**ENCOUNTERS**:

Silhouettes in our memories

An essay by Dragan Todorovic

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* a young traveller tells the old Khan about distant cities he has seen on his long journeys. We find an identical motif some six centuries earlier, in Chaucer's “A Man of Law's Tale”: a group of Syrian merchants is invited upon their return to their sultan's palace to report of the distant lands. In the 17th century Evliya Çelebi spent over 40 years travelling and writing about it. The notion of a traveller sharing his experience is timeless. There are two reasons for this: one is that externalised experience has always been a condition of survival for a tribe. A traveller in pursuit of something is an explorer, an avant-garde of his community. Another reason is that compared experiences are at the core of our communication. That is why we have the power of speech. We are what we narrate.

Yet, when travellers with a hair-raising experiences arrive on our shores, we are not interested in hearing their tales. They are put in concentration camps, or detention centres, or jails, they are surrounded by barbed wire, kept under guards, pushed back into the sea, and sometimes they are attacked, by men or dogs, sometimes they are even killed—this is not a historical cross-cut of their treatment, this is all happening in our time and only varies from country to country. Why is this? Are these not the Marco Polos of our times[[1]](#footnote-1)?

The story of a refugee is perceived as a tale of failure. A failure of their original state, and with it a failure of their culture, tradition, the whole system of reality. As such, their experiences are discarded. The western narrative is that of the strength and so we start questioning broken stories. Our perception is impregnated with suspicion as a defence mechanism, because it is easier to suspect than to act. We watch public catastrophes in private rooms, and it is not a pure coincidence that the glass protecting our screens, and so dividing the image from our reality, is called “gorilla glass”.

As Rancière puts it,

“Theatre is the place where ignoramuses are invited to see people suffering[[2]](#footnote-2)“.

The verb *see* hints at the distance between the spectator and the spectacle: watching is, claims Rancière, the opposite of knowing. Theatre is an egg in which parts are pressed against each other but remain separated.

While we are interested in the spectacle of travel and the *noble traveller* as its main protagonist, the movement of refugees carries none of that allure.

Why is a refugee not a traveller?

When we tell refugee tales, what are we telling?

In making an attempt to answer these questions, I will use two stories of my encounters with refugees. Both of these stories have found their way into my writing, but in very different periods and by different means. In the end, both of these stories have shaped me as a writer.

June 1991.

The border between Slovenia and Austria is jagged like a cardiogram of a furious person.

After crawling up the Austrian side of the mountain, we arrived at the shared peak in the evening. Because of the dangerous road leading to it, this border crossing was deserted and the Austrian policeman entering the bus had time for his small pleasures.

“Your country has ceased to exist!” he said happily.

We ruined his thrill by not asking questions. We knew what must have happened: the Slovenian parliament had voted for independence, or some such episode. We knew our country, Yugoslavia, was falling apart. That’s why Silvija had decided to spend all the money she’s earned from her new play being staged in one of the leading Belgrade theatres on our trip to Paris. “There’s going to be a war in this country,” I said. “Better save that money on bribing the firing squad, or buying medicine. Let’s buy false British passports.” But she wanted Paris. We had bought a package,

“Paris: the City of Lights. Travel by bus, admire the vistas of the Alps, the beauty of Munich, listen to the music carefully selected for your pleasure, while getting all the information you need from our experienced guide.”

Translated, this meant we avoided roadside restaurants and took breaks only on deserted rest areas where we admired the vistas behind the clogged toilets, it meant that our guide told us in Paris, “This side is the Left Bank, this other side is the Right Bank. The right one is more expensive.”

Back to the border between Slovenia and Austria. As soon as our passport had been stamped we entered a hotel on the side of the road. There were very few colours inside. Everything—the furniture, the carpets, the drapes—had faded until it reached the colour of poverty. But it wasn’t a surprise on this trip: the whole tour was made by poor people for poor people, such as we were. After checking in I left Silvija in the shower and I went down to the Reception to see if I could find something to eat before the kitchen closed.

In the lobby there was the usual traffic, mostly families with small children.

“Excuse me,” said a pleasant male voice behind me, “where are you travelling to?”

I turned around to meet a man in his early forties. He was well dressed, with impeccable manners, very polite. When I said it was to Belgrade we were returning, he said, “Do you happen to have some connection in the government?”

The strangeness of this question made me pay attention and we started talking. He was an exile from Lebanon, travelling with his wife and four children. They had been staying in this hotel for the past week. They couldn’t proceed further, as the Austrian authorities didn’t let them in. He was desperate to get some sort of Yugoslav document for his family. They wanted to reach France, where they had friends.

And then I told him I had no such connections, and watched his face lose all energy, a lamp switched off. Behind my back he spotted another set of guests entering the hotel and quickly excused himself.

