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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 Santa<sup>1</sup>**

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 Someplace 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 Grillo<sup>2</sup>  
 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

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## 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](http://www.sempresicilia.wordpress.com)