**To Speak in Salt Selections**

**By Becky Thompson**

**Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Conference**

All respect to people forced to leave their homelands, these poems are for you.

Please do not distribute since pre-publication

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**Precis:**

In 2015-2016 over one million people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Iran, Palestine, Pakistan, and other countries fled violence in their homelands to Turkey where they took dinghies across the Aegean Sea to the Greek Islands. Among these islands, Lesvos became the center of the passage into Europe. After arriving, families walked across the island as they made their way to the Greek mainland and on to northern European countries. What was identified as the biggest refugee crisis since WWII was also the biggest intergenerational, multilingual peace march in modern history. While the number of people reaching Greece has declined since the EU closed borders in 2016, the crossings continue. With nods to Sappho, Minoan pots, and silhouettes crossing the burning sun this collection focuses upon the lives of people in transit as it circles around my years meeting rafts, walking with people, and teaching poetry in refugee centers.

**Lead witnesses**:

Sand: willing to hold a raft’s imprint until the next high tide.

Keys: from houses in Syria kept on a ring under diapers in a satchel.

Satchel: carried or thrown overboard if a raft is sinking.

Poetry: climbs mountain passes, is tucked into the Quran, sung in verse.

Lesvos: made from a volcano, Lepetymnos. Quiet now.

Moria: the biggest refugee center in Europe that burned to the ground in October, 2020.

Emi: Greek chef who snuck families across the island in her van before dawn.

Dots: get bigger or disappear on the Aegean horizon.

Sona: eight-year-old from Guinea Bissau.

Fire: leaps across tents, devours passports, pacifiers, date meat, olive trees, and shade.

**The Sea Shares Salt with the Breeze**

i.

The poppies stand at attention, like stop signs

among twisted life jackets, cut up water bottles,

men’s pants strewn across surprised hills.

It’s true, the road is drenched in light.

Cassandra rolls up a tattered raft, stacks

baby life jackets (the size of juice cartons),

the orange still inflated. A family inches

toward Molyvos, tells us they silenced

the motor to muffle their landing. Rain

threatens the blue expanse. The sea chants.

ii.

They tell me, we chanted, our raft

took in water like an upside down

umbrella. We stayed still, zipped up

our breath until we reached sand, our

lips, dried roses. *Xenos* in Greek means

foreigner and guest. Police caution

walk west, no shelter here.

Our eyes paint forward.

iii.

Their shoes walk, I sleep

awake. My mind

confuses helicopter blades

for fishing boats, a buzzing

refrigerator for a motorcycle.

When a light zigzags across

black glass, I wave a lantern

in big sweeps above my head

to guide the silhouettes to shore.

We share chai and plum toast.

Families walk, babies

in arms at the back.

This island a canopy

each raft a nation.

iv.

Nations: canopy each raft

a human chain

to carry dazed relatives

from the boat to shore

gather under an

eastern strawberry tree

its thin skin shed in

long strips. We drink water

and load my bike again

one child on the front

another behind, handlebars

carry diapers and apricots.

In Kalloni they spread

a blanket over a bare floor

lay their infants down like tired

dandelions drown by sun.

v.

Tired sun: cancel rough-sea days. Our eyes count white caps.

A man in a torn wetsuit drags a dinghy to shore, bills all wet.

Scavengers eat bananas. Rusty pickups haul engines to sell in Izmir.

A father lifts his newborn to Allah. Everybody cheers.

Girls in Kmart shirts with smart phones ask about Sylvester Stallone.

At night I pass food through open-shutter windows, toss water bottles.

vi.

We snuck families into her tinted-window van, the Greek chef and I,

dodged police barricades, sped

families to safety across the island.

After that, we shopped for sweet kale and marzipan

at the gourmet grocery.

She had stopped smoking by then

except after the dinner rush or before the dinner rush. Sometimes

in the middle. She was beautiful

to the end, her brilliant bald head.

She taught me the five drivers of this migration:

sex slavery + organs + water + arms + drugs.

SOWAD,

an acronym we made up. Rhymes with firing squad, Assad,

façade, retinal rod, roughshod, cephalopod,

war god, not outlawed.

Cephalopod, from the mollusk class, characterized by the ability

to squirt ink. Known to fisherman as inkfish.

Another name for poets?

SOWAD: the people in vans kidnapped in Bulgaria missing now.

One December I watched a Serbian vet jerry-rig

a car radio

to intercept patrol boat messages. We liberated sneakers

from a storehouse

when wind chill forced cruelty.

