retreat with SanghaSeva, which took place in Calais for the first time in August 2017. The next Humanity in Action [retreat](#) will take place in May 2018.

In conversation with Record of Hope, Joe tells a stark and at times lyrical story. The following curated dialogue aims to capture the essence of how Joe became involved in the volunteer operation in Calais and his experiences during his first summer there in 2016, after the southern part of the camp had already been razed. The time-frame covers the first half of that year.

RoH: *How did it start for you?*

Joe: *The original spark came during a retreat with Christopher Titmuss. It was a year and a half ago now [February, 2015], in India. I don't remember the exact words he said, but during a Dharma-talk he spoke about the situation in Calais. At that time it was Winter, and—just essentially the bad conditions in the camp, you could say. At the time the Jungle was still there.*

Christopher Titmuss is a senior Dharma teacher and former Buddhist monk in Thailand and India. He is the founder of the online [Mindfulness Training Course](#). He teaches in Australia, India, Israel, France and Germany every year, and has been teaching annual retreats in India since 1975. Joe first met Christopher on the yearly European [Dharma Yatra](#) in France in the Summer of 2013. This was also the year when Joe first started travelling and volunteering.

Joe: *The retreat manager's husband was actually going. He was a film-maker. He was going there with an actor to film the conditions. So, anyway, Christopher spoke about that and some of the grassroots initiatives that were happening there in the camp, and this really touched me. This was on retreat... I really felt touched, and recognized that I felt touched, in the body, in the heart... in response to the words coming from the other, and, yeah, this was the spark.*

Shortly before the retreat in India, on 5th December 2015, an Avaaz petition had highlighted the harsh conditions facing the refugees in Europe:

Dear friends,

They're fleeing terror... running from violence just as vicious as the

attacks that have shaken Paris, Beirut, and Bamako. Yet they risk becoming tragic scapegoats unless we act now.

More than ever, thousands of women, men, and children are arriving at Europe's doorstep—hungry, exhausted, sick... only hoping that someone soon will just open one door, and the nightmare they're fleeing from will be over.

But harsh weather is setting in, and the prospect of a chilling winter of death isn't moving governments to act. On the contrary, they're building more and bigger fences to keep refugees out.

Now we, people, remain the key source of hope for those trapped by Europe's shameful walls.

Joe: *The first memory I have of being aware of what was happening in Calais was an Avaaz petition. So this is the opening point: there's a non-awareness first, and then there's awareness. This was essentially the opening point.*

I think this is really interesting, because with any of these issues we are looking for a point—yes, you said we have to put a pole in the ground and label before 'before' and after 'after', something like this you said. With Calais there are clear poles, so we can look at this. And this is a clear pole: before, non-awareness of anything; now, inkling of awareness. It didn't lead to much—I don't think I even signed the petition, but we talked about the spark in India, this retreat in India where Christopher mentioned Calais again, and there was the personal story... the receptivity on my part... the call to action on his... and this is the seed growing, blossoming, opening up...

I had an interview with Christopher. I told him I had been touched, and that I wished to act, and he heard, and acknowledged it's important. And then we have the period of feeling around, of trying to figure out what to do with this spark. There was the email to Christopher, quite soon afterwards, essentially saying if you're doing anything let me know. Yet the ball was still in my court. I went to another project, [Dharmalaya](#) [India], that I love very much and spend a lot of time on, and from there I remember I was talking to people... I guess asking if anyone else was interested in going or knew about anything going on in Calais, saying I was interested in going. I also filled out an application for an organisation in Rhode Island, Dorcas, that helps refugees. That didn't work out. Just

another dead-end... but, you know, it's taking steps, this is the important thing—taking steps.

During the time in India there was also a bit of poking around at the Calais situation. I remember I found a blog written by a woman, Kate Evans, who'd been there, who drew this beautiful cartoon, a hand-drawn story of the Jungle. I could probably try and pull it up, it's very touching... I posted it on Facebook. Things like this, there had been some other online research...

Kate Evans is a British cartoonist, non-fiction writer, graphic novelist and public speaker. Her portrayal of the refugee crisis was published by Verso under the title [Threads from the Refugee Crisis](#). Her previous work, *Red Rosa, the graphic biography of Rosa Luxemburg*, was selected by the *Independent* and *Observer* newspapers as the best graphic book of the year. She is also acclaimed for her work on pregnancy and fertility. One reviewer, writing for *The Guardian*, described her as “one of the most original talents in comics [...] in a long time.” Her blog can be reached [here](#).

Joe: *Still the feeling of wanting to do something. Not sure how to do it. Increasingly the sense that I was going to have to commit. You know, some kind of fear, wanting others to do it for me. But that's the thing. It's up to us. We follow each other, human beings, and we find it easier to follow each other. This is the real key, it's not so much talking to each other, it's example, role-modelling. We imitate each other. This is what's needed. Modelling the behaviour. And not in a fake sense. I'm not talking about in a fake sense: I'm saying, really embodying, living something important. Something we care about. We naturally respond when we see this in other people. Myself to others and others to myself and others to others. It's just how we are, it's how human beings are. And this is really powerful if we are trying to make change, decent change: to really live what we care about.*

So, online research. Found a website. Calaidipedia, written by a British librarian. She had been to the Jungle, had done volunteer work there. I say the 'Jungle', I mean also in the organizations and operations happening around the Jungle, particularly centred around the Warehouse. She went back to the UK. Wasn't sure how she could contribute. The way she did decide she could contribute was to use her skills at consolidating information to get information about the Jungle and what was happening in Calais together, 'cause it was a lot of different organizations. Not even just organizations—people just showing up, doing things... as I understand, that was the real ad hoc time—individuals taking action...

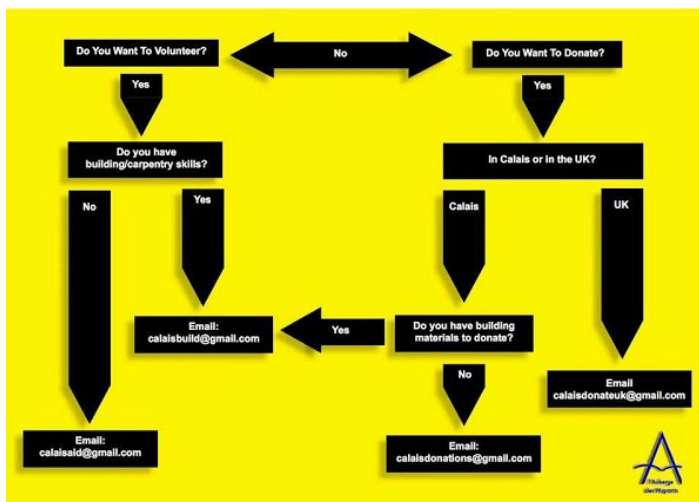
By the time I got there in the Summer [2016], things had gotten somewhat more organized in the sense that it was larger groups of people, and there were some larger organizations. People had organized themselves into larger organisms, so there was I think a bit less of that original—that initial dynamism, I guess, had faded somewhat. It was still there, for sure, but it was more, like, if you were new you had somewhere to go where people would orient you, whereas previously in years past it hadn't been so much like that, people would show up and orient themselves, and a lot of really interesting things came from it. That's how [Help Refugees](#) started. And there's an interesting thing here, we can talk about how human beings come together and evolve into organisms. Yeah, we're not using this word 'organizations' but 'organisms', which are dynamic organizations. This is actually a process that human beings go through, a natural process, it's not arbitrary, it's not hierarchical, it's natural.

In 2015 there was still very little support for the refugees in the Jungle camp. A group of friends from the UK set themselves the target of raising £1,000 and driving to Calais with a van full of supplies. Within one week they had raised £56,000, and were soon receiving 7,000 donated items every day. This was the beginning of [Help Refugees](#). After two years they had helped over 720,000 people and managed almost 18,000 volunteers. They write:

Boosted by the support of high-profile musicians, filmmakers and actors who joined our '[Choose Love](#)' campaign, we believe that together with our ever growing network of grassroots groups,

implementing partners, volunteers, fundraisers, and supporters—we have pioneered a new movement in humanitarian response—acting quickly and flexibly, enabling ordinary people to help other ordinary people in need in the most direct of ways.

