

On Belonging

The stories and observations that form the foundation of this book were collected from refugees during the summer of 2019 on a research fellowship regarding “belonging” in foreign circumstances. The study spanned two contexts in two different continents: the majority Somali/Bosnian refugee communities in the Tensta district of Stockholm, Sweden and the Syrian refugee community in Azraq, Jordan.

The first leg of my trip was spent living and working in a refugee slum/town in Stockholm with several community and art initiatives, helping them with their operations as I interviewed and had conversations with the service workers and the refugee women who study there. The primary group I worked with was called Livstycket, a sewing and Swedish language school for refugee women. I conducted 39 interviews with these women during my time in Sweden.

In Jordan, I worked as a music instructor in a small school out in Azraq as well as working as a plumber and a handyman in a church school in a bedouin area of Na’ur. I also worked for several charities affiliated with the UN during the summer, enlisted to conduct a census of refugee populations in the Jordanian desert while doing my interviews. I conducted 193 interviews from this population in Jordan.

A note on the experiences and methodology that created this book:

Documentary film follows principles when engaging in creation, complying to a set of acceptable “modes” based on the filmmaker’s intent. Several of the most common are *the observational mode* that unobtrusively captures the everyday experiences of subjects, *the participatory mode* that emphasizes the interaction between a filmmaker and subjects, and *the poetic mode* that focuses on the associations abstracted from subjects.

I have unfortunately not been able to create a film, however, many of the same principles can be applied to my endeavors. Although I attempted throughout the interviewing process to stay “observational,” I understand now that this was impossible. The observations I chose to write down are included at the expense of those I didn’t. The translations from Arabic often could’ve been truncated from the original. And of course, the interviewing process itself is much more participatory than observational. From the outset, my presence in the noting down of events was thereby impossibly entwined with the experiences that were shared with me, regardless of my intent.

Yet, I chose not to engage in documentative “participatory” creation form either. Every week, I attended a collective that focused on “Forming the Formless” in which art was explored as an avenue to give shape to things that are too difficult to understand, interpret, or capture.

As ceilings collapsed, naked men ran, hot metal burned, people died, and others born during my time there, alongside the countless stories included in the poetry below, I couldn’t begin to articulate that which I had been witness to, orally or in person. This prompted me to decide that I could better demonstrate the “formless” experiences of refugees in poetic form, imbuing more of

the rhythms and sensations of the journey in a way that is also less constricting to the experiences that people shared with me.

But, as this leaves more of an interpretive role to the reader, it is important to note that powerful impulses and random occurrences steer many of the events of our lives. Yes, it is natural, with our own lives, for us to weave these occurrences into greater narratives. But when we begin to frame the impulses and events of lives that are not our own according to our individual criterion, it is inevitable that we will construct impenetrable differences complete with moralizing anecdotes that turn people's real experiences into fictional parables. This must not happen. Read openly.

After organizing and reorganizing the stories many times over to try and form "chapters," I stopped myself. Instead of connecting themes at first, I dug deeper, talked to several refugees I am still in contact with, and developed a better idea of what "belonging" truly means. Many things "belong" to us, a material designation that allows us to separate that which is ours and that which is theirs. However, what is it that we belong to? This is a more uneasy question. The things we belong to are invariably also "ours", but do we really have control over them? Our memories. Our selves. Our families. Our society. Our dreams.

"Belonging" in these categories are what form the chapters of the book. However, whenever an organization of a concept (within a poem) or within the greater structure leads to information and/or differences I am unable to collapse, I left a footnote.

As opposed to the well documented experiences of celebrated historical figures (in which whole days are often available for scrutiny), I was only allowed a passing glimpse through the eyes of the refugees I interviewed, yielding only fluttering images, stories, and expressions for me to collect. Much of the poetry in this book can be seen as an assemblage of portraits from these elements, and I have attempted to preserve experience as faithfully and responsibly as possible. But, in light of all the difficulties and morally fraught approaches in capturing the experiences of refugee communities, I will promise nothing but a fleeting glance of what I saw in the lives of others.

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belonging in a memory

the sweet shop

It's hard to tell stories
of misfortune
lonely misfortune
standard
stories
a single act
one misplaced bomb.

Their sweet shop collapsed in front of them.
A five-story house, with every generation
running out in nothing but their clothes,
not even their best.

Walking through the desert abreast,
the kids remembered the fall, a first memory.

But to those who worked,
sculpting treats in the back
the sweet shop and the rubble
occurred at once
an explosion
inextricable
interchangeable
with sweet pistachio.

The artists are in the fields now,
working seasonally.

The past is perishable;
it rots, you know.

Who will remember
the sisters of Etidal and Ahmad,
names that mean nothing to you.