The lesson. Find the key. Use the key. Replace the key. Repeat.

vii.

What about the mother who tucked her infant

under the prow

of a docked boat, the only shade where

the baby could sleep? It’s true babies can sleep

with their eyes open,

when you rock them in a van,

heading to Mantamados. If you’re walking from

Afghanistan to Turkey,

water proof band-aids are gold—

like rosaries made of green olive pits by inmates

at the Damascus Central Prison.

Pure ingenuity.

Like the Lesvos “dirty girls,” in pickup who hoist piles

of wet clothes to the laundromat,

bring them back clean

for the next boats. Smelling like jasmine. The girls wear

suspenders and purple rain boots.

I’ve always liked a girl

in uniform. In Mantamados the legend of St. Taxiarchis

honors the embossed image of the saint

made from mud

and blood of murdered monks. They say the saint changes

shape depending on how he

feels about the believer.

People bring him iron shoes so he can walk at night.

They are found worn out

the next morning.

viii.

On days when I want to reach a raft shuttered by cliffs, to find people

who might be too injured or too stunned to talk or out of water or seasick

or unsure which direction to walk, I take a shortcut through the hot

springs gate Philippe left unlocked without saying a word, when hot springs

were closed, when Greeks were forbidden to help, a gate that opens to a cove

beyond the naked beach, a rocky route to the sea quicker than any

motorcycle as I jump between stones, an art learned in a rushing

river in northern Arizona with my barefoot sister, tomboys

leaping tall rock buildings in a single bound, legs stretched

like the scent of hyacinth in spring far from Mithiminas road.

ix.

On Mithiminas road

an elderly farmerpulls his pickup

to the side, lets eight

of us pile into the bed

of his truck between

nectarine boxes and hay.

Jude’s velvet hat hugs

her eight-year-old head

as her mother stretches

her own leg out, cut to the bone by

a smuggler’s machete.

They stick a baseball cap

on my head to hide me

from vigilantes skulking around.

Laurel trees blur by

and the sea gifts blue

to the farmer who

saved us from a blazing

walk up a hairpin

mountain. Jude’s father

casts safety with

his wide open arms.

x.

Past hairpin mountain, two sisters and their kid brother run to the playground

by the Kalimera Resort Hotel, giggle on the slide and candy-striped swings

until a sad-sack manager appears, shoos them away, their parents saying

*Salam Alaikum*, sorry, *aietidhar*. My little sister and I played pirates

one Christmas and took apart our swing set with shiny wrenches and

screwdrivers. I wish for our toolbox so we can double back.

xi.

When talking is our only toolbox on a double moon night

a musician explains to me:

*rubble pinned spirits to the ground when the drones*

*came running toward our house each day*

*a meteor shower the pink white walls collapsed*

*around us we packed my flute and phones*

*scooped water with hands like bowls as waves*

*competed for the sky’s attention we traced*

*the route ancestors traversed when*

*Turkey was still Asia Minor.*

xii.

Minors: channel ancestors. The bowl of the earth

is turning upside down, *ti kaneis* and *khodahafez*

barely a start; the teens teach me Persian

phrases, *khosh amadid* and *dooset daram*

my mouth marbles, they laugh. A tourist

bus snorts up a starless hill, numbers walk.

xiii.

Numbers dizzy the stars. One million walk

across the border, two million hover to cross, three

million in transit, four million stuck, five

million pray, six million killed in the Holocaust.

Germany, the refugees’ goal, this paradox.

Elie Wiesel wondered if god died

in Auschwitz? I want to ask: the boy who

fills a baseball cap with cool water; the man

in Kara Tepe as he observes Salat, sewage a street

beside him; the mother deaf from a barrel bomb,

who collapsed on the beach, then hoisted herself

up, dressing her daughter in a pink Madeline hat;

the family who outsmarted the smugglers,

found their own raft, snuck under the radar;

the professor who ran alongside my car, placed

his only blue stone ring on my finger—

**A Litany Travels**

The translator says*: Let’s turn to “A Litany for Survival.”*

*We’ll say it first in Dari. Then English. Altogether. Ready?*

Did I mention that I’m over my head?

Or perhaps, my head continues to fly about but my spine has folded in.

When did this accordion behavior begin?

Was it when we had chairs for fifteen and twenty-five came, not

counting the children?

Or was it when I passed around an attendance sheet that came back with six

signatures? Fear buried their pens.