Around the same time, English teacher and librarian Christine Cox set herself the task of gathering information about the situation in Calais from carefully vetted sources and organising them into a website, [Calaidipedia](#), which aims to be the “go-to resource for those involved in the phenomenal grassroots movement supporting refugees in Calais (and beyond) that sprang up in the late summer of 2015.”



Joe: So she attempted to really bring together the news that was happening on the ground, the different organizations, and just keep a central place where you could go to get information about what was going on,

any news stories, what organizations were there, how to volunteer, just this kind of thing, ‘cause it was very fragmented. I think it was a great service, that’s how I found out how to volunteer: I went on her site, there was a diagram, an amazing diagram... basically it was a flow-chart based on your skills and who you got in contact with to volunteer. For example, the first question was, ‘Do you have carpentry skills?’ Yes, No. Go to ‘Yes’, there’s an email, contact the build-team. This is the person who is doing building work in the Jungle. Voilà. And then you go down and there’s different skills. They try to suck out things like teachers, nurses, doctors... really skilled people, maybe lawyers as well.

On 8 June, 2016, Joe sent out the following email stating his intention of going to Calais and inviting anyone who wished to join him to be in touch—effectively a call to action that served to encourage others who wished to take that first critical step:

Dear Friends,

I hope everyone is doing well, and I look forward to seeing some of you in the months ahead.

I'm contacting you because we may have spoken about this previously, or I just felt you may feel sympathetic to the idea.

In short, I'm planning to go to the Calais refugee camp in France and volunteer there for 1-2 weeks this summer, in between other Dharma events. I feel clear enough about this now to say that I intend to go on my own even if no one else wishes to join, but would really like to open things up for others who feel drawn to participate. I know this would be really supportive for me personally and I think it would be a real joy to practice and serve with others from the Sangha.

I'm done some research online (<http://www.calaidipedia.co.uk> mostly), and it seems that there is already a pretty well-organized network of people doing things on the ground and they've made it pretty easy to plug in where there is a need. They list their #1 need at the moment as volunteers.

The window of time I am available to go is between August 19th and September 2nd, with possible but not preferred extension until September 9th.

So if you're interested in going or know of someone else who may be please do get in touch.

Joe: *Still doubt and uncertainty on my part. I sent an email out at this point to all the people I'd talked to previously about going, and I said I'm going to go. I got an email from D., and she said she knew someone that was working at the Refugee Community Kitchen, one of I think three kitchens operating at that time. Between the three of them—there also might have been some government stuff happening - people were being fed...*

The [Refugee Community Kitchen](#) (RCK) was created in the Autumn of 2015 to help refugees living in the camps of Europe. They write: “Having seen tens of thousands of people forced to leave their homes and living in awful conditions in northern France, a group of us—event organisers, chefs, caterers, doulas, and activists—came together to offer assistance in the form of nourishing meals and access to fresh food daily.” As well as having served over 1.5 million meals everyday since 1 December 2015, they also ensure that their food is sensitive to the tastes and beliefs of the people they serve. They have designed and built numerous communal kitchens, shops and sheltered communal areas in Calais and Dunkirk, and they run food delivery operations to Syria and Paris, where volunteer groups offer support to stranded refugees. Their main operation is an industrial-sized kitchen in the Auberge des Migrant warehouse in Calais, the warehouse that was to become the focus of Joe’s own volunteering experience.

Joe: *D.’s friend was a manager at Refugee Community Kitchen, at least she was at that time. D. asked if I was interested in getting in touch with them. I said yes. She gave me their Facebook, and that was my main point of contact. I emailed them, and I think they got back to me, they sent me a welcome packet, they had welcome packets at that point—all sorts of information, how to get there, how to behave, where to show up. Things like, if you had a van, not to park it in Calais and sleep in it, for example, because, they said, there was tension with the town, with people in the town, and your van might be vandalized. This kind of thing. Things like, don’t go in the refugee camp at night, that kind of stuff.*

I was there in Calais that Summer [2016], and surrounding that experience other friends from the Sangha came. There was openness about what we were doing and others were inspired to also volunteer there at the Warehouse. Some when we were there and others over the Summer months and in the Fall.

RoH: *Summer 2016: this is when the Jungle was still there?*

According to a Refugee Rights Europe [press release](#), the demolition of the southern half of the camp began on 29 February 2016. The operation lasted about a month, and according to the French authorities the number of people affected was around 1,000. A census conducted by [Help Refugees](#) and [L'Auberge des Migrants](#) set the number at closer to 3,500. According to the [Save the Children](#), this number included 400 unaccompanied children. Due to their informal nature, the Calais camps have never undergone the standard demographic analysis usually provided by the UNHCR, with the result that the figures have become as much a part of the political contest as the refugees themselves. Despite promises from the French authorities that adequate accommodation would be provided, the outcome of the operation was that the material structures providing the refugees with a modicum of shelter and security were torn down and the people living in them were left to fend for themselves in the woods or on the streets. Many simply relocated to the northern part of the camp, aggravating an already volatile situation due to overcrowding. Above all, the move did nothing to provide a viable long-term solution to the crisis. Refugees continued to arrive in Calais looking for a way to get to the UK. By October 2016, when the remaining part of the camp was demolished, the population had swelled from around 5,500 to almost 10,000.³

Joe: *This is when the Jungle was still there. It was 10,000 people in the Jungle at that point. In the Spring, the southern half of the camp had been cleared and all the residents had been pushed into the northern half of the camp. I remember reading about this in the lead-up. So there was the sense—'horror' isn't the word, but the pain of the situation...*

³ Help Refugees census, 24 August, 2016, <https://helprefugees.org/latest-calais-census/>; Davies, T., Iskajee, A, Dhesi, S., 'Violent Inaction: the necropolitical experience of refugees in Europe', *Antipode*, Vol. 49 No. 5 2017 ISSN 0066-4812, pp. 1263-1284

the pain of the particular situation and the global situation. And the sense of going in knowing there were people there on the ground and we were going to go in as well and do something. It's this kind of sense. It's quite a strong, inspired movement. I was in Calais for 10 days. It was a buzzing time. It was a lot of energy. It was like a beehive. I said over a hundred people. I'm not sure the exact numbers...

RoH: *Hundreds of volunteers?*

Joe: *Volunteers, yeah, doing all sorts of different things. It must have been over a hundred people for sure every day. They had a kitchen, they were distributing meals, they were distributing dry food, there was a woodyard that I was working in where we would chop up scrap wood and deliver it to the camp. The volunteers had previously given the refugees rocket stoves. Social projects—like teaching English and French. There was a youth service centre. There was a bus they'd converted into a women's centre. There were building teams, they were building simple structures out of pallets. At that point, when I was there, the police had stopped letting them bring in building materials. The police would only let them bring small things that were burnable. They would check all the bags we brought in. They had built mosques and churches and things like this. Simple structures. The camp was alive. There were people running restaurants, there was a black market economy. It was just alive. And coming into this centre of activity were people from all over, mainly British people, but there were Americans, at least one Australian, people from different parts of Europe, Spain. There were two really lovely—I think it was a mother and daughter from Catalonia, teachers, really lovely interactions with them. Such spirit, absolutely amazing. What was being done there. How it was being done... it was the kind of place where you'd show up the first day with no idea what you were doing and by the end of the day you had a job, and by the next day you were showing someone else how to do that job. If you stayed over a week you were...*

RoH: *... an old hand...*

Joe: *... an old hand, yeah. And that's how the whole thing was running. Anyone in a position of any kind of authority—that was just from being there. It was just from showing up and sticking around and getting involved. That's what it was. Can you*

imagine this happening if you went to volunteer at, I don't know, the Red Cross or something, and the head of maintenance comes up to you the first day and says, you know, "we're going to do some night work and rewire the lighting of this whole place, and... you up for it?" Imagine that? That's how this place was running. It was running on, like, sheer human awesomeness.