The names lie festering in my memory,
becoming all that I see,
a past that rots without me.

the walls

“Home is a place with four walls!”
she said with a laugh.

“I don’t have time to get stuck
on the imagined place we live for
bludgeoning the walls of our town
with images and stories I can’t recount.”

“Childhood memories familiarize a place,
but what use is that when it will only change?
safety is my home,
and, إن شاء الله, the only home my children will know.”

the ceiling

The gunfire arrived after dawn
in Somalia 1995,
the family of camel farmers.

Saynab, with no common tongue
for me to share with her
started her story
complete with sign language
and explosive noises
from the mouth.

The soft
bodies of her four children
could not face
tearing bullets.

but there is nothing to do
but run home. Pictures.
Prayers. Value that protects
in some way.

Bombs cut out the kitchen
and camel milk from the morning
spills out.

Her fluttering green veil
wrapped around her children,
she would stop the missile,
she would stop the memory.

The last bomb dropped,
falling through the roof above¹.

The home is not impenetrable.
We never know what can fall
through the ceiling.

The bomb never exploded.

the train

Forging clothes, on the assembly
line she saw
an unraveled thread
casting the shadow
as a razor blade.

She packed her world
in a bag, to a train
from Bosnia
no family along
pregnant and alone
in her Sunday's clothes

Refugees are ripped off and killed at the stops.

She begins to cry.

The police beat and drag another one up ahead.

She must imagine herself happy.

The police pass her by.

Twenty-seven years later,
sewing designs, she tells me
“I feel it in my heart,
that grip,
resurfacing
sometimes
on trains
from pieces of string
or next to a phone
waiting for the call”

¹ The bomb never exploded.

Every night she falls asleep,
expecting to wake up.

a life unoriented

I don't have any stories to tell.
I was married young
to a man much older than I.
It has been safe,
disappointing,
and empty.

belonging in a body

the formless²

“What shape are you? What color is that shape?”

The kids painted on their pages
having just learned that both
objects and lines can hold light.

Hearing the question, they swiped vigorously
at the over-embossed canvases,
moving fingers in circles, triangles, squares, and the occasional octagon.

Facing the formless experience of trauma,
we build identity like legos:
a block at a time

the ears

A young boy was playing tunes by himself
he didn't know what was sounded
only the pressing of the keys.

The melodies — were dissonant,
irregular, undulating with
his boredom.

Downstairs, kids ran—
wearing “war is peace”
on PubG shirts.

After leaving the school
I couldn't shake
the steady rhythm of the bombs
that blew out the boy's eardrums.

Thinking that this rhythm
was the last thing he ever heard.

the uterus

² Sometimes kids have a hard time discussing the trauma they feel, therapy reflects out these emotions in a playful setting, while simultaneously building a “self” that has been broken by separation/conflict.

A child, lost into oneself
still upon entrance
had no home

How can you “belong” in the foreign
when you feel foreign, defeated, estranged from one’s body?
When she — it — didn’t find hers—itself
a home with me either.

In vitro internal failures
picking, biting at it.

Vinegar in the mouth
gripping legs and arms
hoping that it might end
this bodily tearing.

*the pills*³

An old woman—
alone, in the desert tent
with finality and permanence
sitting, resting.

Pills came pouring out
of her plastic baggies.

Blood pressure.
Allergies.
Antibiotics for a parasite in her stomach.

She had no income,
no family,
received no aid.

“How do you support yourself??”

She shook her head. Refusing to answer me:

It’s god’s money.
You live on it too.

³ Based on the results of the data I collected, every family needed money for either medical insurance or advanced medical attention.

legs

Summer seemed to hover
in the 8-year-old's eyes,
sitting at the edge of sunshine
under the brown canvas of the tent

Her many surgeries had helped,
but she was far from healed.

She pulls the pillow over her broken legs
when we walk in.

There is no belonging
for a person with no
legs, in Jordan.

Moving to the city,
where they can support themselves
on their forearms.
hills and buildings
towering beside them.
Their crawling bodies
pull themselves across the
blistering concrete.

belonging in a family

the father

“I am no father anymore,
my two daughters are no more”

The youngest, a
tumor
masquerading as
a bruise

The eldest, a
disease
stopping her
development

Had only enough to treat
a single daughter.
chemo took it all.
The cancer took his youngest.

Now it's too late to treat the eldest.
Her deformed face mocks him.

the mother

The inked moon on her forehead
flows from her face in a river
down her chin.

She is the mother but also the father
to the thirteen children in her house.
pressing cents from tomatoes with her hands.

