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Rolling Waves and Forgetfulness

An Account of an Afghan Refugee's Experiences in Sicily Through Poetic Representation

Michelle Reale

Abstract Mixing qualitative methods and poetic inquiry, I attempt to show the brutal realities of an Afghan refugee trying to find safety and acceptance in his new country of Italy.

Keywords: *Laurel Richardson, poetic inquiry*

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.

— Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*

What is past is prologue.

— William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The lives of refugees are fraught with misrepresentation and misunderstanding. In Italy, refugees battle for survival on many fronts. Often, they are seen less as the vulnerable human beings that they are and instead are used as political pawns, treated as invisible, and become victims of discrimination and crime. They are scapegoats in a society with rampant unemployment and a rapidly changing demographic, challenging the notion of who is an Italian. These poems represent a series of interviews with an Afghani refugee, who, while functioning in Sicilian society, still does not live the life of security, both emotional and physical, that he believes, correctly, is his right. Inspired by Laurel Richardson (2003), I decided to present his experience using poetic representation. These poems attempt to show, for lack of a better word, not *the* life cycle of refugees, but *a* life cycle of one of them. The travel is treacherous and the arrival a profound shock. My hope is that these

poems give a much needed window into this, in sociological terms, modern phenomenon, but for the refugee a very personal and life changing one.

In the Beginning

I never wanted to leave my mother.
She is such a good woman, she delivers
babies in our village. She is a trained nurse
with compassion in a place where most
people have forgotten what that is.
She also grows fruit and sells it for what she can.
I have a brother who has been in and out of jail.
This is common in Afghanistan.
Men either go to jail or disappear.
My father went away, but like
a miracle, he came back.

He joined the local police force, a respectable
job back then. The Taliban never stopped watching him.
They threatened him, but called it "recruitment."
I heard them yell one night "we will kill all of them."
I told my father, no one would judge him.
He was also the imam of a very small
mosque during the day.
At night, he hurled bombs
in whatever direction
the bleary-eyed Taliban
pointed their fingers.

Guerra Santa¹

In school we learned
the Islam of the Taliban,
so different than the Islam
of Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Every Friday was reserved
for shaming someone.
This was called "pilgrimage,"
and they told us it was our

duty as good Muslims.
If you did not attend,
they would come to
your house and kill you,
ignoring the screams
of your loved ones.

This made me feel crazy.
I used to hold my head
with my shaking hands.

I studied the Koran
like I was taught.
I found no justification,
even though I looked.
The smack of a stone
thrown with a vengeance
we did not own, against
soft skin, still warm and
living flesh, taunts me
like a funeral song.

Now I know the true
meaning of *guerra santa*.

Sorry

I am so sorry.
You are a nice lady,
but I cannot tell this story
in a straight line. Please
use my real name. I am so
afraid of disappearing again.
If I did, would you tell the world
my story?

Natal

Now my mother has bad arms,
bad legs. Still, the work
needs to be done.

I wish she could be with me and
I would go and get her myself.
If only I could.

She tells me "son, I was born here."
I know these things, and still.
She tells me that nothing is easy,
but she is home.

"If I lost my life here, I would be proud."
If I close my eyes, I can still smell the
sweet fragrance of my mother's rice.
I pray to Allah that she is proud of me.

Denial

From Afghan to Iran,
I was kidnapped for money.
They tortured me with a knife.
Allah will not mind if I pull up
my pants leg to show
you the scars.
Day and night they ordered me:
"Call your family for money!"
I told them:
I have no money.
I have no family.
I denied them to
save them. I never
want to have to
do that again.

The Border Between Here and Somewhere Else

At the Turkish border,
I found a man
to organize my travel
Everything seemed to go
so slow, and I was a young man
in a great hurry.

This man managed to get
a few of us to Istanbul.
But without documents,
the police caught me.
For six months I sat
in a prison where
day and night looked
the same.

In that jail I spent two months,
made some friends.
One of the guards was
so young and easy to talk to.
A few of us put our
money together. He went and
bought us some clothes.
Some candy. The cigarettes we were
desperate for and smoked
as if they were our last.

What We Were

When I was released
from prison, I was taken
to a hotel. I saw so many people.
We waited until they were ready
to put 30 of us on a small dinghy.
We began our travel so early
in the morning, you could not tell
if the day was ending
or just beginning.
Greece was our destination.
We had no food and no water.
We were 19 men, 6 women.
Five children.

Deep Sleep

My dreams? Please don't
ask me of such things.

I forgot them long ago.
But I will tell you
something I cannot forget.
The water was black and filthy smelling.
My body soon swelled from
the sun and the heat.
I went into a coma, but I
was the lucky one.
Three men went crazy
because in that dinghy
they lost wives and children.
The two children who remained
lost their mothers.
One child was from Afghanistan.
One child was from Lebanon.
We could not help the children.
We could not help ourselves.

Leaving a Trace

In the next part I am in
a container. The driver tells us
we will reach our destination
in six hours. Six days later,
we did not arrive in Greece,
but instead, Udine.
Amongst our bodies
pressed together,
a man died.
I cannot tell you his name
or the moment he took his last breath.
I do remember hitting the ground,
waking up in the hospital.
I cannot account for about four days.
The doctors told me I needed me to get well, quick.
When I did, they told me the police would
need me at the station to give my fingerprints.

A Guest in the House

The destination was Italy, and I got there.
 But Italy is strange. Sicily is stranger.
 Right now I have no particular problem,
 but everyone knows this
 could change tomorrow.
 Some people here are good.
 Some are bad. I am from
 Afghanistan, and sometimes
 people think I am Italian.
 The Africans, because of
 their color, have more
 problems than me.
 One day Beppe Grillo²
 came to the square.
 I want to keep my heart
 and my mind open.
 I went to hear what he had to say.
 There were so many of us there that day.
 He pointed to a dark Bangladeshi man
 holding a bunch of roses he was
 hoping to sell on the street.
 "He is the problem!" he said
 pointing right at him.
 I am not ashamed to tell you
 that I cried when he said that.
 I did. People saw me cry.
 And still, I have no shame.

Notes

1. Holy War
2. Italian comedian and politician

Reference

Richardson, L. (2003). Poetic representation of interviews. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (p. 187–202). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

About the Author

Michelle Reale is an assistant professor at Arcadia University. She divides her time between the United States and Sicily, where she does ethnography among African refugees. She blogs on immigration, migration, and social justice in the Sicilian context at www.sempresicilia.wordpress.com