2. Arrivals

I want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

RoH: *With regard to Calais, what is the story that needs to be told?*

Joe: *What's coming to mind is a specific memory. Three of us were sorting out clothing. There were these large hoppers of t-shirts in the Warehouse, these large bins that you load from the top and take from the bottom. You can store a thousand pieces of clothing in one, something like. A thousand might not be the right number. And we were sorting them, essentially, into lights and darks because the light clothing gives them away to the police at night if they are running from them, trying to jump on lorries or this kind of thing, so they prefer dark clothes. So we are sorting them into lights and into darks. And the lights we would only give out if all the dark ones ran out.*

And there was a feeling at some point during that—that I was sorting these t-shirts for myself... I'm sorting them for myself because these people—they're no different than me... in twenty years it could be me, it could be my family. It's the same fragility, the thin line of life circumstances. That's all that separates. It's not personal, either. It's like we're all in the same boat, that's the reality of it. And then the way we are living isn't quite in line with that. It's apparent in Calais: you can see the the beachfront with ferris wheels and this kind of thing, then in the Warehouse I learned about trench foot for the first time. You know that's the reality of the people, the guys living there. It's a really really stark division.

Trench foot is a painful disorder of the foot affecting skin, nerves and muscle caused by prolonged exposure to damp, muddy and unsanitary conditions. If left untreated it can lead to gangrene and amputation. Cold and wet

weather, sleeping rough without adequate blankets, sleeping bags, mattresses or shelter, and poor living conditions generally are an everyday reality for the refugees. Figures released in February 2016 by UK-based Refugee Rights Europe following a survey of 870 Jungle camp refugees show that 72.7% of respondents said they did not have enough water to shower and wash in the camp, and over half that the toilets, mobile portaloos, were ‘filthy’. Most of them said that the camp was infested with insects and rats, and one man that the rats were ‘as big as rabbits’. The Jungle camp has since been demolished, but the people are still there and the report’s findings still paint a relevant picture. People are suffering from a wide range of mental and physical ailments as a result of the extreme living conditions and severe levels of anxiety and fear.

Joe travelled to Calais from the region of Carcassonne, in the foothills of the French Pyrenees, where he had been on a retreat. He had arranged to meet Marie, a friend from France who had responded to his call-to-action email. It was an overnight journey across France by train, metro and bus to the Calais youth hostel where he and Marie had booked a room. They were committed to meditating twice daily and supporting each other through the coming week.

Joe: *When I arrived, Marie was in the midst of helping a British volunteer—a young woman, probably eighteen-nineteen-twenty, who wasn’t feeling well and had to go to the hospital. Marie is French, so she was actually coordinating this.*

The woman was sitting down in the lobby, and Marie mentioned this to me as soon as I arrived. I was quite tired and I wanted to book into my room. I had that initial thing of “Oh good, someone’s handling it, I don’t want to do it, it’s a bit much for me, but she’s going to do it, that’s good.” I think I asked her if she was alright, she said she was, and I went up to my room to go check in. Marie knocked on the door, and this is when I got

involved. She said we had to go through this woman's room to get her ID and stuff—I forget what it was. She had some medication, as well, that she was taking. She thought she had been roofied. She had been to a bar the night before and thought that someone had slipped something into her drink. Not so sure about this. It seemed like it was more anxiety-related, maybe it was some of the medications she was taking I don't know, but in the end she was fine. Anyway, this is what she thought was happening. And we didn't really know, we just knew that she was in distress—sitting there, shaking, maybe some rapid breathing. Certainly didn't feel good. She had her head in her hands... Anyway, Marie knocks on my door and I get involved.

And so we went into this woman's room and searched. I think we grabbed something that looked like her bag and brought it with us. I think it had her medication in it. Marie had called the French hospital—they usually don't let people do this, but they let me ride in the back of the ambulance as well. The two of us were standing in the back with the med techs, and we all went to the hospital with this woman strapped to a gurney.

And, yeah, we spent the first night in Calais in the hospital. That was just the story. What a night, it was really touching.

The woman was ok. She was worried about money—about having to pay for the hospital bill. Just to say something about the hospital in Calais. They didn't charge her. And they don't charge any of the refugees. This is still the case. The refugees in Calais get hurt for various reasons. From tear gas, fights with each other—something that does happen between the different communities. Right now the Sudanese and Afghan communities don't like each other too much. It's a lot of young men, a lot of them have been through traumatic situations. So sometimes that comes out in really intense outbursts. Fights with each other, being beaten up by the police. This is something I understand happens, just the things that come of living outside. Becoming ill. Falling off lorries. I don't know, people get hurt.

Fear is a major aspect of day-to-day life for the refugees, and the top three causes of fear are police violence, citizen violence and, when the camp still existed, the threat of it being demolished by the authorities—in that order.

Three-quarters of the respondents said they had experienced police violence, most notably in the form of tear gas, but also physical violence and verbal abuse—even, according to some accounts, sexual abuse. It is not always clear from the reports whether the tear gas used is pepper spray or CS gas, but it is clear that these weapons, designed to control rioting crowds, are being used by specially trained officers against individuals, sometimes in confined spaces and often when the victims are asleep in their sleeping bags. Many are the reports of the CRS, *Campagnes Républicaines de Sécurité*, the counter-insurgency and riot-control arm of the French police force, using tear gas deliberately to contaminate clothes, sleeping bags, tents, food and water. This carries its own burden of medical issues, which is compounded by accidents that occur in the camp and as a result of the frequent outbreaks of violence among the refugees themselves; but also, and perhaps more significantly, during the refugees' attempts to gain access to the ferry port and the entrance to the Channel Tunnel. This is when the refugees are most exposed to risk, and the mortality rates due to being hit by cars, lorries and trains while attempting to find a way across to the UK or evading capture by the police are disturbingly high.

Joe: *The thing about the hospital in Calais is—I learned this later on—they treat people. They treat them. There is now a dedicated section in the hospital for treating refugees. I understand the doctors are quite sympathetic. The rest of the staff is mixed. The reception area I'm told at the moment isn't too hospitable. I can get more into that. But the point is essentially that there is a dedicated section in the hospital for refugees.*

The wider point is that that's quite amazing. I find that quite remarkable. Everything ranging from the story of me and Marie going in the back of the ambulance to the hospital, being able to stay with this woman. A British national, a volunteer, being treated, the refugees being treated. It just shows the underlying... maybe just the things that can often

be taken for granted. Human beings taking care of each other, when they don't necessarily know each other or have any reason to—and just how widespread this is.

It is worth noting that at the time of the February 2016 RRE report the medical care provided by charitable organizations and NGOs inside the camp, including Médecins Sans Frontières and Doctors of the World, was viewed in a positive light by a majority of respondents, the main concerns being the lack of sufficient supplies and personnel. Generally speaking, and despite the inevitable shortcomings of the situation, healthcare might be viewed as one of the many highlights of the volunteer relief effort.

Joe and Marie's final destination in Calais was the Auberge des Migrants warehouse, referred to here as the 'Warehouse'. The Warehouse lies in an industrial area on the outskirts of Calais, a short distance from the ferry terminal. From the youth hostel on the beachfront it is a short bus-ride to Calais Théâtre, and from there East along Avenue Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The industrial area is situated between Calais and Dunkirk, not far from the infamous approach to the ferry port, Route National 216, where to this day refugees are losing their lives in their attempts to reach Britain.⁴ The former site of the Jungle camp lies alongside the N216 just to the North of the Warehouse, close to the sand dunes and the abandoned Atlantic Wall gun-emplacement, Battery Oldenburg. After their night in the hospital, Joe and Marie took a day in Calais to catch up and regroup before heading to the place where they would spend the best part of the next ten days volunteering.