Was it after we read a haiku and a father said, *how can we write pretty poems*,

*our lives are not* *pretty*, as his three-year-old daughter drew on her arm

with a purple marker?

Or was it when I couldn’t outline the basic shape of Afghanistan on the board?

Someone came up, drew his country and all the ones that touch it.

Was it when shutters we opened so the small room could breathe kept banging,

each time pulling people from their chairs?

An older man rose and gently closed the shutters.

Or was it when a teenager clutched her friend, sandwiched between men

like fish, said she liked the poem about memories and backpacks, wished it was

in Somali. I said, me too.

Or was it when a father explained his family receives 300 euro each month. If

they’re granted asylum, that will end after six months.

Or was it when I was sure two teens who stared into their phones were there

for the free bus tickets until they recited brilliant landays in Dari and English?

They wrote them with google translator.

What about the seven-year-old who answered all my questions in English

before the adults, their eyes stuck on the table.

The table floating with cherry pits left by the four-year-olds.

There is no childcare at this refugee center.

Parents hold their children close, won’t let them go farther than their

side vision.

### Their eyes reach in all directions.

The Afghan filmmaker declares, *I’d rather not hear the word refugee.*

*Ever again*.

He asks, *What would happen if every time you hear the word*

*refugee you ~~whisper~~ / shout the word people*?

What about the woman who, after I blah blah about writing to tell

the truth says*, with all due respect,* *no one can speak honestly*

*as long as we are here*.

**Ahmad Talks to his 13-Year-Old Brother**

Remember you are Superman, with a hurt-proof cape. Don’t forget your aunt nick-

named you balloon—he who will float above danger. Learn to draw a map of

Syria in ink on paper cups. Don’t look at the sea if it makes you sad. Look

at the sea and remember you made it. Be the song you sang on the raft.

Don’t run from ghosts. Use your backpack as a pillow, a seat, a table.

Carry your prayer rug inside. It’s okay to let the rug double as a bed.

Eat meals with the young Palestinians. They’ve been through this

longer than you have. Keep ironing your shirts even though you

have to stand in line. Know your people are proud. Remember

why they sent you first. Don’t trade your toothpaste for

cigarettes. Well maybe sometimes. Don’t sell your

kidney to anyone. Ever. Remember your uncle

before the sniper. Be tall. Know you come

from a people of maps and stars. Learn

how to be a barber. Wherever you go

men will need their hair cut.

Don’t drink bleach

Don’t drink bleach.

“**We Have Taken the One in the Sky as Our Witness”**

*In your right hand hold the colour of the tribes*

In the left a pencil that erases state borders.

*With the colour of dawn, you can cross over*

A merciful god turns a mirror on borders.

*For if you have crossed so have we all*

Skin is an organ that refuses all borders.

We plant petunias in fallen white helmets

The scent travels past bullets, slips around borders.

Alawites in Aleppo, my family strewn about

I know now the moon cancels night borders.

If you are worried, *grasp a skein of sunlight*,

so torture won’t seep into your body’s borders.

They call me Fadwa Suleiman, my poems: no borders.

My body from Paris to the sky, an elegant boarder.

**Squatters’ Rights**

~ *LGBT Gala*

Squatting in an abandoned building in Exarchia Square

Qamar and Samir up the ante of who can shimmy faster

Unlock their hips to the jerry-rigged sound system

As the gay chef from Syria orchestrates a four course dinner

That will stretch to feed fifty. An Afghan couple wanders in

Their toddler dancing with a transgender woman with

Eyes that tell us, “my sisters and I risked the raft,

Ravages of bombs now behind us, a hole in the boat the

Size of my fist, we filled with singing until we were

Rescued.” *Paris is Burning* travels to Athens on a dinghy,

Inclusion the mantra folded into tabouleh, parsley translates from Arabic to Urdu,

Gracious a verb everyone is granted, as the base from the sound system

Hijacks old fear. Temporary become an excuse for let’s party, community

Travels with tattoos and silk scarves. The toddler sleeps in a crock of an arm as

Silence equals death transforms into eyes from this storm.

**Teaching Poetry at Khora**

Praise this stand-alone building in Athens for its ingenuity

Praise the class when their collective poem majors and minors in despair

Praise another class when their poem conjures sunny carousels

Praise the man from Côte d’Ivoire who says

*I have no time to write about my past*

Praise him again when he says

*I have no time to write about the future*

Praise the Eritrean woman who glances at the door when I ask if she speaks Farsi

Praise the mural on the classroom wall that got carried away with color

Praise the teenager who wrote

*they shot us as if we were deer*

Praise the soldier from Syria who asked

*can we write about anything, even if it’s scary*?