For the next while I stayed in the lobby, watching him approach several newcomers, probably with the same question. Then all of them checked in and he stood there, by the entrance, with his back turned to the lobby, waiting, hoping for more people, more *influential* people. The dark silhouette of a lone man, in the lobby of the faded transit hotel. Right there, on that parking outside he was scanning, only a month later would be tanks, soldiers, hatred—the same stuff that had brought this Lebanese family here, to this hotel of no colours.

But I did not write his story. I tried, but he simply refused to enter my pages. It was *his* story, not mine. I didn’t have the key.

As time passed I remembered that quiet, desperate Lebanese man more often. He taught me about the power of the host over a foreigner. Just because I belonged to the local culture I was ahead of him. He gave me the position of authority in spite of my being half his age.

As time passed my country descended into bloodshed much worse than that in his country. Had he found a roof before the storm arrived? I remembered him because I could have been there, stuck in that hotel, surrounded by the cardiograms of angry people. I could have been him.

It took me four years to become him. Exile is possibly contagious. I remained in Belgrade, a dissident, fighting the regime but, after not being to find any decent job and after being attacked in the entrance to the building where I lived, in 1995 I left Serbia. I was lucky: there was a Canadian embassy, still open, still taking applications, and so I never got stuck in a transit hotel.

Well, maybe only for a night. Belgrade was under sanctions, the planes didn’t fly, and Silvija and I had to travel from Budapest, spending a night in a transit hotel by Charles de Gaulle Airport. It was evening when we arrived to check in, the lights were subdued, the colours faded.

Almost ten years later, I was writing my memoir in Toronto, and I was struggling with a chapter talking about the events that took place several months before I left Belgrade. Whatever I wrote was dry, dead on the page. And then one afternoon a snowstorm started and I made a coffee and stood by the window, remembering John Houston’s film *The* *Dead*, and Joyce, and Donegal, and Belgrade, and dark silhouettes on the curtain of snow, and the Lebanese man came back. Suddenly, I understood it all, because we had a shared experience.

A refugee carries two stories with him. One, external, is about his journey. The other is internal, containing his culture, his background, his personal history. The internal story has a chance of realisation only if me make space for it by accepting the external story beforehand.

Telling refugee tales is impossible without telling one’s own tale.

Aziz and language

And now an obligatory epigraph by Derrida:

“Among the serious problems we are dealing with here is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defence before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence[[3]](#footnote-3).”

I was told about Aziz early in 2015. He was the Syrian refugee whose story I was about to turn into a tale for the Refugee Tales project. The information I was given about his background contained several brackets, and brackets within brackets—”don’t ask about this at all”, “be careful when talking about that”, such stuff—and by the time I was about to meet him, I felt considerable unease. During my years in journalism—first in Serbia and then in Canada, some thirty–plus years in total—I did interviews with victims of war, incest, rape, police brutality, stardom, I met with people who were stabbed, shot, beaten, drugged, who fought against the police, were sprayed with tear gas… But I’ve always communicated directly with the interviewee. This time there would be a dragoman with us. Aziz, I was told, spoke some English, but preferred to have an interpreter from Arabic at hand. That wasn’t a good sign: having a third person present during an interview didn’t sound like my interviewee trusted me. It also meant there was a reason for that, some sort of trauma about which that person was not ready to talk, even if the main reason for the interview was precisely that trauma.

I begun by asking soft questions, to ease his descent into painful memories, but it felt awkward. The presence in that room was larger than what short narratives can accommodate: it was the presence of his war, my war, the quiet, dark interpreter, the piece of cake I had brought with me to melt the atmosphere—now standing like a chocolate penis between the three of us... Slowly, barefoot, we inched towards the middle part of his experience. Fortunately, stories tend to start in medias res, and once we got there, his tale started unfolding.

Aziz occasionally slipped into English, and I could hear his sources: international English, a bit of BBC, an occasional Midlands drawl. At first I thought he reached for English in those places where he wanted to be more precise, but when I downloaded the interview from the recorder the spectral analyser on my screen showed that his English words always peaked, so he charged into English when there was an urge to blurt something, and left it to the interpreter to carefully tailor the less dramatic information. Very strange: usually people resort to mother tongue when they have something important to say, but in his case it was the speed he valued before anything else. He behaved like someone who didn’t have much time.

He was otherwise very precise, telling his story with all the details he could muster, paying attention to numbers, an accountant of his own life. He had paid €3,700 for his first attempt at reaching Italy, which was unsuccessful and almost killed him, and he had paid €4,500 to a smuggler who had hidden him in a truck. The boat was 25 metres long. He had brought food for 5 days, but managed to stretch it to 6. He had spent 17 days in the boat. And later a 100 days in a detention centre.

At times Aziz shut down, crossed his arms and rocked back and forth. This was always on the precipice of the areas I was asked not to ask about.

A certain pattern in the method of remembering, noted by the psychiatrists who worked with prisoners of war, points with great certainty at the possibility that the narrator has been a victim of torture. Aziz had all the signs. And he had something else, I was told: his narrative carried the pattern usually seen with the victims of sexual torture.