⁴ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/16/england-seemed-so-close-refugee-15-crushed-to-death-by-calais-lorry?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Joe: *I sat down for breakfast—either with someone or they sat down with me, I forget, but she was a woman from Scandinavia, and this was not her first time coming here. She'd been multiple times, and she'd been in the old period, when things were a bit more about individual action. And so she knew people in the camp. She was planning on going to the camp that day. I think she was actually with someone from the media from her country... She had developed personal relationships with some of the men—I say they're men just because that's the majority of them, that's just how it is—so she has these friendships. She wasn't sure who was going to be there.*

According to a Help Refugees [report](#) released on 22 February 2016, a week before the first phase of the demolition of the Jungle camp, the total number of people living in the camp was 5,497, with 205 women and 651 children, of which 423 unaccompanied. By July, the total number had grown to 7,300, and it was estimated that the monthly population growth rate was around 15%, with around 50 new people arriving every day.⁵ The percentage difference between men and women in the camp in early 2016 was therefore approximately 94%-3%, with an average age across the whole population of 25.5 years.

Joe: *She'd taken some months off, sounded like some burnout, yeah, quite hard. She even mentioned the difficulty of facing the situation there and then going home. She had really come to see that it was important to be careful about how much she got engaged as well, to look after herself. This is quite a common story, I think, probably one I'm playing out as well in some way. She had this kind of hope, it was like this kind of dream-idea of how she wished she could get some of her friends from the camp to her country, just to spend time. I think she had family—a relative had these cabins out in the wilderness, out near a lake or in the woods or something, and she had this idea of getting some of those guys there, just to see a different side of Europe, somewhere with space, just nature, you know,*

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-calais-jungle-child-refugee-numbers-migrants-syria-france-europe-a7148116.html>

not being in a... god, in the situation they were in, you know, with the police, with homelessness, with the Jungle. That was the dream, whether that was something that she was acting on, that wasn't my sense necessarily, it was more a wish of the heart. Anyway, that was the first interaction with somebody.

3. Warehouse and Woodyard

it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

Joe: *The youth hostel at this time is buzzing with activity. We head out and go to the bus stop, which is just down the street from the youth hostel - and a lot of other people with us. We filled the bus, actually, so there must have been - I don't know, I'm bad with numbers, twenty-thirty-forty people, that's a lot of people! There was a lot of people in Calais at that time. I remember the Catalanian mother and daughter, yeah, even at the bus stop they had a really warm energy, they were just smiling, talking... We got on the bus, and went to the Warehouse.*

We followed the herd of volunteers across the street, down a side-street and through the doors of an industrial warehouse. There's a parking lot, a large building in front of us - a warehouse building with three chambers, you could say—doors. On the left was a parking area, caravan area—whatever, it's where volunteer cars were. People were living there at that time. There was a welcome centre, a little wooden structure they'd built where you said that you're there, and "Hello, what can we do?"

We were given packets where we read health and safety stuff and wrote down some emergency contact info, maybe a bit of info about ourselves, I don't really remember. Insurance—they had insurance for the volunteers. They were desperate for teachers, desperate for medical personnel at that time. And, well, there we were. There was some milling around. We filled out the forms. The thing was run on Indian time, you know, so it started when it started. The briefing was supposed to be around 9:15. The place was full of 'rubbish'—donated food, sweet rolls and candy and things like that, I don't know where they got it, but there was some merchant in Calais that gave them stuff—bread and baguettes and baked goods. There was a coffee station. So it was a place where you could get your morning breakfast and hot drink.

And there were the long-termers doing actual stuff—trucks coming in, people driving forklifts around, yelling greetings out to each other. Quite a special atmosphere.

Morning briefing. Someone yelled in an orange vest. That was the distinction. They liked people to wear yellow-green hi-vis vests. They had a big bin of them. And that was, well, in their own words—this is a loaded, charged thing to say—but to be clear about who was in the Warehouse, because—this is basically a quote—“because fascists are everywhere.” Oh man, that’s such a... it’s a very charged view... but, basically, they were worried about people coming in that wished to do harm. So they had this system where you wear a hi-vis jacket. Not everyone did it, I didn’t wear it a lot, but they were there. And if you had an orange hi-vis jacket it meant that you’d been there for some time.

It is indeed a charged view in an extremely complex situation. Almost half of all respondents in the February 2016 RRE report said they had experienced citizen violence, or acts of violence not committed by the police. Of the 49.5% who said they had suffered citizen violence, 34.33% said they had experienced physical violence, while 29.62% said they had experienced verbal abuse. The kinds of attack the respondents reported included being beaten with sticks by masked men, and being attacked with guns, knives and dogs. Some reported being punched and kicked, others being splashed by cars and thrown into the river; 2.76% reported sexual abuse. Another common experience was being hit by glass bottles and other rubbish being thrown from moving vehicles. In many cases, the attacks appeared to be coordinated, and there are some reports of victims being beaten by gangs of up to 20 aggressors at once.

Although it is difficult to determine from this that the attacks are anything more than a violent response to a volatile situation, there is clear evidence that neo-fascist groups have become active in the Calais area. In 2013, according to the Calais Migrant Solidarity website, a far-right organization,

Sauvons Calais ('Save Calais'), was established. In 2014 it launched a week-long attack on an immigrant squat involving molotov cocktails which resulted in the building being burned down. Calais Migrant Solidarity also speaks of a "regime of apartheid" in the town with many shops and cafés refusing admission to dark-skinned people regardless of whether they are refugees or not.⁶ This may suggest an unbalanced view, however: given that there are also many in Calais who actively support the efforts to bring relief to the refugees, such as the local youth hostel that offers discounted rates to volunteers, the risk of painting an oversimplified picture of the situation cannot be ignored.

Joe: *This woman, C., she came over and yelled out "C'mon, we're going to head to the side-yard!" So we go around to the side, this is where the woodyard is, and the caravans. The toilets as well, there were banks of port-a-potties. When they first started, she said they were shitting in a bucket behind the Warehouse. Really, the place had changed a lot—still changing. Now they have flush toilets.*

She gave us a speech. We did some exercises - all formed a circle and did some calisthenics that she guided. And started asking for volunteers for various things - we need a few people for the kitchen, this many people for the Warehouse, where you sort donations. You know, you raise your hand. We need this many people for the woodyard, we need this many people for tents. At that time they were sorting tents and checking them. And me and Marie both got sucked off into one of those. I volunteered first, for the woodyard, and Marie volunteered for tents.

Speaking about what tents was in the specific, they got donations of festival tents or just regular tents, big truckloads of them, and they had to make sure that they had the equipment to set them up, that they weren't all ripped, that they were decent, essentially, and that the refugees could use them. Obviously bigger tents were more popular, even if you

⁶ <https://calaismigrantsolidaritywordpress.com/introduction-to-calais/>

were a single person: you'd rather have more space to hold your stuff. And that's what Marie did for most of the days. She actually ended up being in charge of it! That's another example of becoming an old hand. And I went to the woodyard.



Joe: *The woodyard was at that time based around getting firewood into the camp. At some point they'd gotten rocket stoves for many of the refugees so they could do their own cooking. I never saw one, but the idea is you could put a small chunk of wood in and you can burn it efficiently and cook a meal.*

At that time the police weren't letting building materials in. They didn't want more permanent shelters, especially since they'd demolished the southern half of the camp and they were keeping people out of the southern half of the camp at that point. But the police would check the bags the woodyard brought in to the camp, and we had to cut the wood small so that they knew it wasn't for building material, and then they'd let it in and people could use it for their cooking fires, and the volunteers would distribute it in the camp.