Praise the teenager who wrote haiku about his eight cousins

*my mother became / their mother, not enough / to go around*

Praise the artist who wrote in Arabic

*the sea did not save my memories or my paintings*

Praise the Syrian woman who wrote

*the white postbox stood / alone / the bomb took everything else*

Praise the man from Sierra Leone who leans in

*this one in the story who lost his whole family, was me*

Praise the twelve-year-old who whispers

*I carry my soul in my hands*

Praise the mother who wrote

*I sleep with the sea, I do not sleep*.

**A Coast Guard Officer Asks**

Months after walking with families

to the harbor where Janni Papadakis

handwrites the names of each newcomer

sometimes patient with Arabic and Farsi,

sometimes wound up, no words

between us, my actions, perfectly illegal

his work perfectly legal, three hundred

thousand registered, his belt empty

of a weapon, no billy club or gun—

Janni turns to me, says in Greek-English,

I have just one question, why do police

in America shoot their own citizens,

on the street, in the middle of the day,

at night? Fred Hampton’s spirit explains,

Michael Brown testifies, I stutter.

**What the Sky Watches**

Sunrise on my face, a Minoan pot shape shifts into a mosque.

Poseidon winds chase white caps coming up for air, the sea bottom laughs.

Up cobblestone steps rosaries become a man’s talisman, each quiet flick.

Women without wings paste eagle feathers to their arms, scoop up children.

Cats meditate in summer, hide in winter rain, love and fight like humans.

Swallows embroider nests they return to each year, babies know they’re home.

Heavy summer air let strife be lonely, sidewalks sing to the streets.

I cry for the world fragile as a starfish left alone by the tide.

Without my ozone I’d be as helpless as a baby left alone.

If water covers the islands sea urchins will host bigger conventions.

The moon makes stars shy with their beauty, the sun misses the etude.

Zeus says, Atlas, hold heaven on your shoulders, a new weathered map.

Tonight a steady stream of people walk across the setting sun.

We are all connected to the center of the earth, each precious one.

**Lesvos**

~ *after Zeyn Joukhadar*

When I was born

a glacier carved my

shape like a winter tulip, so

I could still see Anatolia, my eight sisters each

a tortoise step for the gods. I am my mother’s daughter, here

before volcanoes let loose. Lava domes are now castles to the sky.

Sea of my dreams, with your fierce moods and sequined days, I am the

poet’s land, the home of Arion’s meter and Terpander’s musical scale. There

was a time when the people rotated crops like verses in holiday hymns. There was

a time when men were pretty and women were strong. There was a time before the Byzantines and Ottomans. When gargoyles cavorted with cats who mated and then slept. Sea of my dreams, I long for boats that bring tilapia and cod. For beaches that

sing rain, recycle wind with long breath. When the moonflower shines, the moment

will awaken your spine. As long as you come you are welcome.

Flamingos will be waiting and early mist, night shades so black

they shimmer. Sea of my dreams welcome all who come to my shores.

As olive trees reach from China to Australia, so do my arms.

This island is too big. This island is too small.

There is always room.

**Notes**

“A Litany Travels” references Audre Lorde’s “Litany for Survival,” one of the poems translated into Pashto and Dari for the poetry classes (from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, Norton, 1997). The Somali teen’s reference to a “poem about memories and backpacks” references Zeina Azzam’s “Leaving My Childhood Home” in Jehan Bseiso and Becky Thompson, editors. *Making Mirrors: Righting/Writing by and for Refugees.* (Interlink, 2019)*.*

“We Have Taken the One in the Sky as Our Witness”: Fadwa Suleiman was a beloved Syrian actor, poet and activist who was forced into exile in 2012. She lived in Paris until her death from cancer in 2017. Italicized lines from “Syrian Poet and Actor Fadwa Souleiman, 45.” *Arablit Quarterly,* 17 Aug. 2017, https://arablit.org/2017/08/17/fadwa-souleiman. The title is from“From Genesis” in *Making Mirrors: Righting/Writing by and for Refugees.*

“Loving in Doorways”: The title, “in our children’s mouths/ so their dreams will not reflect/ the death of ours,” and “coming and going/ …between dawns” are from Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (Norton, 1997).

“Lesvos” is after the sacred maps in Zeyn Joukhadar’s beautiful novel. *The Map of Salt and Stars* (Touchstone, 2018).

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