With our three accents, with all the stops and silences, our talk was fitful, fragmented.

But isn’t this precisely the way the stories come to us? Like showers, tales begin with a cold drop under our collar, then a few more, until we start noticing. We meet a stranger in a border hotel, we are unable to help, the detail becomes corrosive. The narrative of exile is fragmented and distorted, quiet and remote. It does not fit within the recognisable patterns of stories we know and understand.

Each of the seven basic plots that Christopher Booker[[4]](#footnote-4) analyses in his book of the same title starts with a character set in an imaginary world, a character with whom we want to identify. That character will then get some kind of “call” and head off on an adventure that will introduce the hero(ine) to monsters and friends. And then there is a finale, where the hero(ine) returns home to a resolution that will restore the balance of that imaginary world.

How strikingly different this structure is from a migrant’s tale! First, a migrant is not someone we wish to identify with. His world is not imaginary, it is mostly destroyed. Tales do not begin in war zones. Then, a migrant’s adventure is distorted because its main purpose is to *not* return home. There is no balance that can be restored in his world. Finally, migrants’ tales remain open. The stones in that mosaic are both too large and too small to communicate a discernible image. Their final meaning is revealed only to the generations that will arrive later.

In migrants’ tales Little Red Riding Hood remains in the belly of the wolf, Cinderella never makes it to the ball, the Sleeping Beauty has too many thorns around her to find any prospective kisser. Even the geography is wrong: the long wide river of refugees in the summer of 2015 flowed north from the Mediterranean, as if the sea started returning into its tributaries, heading towards the Alps, to find the source that never was. Because these tales are so unlike any of those we have received from Perrault, we have difficulties in retelling them, thus remaining paralysed into quiet acceptance of the drama unfolding before our eyes. We perceive the tales about migration as a permanent hum in the background, the white noise of humanity.

Media reports concentrated on distressing images of the people crammed into rubber boats, but there were no faces in the stories we have seen, none of the usual personal touch. No names to identify with, no heroes, no real narrative. And without a narrative, as we all know, there is nothing to report here, move on[[5]](#footnote-5).

Back in Birmingham:

Driving home back from the interview I kept thinking how the story was tragic, but recognisable, generic. I was afraid that there was no story to tell.

I left the recorder on my desk and decided that I should probably arrange another meeting with Aziz and try to get more ‘meat’, more details, something he couldn’t recall in our first encounter. In the meantime I was fairly busy, but I kept wondering why was his tale predictable—was it because all refugee tales are similar, or was it a deja vu, and if so, what was the original, where did I read it? And then I remembered there was a story in *The Canterbury Tales* with some similarities: Syrian protagonists, a heroine left to float on the Mediterranean. I opened the book to check it, and it turned our that *A Man of Law’s Tale* was more than similar. It was a mother to Aziz’s story. Six centuries have passed, and still we butcher people for power, find it impossible to mix religions, send women to die on the open seas, allow whole lives to pass before families are reunited.

When I sat down to write my story, I decided to join Chaucer’s voice with that of Aziz. I wasn’t able to find a narrative in Aziz’s memories until I found a parallel in literature. It was as if Chaucer came and whispered in my ear, and I wanted to keep his whisper in the story.

Aziz is not my interviewee’s real name. I didn’t change it for security reasons, I did it for myself. Aziz is a translation of my name into Arabic.

Aziz doesn’t have his personal documents and he is who he says he is. I am also who I say I am. I changed countries, not once, but twice. I am a water of that same river.

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1. . Our capability for empathy is actually physical. Italian researches Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese discovered mirror neurons over twenty years ago. “A mirror neuron is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another. Thus, the neuron “mirrors” the behavior of the other, as though the observer were itself acting.” [^Wikipedia, Mirror neurons] Researchers claim that these neutrons play part in learning language, gestures, social rules, that their malfunctioning is related with autism, and that empathy relies on this same mechanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Jacques Rancière, \*The Emancipated Spectator\*, p3; Verso, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . [^Derrida, \*Of Hospitality\*, p. 15; SUP, 2000; ] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . ^Christopher Booker, \*The Seven Basic Plots\* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . “The speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now circulate across national boundaries have created a new order of uncertainty in social life.[…] Various forms of uncertainty create intolerable anxiety about the relationship of many individuals to state-provided goods—ranging from housing and health to safety and sanitation—since these entitlements are frequently directly tied to who ‘you’ are and thus to who ‘they’ are. Each kind of uncertainty gains increasing force whenever there are large-scale movements of persons. Where one or more of these forms of social uncertainty come into play, violence can create a macabre form of certainty and can become a brutal technique about ‘them’ and, therefore, about ‘us’.”[Arjun Appadurai, \*Fear of Small Numbers\*, Duke University Press, 2006] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)