The overall Warehouse operations were very well organized, I just want to make that really clear. The whole system was really impressive, especially considering the organic nature of it. I think typically in society when we think of anarchy it's synonymous with chaos, whereas to me this is an example of anarchy as a real way—I was going to say 'standard to live by', but maybe just an 'operating principle' - like a real possible for human beings to organize themselves without incredibly rigid hierarchical structures. I had read a book about it immediately before going to Calais, by Noam Chomsky, dealing largely with the anarchic elements in the Spanish Civil War, and, yeah, essentially factory workers and farm workers organizing themselves and running—particularly in Barcelona and other parts of Catalonia—running their operations very well. I think for me Calais was an example of this.⁷

⁷ Chomsky, N., Bateman B. (ed.), *Chomsky on Anarchism* (AK Press; Oakland, 1969)

So, yeah, the woodyard. We had an introduction. They had steel-plated boots there so that if people stepped on nails they wouldn't get one through the foot. There was this German guy, an older guy, who had obviously spent his life working in machine shops. Incredibly knowledgeable. You had to wear ear-protectors, the boots, eye protection. There's a training system for the saws...

They had like a hippie lounge-area with old couches. They had a dry-erase board with how many industrial sacks of wood they'd delivered to the camp. There was a map of the camp, hand-drawn, showing where the different communities were. It had names—I forget them—New Eritrea, I heard recently in a movie, a Syrian section, Sudanese section, Afghani section, maybe a Kurdish section. I know a lot of Iraqi Kurds were in the Dunkirk camp because they were a minority, a small minority, and were safer there.

There was a little office, it was just tucked in against the wall of the Warehouse and had some covering, and that's where there was at least one guy on his laptop all the time. Because they were also trying to promote this. There's a lot of self-promotion, you know, putting up videos on Facebook, making Facebook posts, making flyers to try to raise money, to get volunteers, to raise awareness.

There was a covered rain-protection kind of thing made of metal, and maybe fibreglass sheeting, or something like that. And underneath were all these power tools, yeah, at least one chop saw, at least two table saws that I remember. Various stations. We'd get donations of wood. They had some farmers in the area that would donate stuff. People within this organism I'm calling 'the Warehouse' would go out to collect the donated wood. One of the teams would do this. There was a team of more long-term people there. Like this German guy, I was saying, one American guy, an Irish guy, this English girl, another girl from Britain—so it was a team. Mostly young, the German guy was older, the American guy was also older.

So, it was this process of the donations coming in. If there were pallets, we had a pallet-breaking team. We used a pallet-breaker, a large metal tool like a crowbar but specifically designed to pull pallets apart; crowbars, hammers—I like to break them apart with

hammers. It's a really effective way: you bang the planks out and the nails just pop out. It's great.

There was a team, we had wedges and sledgehammers, and if we had big unprocessed 'raw' wood, like pieces of trees, we would sledge them with wedges into sections that could go through the table saws. The whole process was to get the wood to the chop and table saws so that we could cut it into small enough pieces to get it into the camp. It was a frenzied operation, by the way. I think we were making demand every week, but it was just so.

We worked in pairs on the table saws. One person helped feed the stuff. Actually we worked in pairs on every power tool. One of the big things is that it was down to the blades: when we hit a nail with a blade at least one piece of the blade would break, and blades cost a certain amount of euros—I forget what it was, but it was prominently displayed in the lounge. And the whole objective was not to hit nails so that we could get as much use out of each blade as we could. They'd run out eventually. And that was the scale of this operation. We'd go through these blades—you know, this is something that typically in a machine shop I don't think you go through that quickly—but here we were going through them, and the objective was not to hit nails. So that's what the second person was to do, to point out all the nails to the person operating the saw, hand them the piece of wood, and then they'd cut it. It was also to keep an eye on the operator, and if they did anything that was unsafe, like putting their hand within a certain distance of the blade, you'd tap the person on the shoulder and you'd say it's time to switch. It was also a constant switching. This was part of the thing, because we were working fast, working consistently. I've never been involved with anything like that, it was absolutely something else.

In the best sense, an activist's most urgent hope is that their work will no longer be needed. Meanwhile, however, there exists a reciprocal relationship between the provider and the recipient of the caring action, in which the provider acquires a sense of their own humanity through caring identification with the condition of the recipient, and the recipient finds some form of support in their time of need. This is the essence of the

‘conversational activism’ already alluded to in the Introduction, and the realization of care it gives rise to; the daily economy of saw blades and nails, pallets and tent-poles, of millions of meals served, its lymph. The creative dynamism that derives from this co-dependent relationship is the driving principle behind grassroots organisms such as those we have visited here, but, if we are to open the point up to the broader perspective, one can only ask just how necessary the relationship between provider and recipient actually is in the context of the more large-scale organizations.

Joe: *I think this is what I wanted to talk about: to talk a little bit about our intention to make this also a spiritual practice. Marie and I were sharing a room in the youth hostel, which is two beds to a room and a shared bathroom with a neighbouring suite. And, yeah, we intended to meditate twice a day, and we did—I think we hit it pretty much every day. Certainly that day we did. We’d get up in the morning, we’d meditate for 20-30 minutes, go get breakfast and go to work. And in the evenings we’d do the same. I think this is crucial. I think this is a really important point. It makes things different. And I’ll just say, the support—I think having each other there was absolutely crucial. A lot of appreciation for her. I couldn’t have done it on my own. It would have been very different on my own.*

It’s the intensity of the situation, the tiredness from the work. Lot’s of candy going in the mouth and biscuits and things like that. It’s the other story of the place. Yeah, and we’d eat on the beach with the sun going down, it was lovely. We’d watch the ferries go out. And, you know, it was fucking surreal. It was just the enormity of the situation. And it just goes through you, just sitting on the beach, and—it’s like, there’s nothing else in the world. Even in the Warehouse, too, it’s like there’s nothing else in the world, it’s just here... that’s it... the intensity. You know, it’s light, we laughed, made jokes... I think there’s probably a lot of sadness there, too. It’s just intense... Why would I say ‘sadness’? Because it’s heavy. The woman C. started that day with a poem. It was either that day or the next. I think it was that day. It was about a young woman... the experience of young women that were refugees and came from these war-torn countries - and it was... it’s just heartbreaking. I

remember the quote: "You wouldn't put your children on a boat if the water wasn't safer than the land." And that was the situation. That was the sense of the situation, anyway... It was intense... We were just kind of grateful to be alive, I guess.

4. The Jungle Camp

no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the ocean

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

After little more than a week of working at the Warehouse, learning new tasks and becoming an ‘old hand’, Joe goes to the Jungle camp itself in response to a standing invitation to any volunteers who wish take part in French/English conversation classes with the refugees after working hours. The project is called Jungle Books. Other jobs involving direct contact with the camp include joining distribution teams to deliver wood, dry goods and other necessities to the refugees, or providing urgently required skilled services such as teaching, interpreting and legal or medical assistance. Generally speaking, though, volunteers are actively discouraged from entering the camp.

Joe: *It was quite late in the volunteering, towards the end, maybe day 7, maybe day 8. Marie might have left at that point, I don't remember. I walked with a few other people that were interested in going. I was a bit nervous of going on my own. It's not so much the fear of going to the camp but more about the fear of not being part of a programme. I like order, surprisingly, if there's something happening already, it's easier for me to follow along.*

We walked to the Jungle through these roundabouts and streets, alongside some farm country as well, and went to the Jungle. This was the first time I'd seen tear gas in France.

Tear gas canisters. I've seen them in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem, East Jerusalem. So I got to this large area of land... some weeds growing, looks like sand, bits of plastic, a lot of plastic on the ground, I don't know if it was a dirt or tarmac road going alongside it. This is the southern section of the camp that was demolished. There were just a few buildings, I think, like mosques, churches—Jungle Books was there, and maybe the women's bus... it's stuff that when the authorities demolished the camp in the Spring, the previous Spring, they had to leave certain structures standing, but they demolished the rest of it.