She used to be furious when
her work was mistaken for his
but she is happy now
nevertheless
to hear herself being
mistaken for him for
she knows what it means
to those that look to
her

Missing for 8 years in a Syrian jail,

he isn't coming back.
and with eyesight failing,

"I can imagine myself happy here"

She is nonetheless grateful
of her river flowing —
to the moon.

the agreement

A pretty picture of her
found its way into his hands

Suit tailor, tall and handsome,
she shunned him
until the small gold presents
warmed her heart
"I was young, what can you say!"

"He isn't pretty now,
Do you see his white hair?
And those suits he wears still
don't fit his figure, I don't
know why he still does it"

The man smiled.
"You *know* who it is for darling."

the child

Father shot in war.
His son kidnapped, raped, and killed.
Brother left for Amman to trade lucid dreams.
Whose mother married again, replaced her children.

Asail, the abandoned orphan girl, sat looking at the wall.

questions concerning the end

As at birth as in death,
a single moan and tangle

you were an agony to me
but also, happy, not like before

In death, I felt you drain
a lifeless body leaving pain

And ran to open the window
thinking “where did you go?”

Nothing in the whole Quran,
or in any other sect of Islam,

told me to let you go.

Maybe it came from the heavens
an unseen “other” of the seven.

belonging in a system

(this section will arrive in the complete book)

*the state*⁴⁵

the locality

*the function*⁶⁷

*the benevolent*⁸

an escape

⁴ The women in the design center cannot women cannot be “Somali-Swedes” etc., mixed identity doesn’t exist as a concept in Sweden.

⁵ Why do many women not integrate when coming to Sweden?

Many women are fleeing from war and are defeated (having to re-educate if they have any education at all), their tv works in their own languages, SFI becomes most refugee’s first group to network within – becomes a factor of segregation and isolation, they often rely on communal support systems and are doubtful of the Swedish government, and many other factors.

⁶ Two selves – the private and the public – women need to remove outward symbols of their culture to get work in Sweden

⁷ 30% of the women actually are able to study further or find work from the Livstycket design center

⁸ Many of the charities that I expected to find on the ground were missing, along with the money they had supposedly donated to the area according to Jordanian Government databases. I received enough threats to know they weren’t messing around.

belonging in a dream

the watermelons

She dreamed she was sent
A gang of kids, chewing

her tongue to a pulp.
But with friends, they followed
kids nimbly hopping on the sharp rock.

When I arrived at her house in the morning
rotting watermelons burned outside.
I had never seen such a thing.

the window in gold

The citadel stood above the city
sky flipping over each day
repeating

Graffiti doors dotted the
Amman hills bellow
the Sandstorm buildings toppled
over one another
finding time to
for things that contain—
even for that that look—
scarce modicums of truth

Gold hung from the window
pictures taken in front
so as to hide the
patterns
that aren't there.

They flood the vision.
There is nothing to do but turn away.

the seed

Beyond the edge of the desert,
in arriving at the definite
a vanishing body
Gleaming
Came falling back to dirt

where naked as we were made
Under obscured skies that
Stirred
Eyes fixed, blinded,
A girl stood looking at it fade
And
Fall

Days fell like leaves to the ground,
to be lost always.
She was far from home.
Lost.

She hated sunsets, and
wished they would stop falling.

She told her mother and father,
her sisters and her brothers
that she would steal the sun.

Reaching up, she picked it from the sky
and held the fruit in her pocket.
It grew too hot there, though
and she resolved to eat it whole.

Eating the fruit,
She bit down on its core,
Cracking a tooth

She turned it in her hand,
wet, it was difficult to hold,
sugar keeping her fingers together
It was heavier than it seemed
The seed, lukewarm to touch

No other will see what you see,
a sky shining without your seed
After kindness when the day moves by,
moving broken in the evening light.
To come to terms with this great creation,
And the overwhelming indifference of nature
Of forces that do not bend to us

The sky was left fallow without the sun

the grasses grew,
wild flowers came to bloom,
and with each passing day,
new seeds were dropped,
dropped,
falling in the sky,
growing into a thousand fruit,
All looking down at the girl

She stood crying,
as thousands of suns
slowly fell in the sky
setting on her, all at once.

the school in Na'ur

what is it about small kids
and bright eyes
a radiance, an inflection
as if God is still there
before the fall of
woman and man

“I don’t care what kind of screws you use”
the circassian priest pushed my work aside
placing down a cup of coffee.

We had conversed a day previously about
my doubts of miracle
on my christian faith.

The kids screamed in joy from the playroom.

He told me,
“There is a miracle that has proved my faith again and again:
what else but God can bring people like you,
from Sweden and America,
people from Japan, Nigeria, and Italy
and money from Brazil, America, and China.
all the way to our little place in Na’ur?”

a tragedy in flattened prose

(This story will also be included in the final version)