And then north of that was a tent city. I can't really picture it too well right now, but it was there. I didn't go into that section - might have seen some police, I don't remember. Passed some loos, portaloos. I passed a medical team that was walking out, I think they'd been treating people all day, I overheard some of their conversation. And there's some guys milling about... young guys, refugees. I asked them where Jungle Books was, and one of them showed us... It touches me because I spend a lot of time in India and Palestine, and I have this sense of the traditional hospitality there. And particularly with regard to Palestine it bothers me, because there is such traditional goodness - I hear a lot of stereotypes about Arabic people, people from the Middle East, people that aren't of white European descent, basically...

I remember coming to this place and there was someone there that was just overworked, that looked overworked, stressed out - a volunteer. He was very interested in people that spoke French, yeah, there was a lot of demand for French conversation classes. English, not so much. And most of us were English speakers, so he asked us to go around and pick up trash, because that's what was needed at the moment. There's a lot of the throwing of the rubbish on the ground amongst the population in the camp, still the case. Just the reality of the situation. The young men there just throw rubbish on the ground. A lot of them do, anyway. So we were litter-picking teams, and that's what I was doing, I was picking up litter.

I had a lot of moments in those ten days... of just watching myself doing something and hardly believing that I'm here and doing this. I don't know another way to say it. Chopping wood under the beating sun in France with 10,000 people sleeping just some distance

away. It just hits you sometimes. It just hit me sometimes... And it was one of those moments picking up the litter, as well. I had a lot of them. It's like there's no narrative... It's just... It's kind of an incredulity, a feeling of incredulousness, like "What am I? Who am I? What am I doing here? Am I anything? What am I?" Quite an experience.

There are other volunteers talking to people in one-to-ones and in small groups. Some of the young men from the camp came over and helped us pick up litter. It goes on to the kind of simple kindness or simple decency, you know. It probably wouldn't make too much sense to them why we were picking up litter, but they saw it was important to us so they would do it.

I did that and got my litter bag full, and I went back in and at that point I think some more of the guys from the camp had showed up. By the way, I'll make a point here that the people that came to Jungle Books were the ones that wanted to learn, that were motivated, yeah, not everyone was motivated, there were a lot of different kinds of people in the camp, there's also the criminal element... a lot of different situations. They can't be lumped all into one. And the people there at Jungle Books, they had an interest in learning English and French. That's why they were at Jungle Books - 'Jungle Books', it's a pretty obvious pun, or play on words: 'jungle', 'book', and then it's the Jungle. Nice one.

Set up by British teacher Mary Jones in 2015, when the camp still had an estimated 3,000 inhabitants, [Jungle Books](#) grew fast with donations, especially following an [article](#) that appeared in *The Guardian* on 24 August 2015. Mary Jones' stated purpose was to provide "real, practical help. Many people here are well-educated - they want to get on and they want books that will help them read and write English, apply for jobs, fill in forms." Alongside the library, it included a classroom, a women's and children's centre, and a radio station, [Radio Jangala](#). Jungle Books fast became far more than just a library. In an effort to redirect the nature of the donations to better address the actual needs of camp residents, Mary Jones set up a

crowdfunding campaign with a £10,000 target to provide basic supplies for the Winter months such as generators, LED rechargeable lamps and cooking equipment. Dictionaries and laptops were also in high demand. Jungle Books also became a space where discussions were held on how the different communities could live better together, and where people could present their own cultures to others and tell their own story of how they came to be there.

Joe: *There were more people, more refugees showed up with an interest in learning, and there was more opportunity for the volunteers who showed up to engage in some one-to-one conversation. One of the volunteers working there was trying to pair people off, and somehow I ended up with this one guy who really wanted to be read to from books. I think he asked if anyone was willing to read, and I quickly raised my hand. It was a Sudanese man, I don't remember his name. Maybe it's written down somewhere... This is the one refugee that I've had contact with. He knew what he wanted, smiled at me, and I think we shook hands.*

They had a few buildings there, constructed buildings. None of it has a foundation, right? It's made with pallets, plastic roofing, maybe sheeting on the roof, metal poles, this kind of thing. It's simple stuff, but they had some buildings that had been constructed by volunteers, and the Sudanese man and myself went into one of them, which was a library, and he picked out a book. They had some picnic tables, we walked to a picnic table, we sat down together at the picnic table, on the same side. He was coughing, he was sick, he said, and he sat away from me - and here's the thing: he sat away, at a little bit of a distance, and he said "I don't want you to get sick," essentially. I don't remember the exact words, but he said that he was sitting at some distance because he was concerned about passing whatever he had to me. Again, this kind of simple decency, simple humanity, I don't know what you would call it, 'kindness'? 'Hospitality' is the wrong word, but something simple, humane and decent. The fact that he'd be concerned about me, you know. Where do we talk about that?

And so I read to him from this book, which was - it was a terrible book. It was a kind of thriller. It wasn't a good book, let's just leave it at that. But I read to him, and he would stop me occasionally and ask what words meant, he'd write them down in English and ask me how to spell them, and write them down in Arabic, too. He was older. He was maybe in his forties—it looked like, but you don't know, he could have been in his thirties. Sometimes people look older than they are, especially if they've lived rough a bit, or worked hard outside.

What else to say about him?

He stopped me. I was reading, and he stopped me, asking if I was thirsty, was worried about my voice, my throat, and said we could take a break, we could stop. At some point he took a turn reading. You know, the concern about my throat, reading too much. I was just very touched, it was very sweet. And we went back and forth. At some point the hour was up. It was possible to get a ride home. And I said "time to go," and he said "oh fine." Shook hands, big smiles, and he asked me if I was coming back tomorrow. He had a bit of a reputation for being the guy who wanted to be read to, and that's easy for me, the reading, and I think we were a good match. I said I didn't know...

...I didn't go back, actually, that was my last day in Calais. I have no idea where that man is, that Sudanese man, I have no idea, I don't know if he's alive right now. I hope he found—I hope he found something

A small memory is coming to mind. I think he might have had family somewhere in Germany, certainly someone I talked to had family in Europe somewhere. Which is another interesting side of the story. People had family in different countries and they were trying to get to England for whatever reason. Some of them had family there, some just wanted better opportunities. Some were just in the Jungle because it was an easier place to be than other places, there was shelter, there was food, there was community, your friends were there. It's warmer, probably warmer than the streets of Paris in Winter. So people came for all sorts of reasons.

On the broader question of education in the camp, in an [article](#) for *The Conversation* by Aura Lounasmaa, a lecturer at the Centre for Narrative

Research, University of East London, the first UK higher education institution to offer credited courses to students in the camp, education is the key to addressing the three main concerns for European politicians and citizens regarding the refugees and migrants arriving in the EU: integration, employability and cost to the taxpayer. Through the University's [Life Stories](#) programme, a group of men aged 18-35 took courses in academic reading skills, writing, art, poetry and photography. The group included a college lecturer from Ethiopia, an optician from Syria, English literature and electrical engineering graduates from Sudan and a veterinary science student from Eritrea. Other students came from Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. The purpose of the project was to encourage the students to tell their own stories, which have been collected published by Pluto Press under the title *Voices from the Jungle*. Once again due to its informal nature, the Jungle camp lacked the educational support available in official camps, and the UEL had to rely for its project on the cooperation of volunteer organisations such as Jungle Books.

5. A Community Of Souls

the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child's body
in pieces

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

Joe: *These ten days was also where I started seeing some of the effects of the reaching out done previously. I spoke earlier about writing messages on Facebook and emails to people, and I remember speaking to people when I was at Ekuthuleni beforehand. I spoke to a man that I met there - he knew someone else that I knew from this project in India, and she was planning on going to volunteer in Calais.*

I don't know if her deciding to volunteer was related to anything I had done. For some reason, I'm drawing that connection - that it was related to the Facebook post I had written in the Spring, but I don't actually know. It may have been unrelated and coincidental, or it may have been related.

It's kind of this movement I'm describing. There's both this mass movement of people, in particular with Calais, and then also there are our particular abilities to affect each other. In this case, particularly in Calais, my talking to people or emailing people or writing messages on Facebook has had effects, for sure. As I've been affected by others. So it's just kind of two movements to keep in mind.

I guess it gets at the spirit of the time, you know. It was quite a hopeful time. And the sense of possibility, of excitement, of friends, seeing people from other contexts coming in and getting involved. Like the sense of this movement happening. We can make a change, we can do something. And it's empowering. 'Empowering': that's a word worthy of reflection.

About half way through our time at the Jungle, Marie and I went to the Warehouse for a movie night, and this also is an important point about the movement in Calais, that it wasn't just an organism for work, it was also a community, and I think this is really important. As I said, there were people living in the Warehouse, yeah, there were caravans nearby. If you were staying for longer, more than a few weeks, if there was one available, you could sleep in them. They were in the parking lot.

That was one place people were staying. There was the youth hostel where a lot of short-termers were staying. People were renting AirBnBs in Calais; there were some people living in Calais that had opened their homes to volunteers, or were very much involved themselves. I met one young guy, early twenties, who was staying with a couple in Calais that were long-term, involved with one of the projects. I don't remember what project it was, it might have been the women's bus. Something small and very much related to direct services with the refugees.

By the way, the women's bus, I've mentioned it a few times, there was a bus that was converted to a place where women in the camp—who were very much a minority... and I think there's a lot of danger going with that—could come. There was daycare for the children, they could get—the word 'pampering' comes to mind—nails done, hair done, a place just to talk, like simple kinds of things. Without any men around, basically, was the gist of it.

The 'Unofficial Women and Children's Centre' was housed in a double-decker bus and was established to provide resources and aid to the most vulnerable people in the camp. It worked in partnership with a number of organizations, including Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières, Doctors of the World, Salaam and s des Migrants, offering information, referrals to other services including women-only medical and therapeutic support, distribution of weekly aid and essential supplies, children's play activities, support for minors, English lessons and activities, such as weekly 'pamper-sessions' for women. It also established an office in Birmingham to provide support for women and minors arriving in the UK.

There was a programme in the Warehouse, informational meetings where people that were experts in one thing or another would give presentations, talks, discussions on things that were happening either in the camp or the wider refugee crisis. At that point, there might have been some counselling services already. I know that now, for sure, there are. Definitely there were times to come and talk about your experiences. So this might have been the seed of the processing kind of thing, where people could get some support and share the intensity of it—‘cause it’s quite an intense situation. There was a real atmosphere of non-discrimination in the Warehouse. Real careful about gender discrimination, things like this. It’s taken really seriously. As well as cultural respect. One thing that they did was they had a movie night, I think once a week, where they showed a film. And it was in the lounge area I described in the woodyard, outside. There was a projector, and people would come and everyone was welcome and watched a film together.

This actually triggers a memory for me, because I was mentioning about the intensity and the stress, and that was in the air as well. I remember this film, and a lot of people there were smoking, drinking beers, this kind of thing. These were some of the coping mechanisms. Some people looked tired, really tired, and you saw a lot of smoking cigarettes and drinking the beer to unwind, just a few beers, but this was kind of the culture. Amidst all the enthusiasm, you know, it had these two sides. There was the great enthusiasm during the day, the pumping music and the incredible creativity. But there was the stress as well.

Right, the movie. We watched a movie, a documentary on Greenpeace. And this was actually... yeah, pretty rough... pretty serious stuff. I don’t know if you know this, but Greenpeace originated when the US government was doing nuclear tests on an island off the coast of Alaska. Some guys living in—I forget what city it was in British Columbia—it was quite a counter-cultural area, they got this ship and went to protest. They were going to just park outside, offshore, so that if the bomb blew up they were going to blow up too. They were hoping to stop the test, essentially. And this was the origins of Greenpeace. That was the name of the ship.

These guys, they ended up getting stopped by the coast-guard when they were refuelling and didn’t end up getting there, and the test went off, and you see the explosion. It really brings

it home that this is big stuff, this is a wider issue that we're working with. We're working with global crises that reach their roots into every aspect of conscious life on Earth. And Calais is just a nexus of that. It's an important nexus because you can feel it there. I felt it especially this year.

They went on to protesting seal hunting in Canada, but then they went to the big one, which is the whale hunting by the Russian and Japanese fleets. And that's terrible to see, it was absolutely horrible... harpooned whales... being diced open... these big ships with blood pouring out the gunnels, 'cause they're processing ships as well... all that also drives it home, just how big this is, how this is a cultural, a species-consciousness issue that we're working with. I don't know how else to put it into words... A word that comes to mind is 'outrage', or it's like a 'travesty'... like a... what do you call something that's horrific and wrong that shouldn't happen? What was the Holocaust? I don't know if I like the word 'tragedy', it's not the right word—whatever that word is, that's what whale-hunting is, and that film really drove it home for me.

6. Departures

run away from me now
I don't know what I've become
but I know that anywhere
is safer than here

From *Home*, by Warsan Shire

Joe: *At some point Marie got a bit tired as well. She got stuck into the tents. And then she got basically in charge of it. In charge of that section. She knew what she was doing, and she was training new people how to do it. This is taking in donations of tents, cleaning, sorting them, assembling them, deciding what's appropriate and what isn't. And she got tired, some days in, and I remember she used the analogy, that it was like a mouth that was never fed. And the image that comes to my mind is the Tibetan hungry ghost metaphor.*

And there might be something of that. Of the operations in Calais, the humanitarian operations. It was like a big mouth that was never fed. You keep feeding it and it's never fully fed, you know, the enormity of the camp, more people coming in, the desperate pace trying to meet demand. Like a mouth taking in food and not being full. I think that's a really wise metaphor.

I don't remember the exact conversation, I just know we talked about this at some point and I think that's when the two of us decided to change the pace. We had a lot of these conversations. This is the benefit of sangha, of friendship. We ate together, we meditated together. I keep saying this, but this is really valuable, 'cause we talked to each other. We talked about our experience, and I think it helped us to stay a bit sane, a bit measured, a bit calm. I don't think I felt... sucked in. There was always a bit of me that felt able to be with the situation, not just in it. Coming and going out of that, but—there's an element of a witness while participating, which is important, I think, 'cause I've also been in many situations where I got really sucked in.

A result of this kind of support is taking breaks. I think we took a day off together. We walked in the parks in Calais. And, you know, it's important, really really important, absolutely crucial...

Towards the end, Marie left early. She was on unemployment benefits in France, and part of that is you have to show up to job interviews when they find you one. She stayed seven or eight days, I don't remember. I remember I was with her, she made the decision, and that's what happened. A lot of respect for her. I'm really glad she was there with me. That we were there together.

Marie had left, that was it, so there was space in the room. It's a place where you share rooms with random people, double rooms, which at that time I wasn't interested in just because we'd had this great space with the meditation, the quiet, caring for each other. There was a lot of care for each other... like partners in crime, really. Using her computer, eating together, as I said multiple times, checking in, having dialogues, talking about what was happening—a lot of care. In the Warehouse, too, she would check on me. She'd come by sometimes. If I saw her out, too, if I took a break from the woodyard, I'd check on her. We'd eat lunch together quite often. And with other people. We met a lot of people. We met tons of people.

Met quite an amazing woman. She had done work with NGOs, and I asked her quite honestly if these big NGOs—I had my doubts about them, you know, I've worked in a lot of grassroots, alternative places, and the question was essentially 'are big NGOs doing good? Are they just doing good? Are they also causing harm?' I think they are. That's the view I come with.

What's your take on that?

I forget how I asked her, though. It wasn't that way because it's important when meeting each other to have considerate dialogue. You can ask that question in a way that closes someone down or in a way where you are able to find a meeting place and actually have a dialogue. And somehow I pulled that one off, or we pulled that off together. She was quite blunt, and said a lot of times it's white people making nice jobs for themselves with benefits and a good salary. She was still working within that system and criticizing it. She said one

of her main criticisms is that big organizations, NGOs, are dependent on charity, on donation, and a lot of donation comes from governments. So there's government influence and then there's corporate influence, which ties into this system of empire building and exploitation that we're involved in. She said in the UK the government is good about giving money and still accepting criticism. The NGOs can criticize on one hand and still get money from the government. In the US it's actually not like that, you also have to tow the line. So it's a worse situation in the US.

But, yeah, impressed with her. Impressed with everyone I met, actually. From all different backgrounds and... the point there is that... we don't know each other and if we look hard enough we'll find something to be impressed with in just about anybody. And I think going forward there's a lot more benefit to that than setting up armed camps and pulling each other down... my way's right, your way's wrong... It's a real practice.

But in a place like Calais where there were so many different people, it's like the place gave the practice... spoon-fed you the practice. And that's quite a thing. It was quite a place for that. It's easy when we are kind of in our own bubbles to not see each other. But when you are kind of forced to see each other—then you do.

And that's the story of Calais, it was everything all rolled into one. I went to the train station... went on the train, to the south of France, feeling quite a lot of things... quite a lot of sadness... quite a lot of—it's like the heart is just broken, but not in a defeated sense. It's just feeling coming through, I don't know how else to say it. You were asking me about what's important to me. It's something to do with the heart. With allying oneself with the broken heart, because the heart breaks. You could say it gets bigger, but it just breaks, it holds more. It holds more, that's the point. So leaving Calais with a broken heart. That's the story of Calais.

Warsan Shire

Poet, activist, editor and teacher, Warsan Shire was born to [Somali](#) parents in [Kenya](#), east Africa, in 1988, and grew up in London. Her words “No one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark,” from the poem *Home*, have been called “a rallying call for refugees and their advocates.” In an interview, Shire noted “character driven poetry is important for me—it’s being able to tell the stories of those people, especially refugees and immigrants, that otherwise wouldn’t be told, or they’ll be told really inaccurately. And I don’t want to write victims, or martyrs, or vacuous stereotypes... my family are really amazing - they’ll tell me, “I have a new story for you,” and I’ll get my Dictaphone and record it, so I can stay as true as possible to the story before I make it into a poem.” [excerpted from [Poetry Foundation](#)]

HOME

*No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbours running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

No one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck*

*and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.*

*You have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than a journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied*

*no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough*

*the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs*

*maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off*

*or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child's body
in pieces.*

*I want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of a gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hungry
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important*

*no one leaves home unless home is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying -
leave,
run away from me now
I don't know what I've become
but I know that anywhere
is safer than here.*



Further Engagement

“I was in the forest when some police beat me up
and I had to walk on crutches for four weeks.”

16-year-old Eritrean boy

“The police beat me with a baton, which gave me
cuts across the hands and chipped my front tooth.
They also sprayed tear gas into my eyes.”

17-year-old South Sudanese boy

—from Refugee Rights Europe, ‘Twelve Months On’

On 30 October 2017, Refugee Rights Europe issued its [update](#) on the situation with the Calais refugees post-demolition. According to their data, there are currently around 700 individuals sleeping rough in the Calais area, roughly 40% of which are children. Without even what little shelter and protection the camp afforded, these individuals are now more exposed than before to violence and disease, and police abuse has, according to the statistics presented in the RRE report, intensified. In March 2017, according to a Human Rights Watch [report](#), local authorities barred humanitarian groups from distributing food, water, blankets, and clothing to migrants, a decision that was overruled by a court as constituting inhuman and degrading treatment. Even so, distribution remains restricted, and police regularly disrupt distribution operations, harassing aid workers by subjecting them to regular ID checks aimed at hampering relief efforts and unlawfully confiscating audio and video recording devices to examine and delete content. On October 23, according to another Human Rights Watch [report](#), the French administration and security forces’ internal investigations departments established that excessive force and other abuses had been

employed by police against child and adult migrants in Calais, reports which have since been dismissed by authorities such as the Deputy Prefect for Calais, who said they were “allegations, individuals’ declarations, not based on fact.”

The Warehouse continues to operate year round, offering essential humanitarian support to refugees in Calais and northern France, and serving as a hub for refugee aid operations further afield, in greater Europe and the Middle East. The organisations operating out of the warehouse, including [Help Refugees](#), [L’Auberge des Migrants](#), [Utopia 56](#) and [Refugee Community Kitchen](#), continue to rely *entirely* on volunteers and donations to continue their operations. All of the organisations are active on social media, and collectively run [The Digital Warehouse](#), an effective way of finding current information on what is happening on the ground in Calais from those directly involved.

To find out how you can make a difference in Calais, either through volunteering your time or resources, please see the Help Refugees website: <https://helprefugees.org/help/>. No donation is too small, no amount of time is too little, and most of all, *you don’t need permission to make a difference*.

Joe now co-organizes an annual Meditation in Action retreat in Calais called [Humanity in Action](#). The retreat combines meditation and group support with volunteer work in the Warehouse, and intends to be an open door for anyone who wishes to engage directly with the refugee crisis in Calais. The next Humanity in Action retreat is happening in May 2018. All are welcome. For more information and how to join, please see the website: <https://www.sanghaseva.org/comingup.html#haven>.

Sources

The UNHCR website (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>) is a good place to go for an overview of the current status of the refugee crisis worldwide. In their words:

We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. In a world where nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution, [our work](#) at UNHCR is more important than ever before.

Another page of interest on their website offers a clarification of the difference between the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html>.

One option for a grassroots perspective on the refugee crisis generally is [Are You Syrious?](#), “daily news digests from the field, mainly for volunteers and refugees on the route, but also for journalists and other parties.” Are You Syrious? is a Croatian-based NGO which began life in 2015 bringing support to refugees on the Balkan route. They also have a Facebook [page](#).

Reports, articles, papers

BBC

—[‘The history of the Calais ‘Jungle’ camp and how it’s changed since 1999’](#)

Calais Migrant Solidarity

—[‘Calais: this border kills’](#)

—[‘Introduction to Calais’](#)

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—[‘Calais: 1816-2016’](#)

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—[‘Like Living in Hell’](#)

—[‘France: Inquiry Finds Police Abused Migrants in Calais’](#)

—[‘Calais Court Case Update’](#)

Ibrahim, Y., Howarth, A., MCCSA

—[‘Imaging the Jungles of Calais: Media Visuality and the Refugee Camp’](#)

Independent

—[‘Refugees in Calais suffering trench foot as squalid condition take their toll’](#)

Refugee Rights Europe

—[‘Still Here: exploring further dynamics of the Calais camp’](#)

—[‘Twelve Months On’](#)

—[‘The Long Wait’](#)

—[‘Press Release – 29 Feb 2016’](#)

The Conversation

—[‘Lessons in the Calais Jungle: teaching life stories and learning about humanity’](#)

The Guardian

—[‘Calais refugee library flooded with thousands of books’](#)

—[‘Student diversity and widening participation’](#)

—[‘Hundreds of Eritreans enslaved in torture camps in Sudan and Egypt’](#)

—[‘Calais fears clashes as far right plans protest march’](#)

—[‘What does the closure of the Calais camp mean for the refugees?’](#)

—[‘‘They are falling apart’: the fate of lone children in Calais’ refugee camp’](#)

—[‘Last of Calais refugee children evacuated as camp clearance ends’](#)

—[‘New fears for 1,000 lone children in Calais refugee camp’](#)

—[‘French police ‘use beatings, tear gas and confiscation’ against Calais refugees’](#)

—[‘England seemed so close’: refugee, 15, crushed to death by Calais lorry’](#)

The New Arab

—[‘The return of trench foot to northern France’](#)

The Telegraph

—[‘Far-right extremists lead hundreds in Calais anti-migrant protests’](#)

—[‘Migrant anarchy at Calais hurts everyone’](#)