Four Sketches

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Kobane in Exile

He stood out from the dusty mass of people arriving and being put onto buses; holding himself with pride, the face of a fighter. We watched him from a distance as he paced up and down, like a lion in a cage, assessing this impossible environment where refugees are processed, ticketed and given drab sandwiches. He approached us, and picked up our darbouka drum. His slender fingers tapped out a rhythm as he sang, his voice heavy and melancholic. He stopped abruptly, and complained that his fingers were too cold.

“You have the face of a guerrilla.” he pointed his long finger in Hannah’s face. “A guerrilla fighter.”.

Taken aback, we asked him where he came from. His eyes, hardened yet fiery, bore into us as he hesitated before responding.

“Kobane.” He gave the two finger victory salute, and we nodded in understanding. He stepped back into the crowd, pulling his red sports jacket around him and glaring across the road, before turning on his heels and coming back towards us, demanding what we know of Kobane, Rojava. We shared fragments of information about Kobane, a general awareness, and the tension in his body relaxed somewhat, as if reassured by the fact that awareness of the long fight which was his whole life had reached the shores of Europe before him.

He pointed again at Hannah’s dark hair, and eyebrows. “Kurdish women are the symbol of our struggle. There is nobody stronger, not even men! In Iraq they have been fighting Isis for more than a year, but our Kurdish women defeated them in a month. For five years I was fighting, with them…” His voice took on a tone of sadness, reflected momentarily in his strong face.

Hannah asked if she could draw him, and he was surprised. “It is my honour,’ he replied, and stood completely still as Hannah’s pen flew across the paper, outlining his strong features, hollowed and toughened from years of fighting and a long, perilous journey.

When the portrait was finished, a fleeting smile flashed across his face and he wrote his name in the beautiful, flowing Kurdish script. Agrin, meaning fire. He insisted that we tag him on Instagram, writing his profile name in my notebook. He pointed at the name, and said, “She was a guerrilla, who fell during the fighting …”

Hannahkirmes-Daly.
Agvin

Memories from the village

Moria at night, the smoke hanging thick between the olives trees, trees 100s of years old which have been all but stripped bare as the branches are used as firewood. In Lesbos, Greece, the segregated registration system means that all "non-Syrians" are "processed" and registered in a disused army base, built as a detention centre, where white floodlights and three lines of barbed wire create a surreal backdrop to families trying to find a place to sleep outside. Tents and makeshift shelters made out of tarpaulins strung between trees, with groups of newly arrived families looking around in blank, exhausted confusion.

Being a refugee is an experience that people are currently facing – it is not an identity. In these conditions, where most conversations revolve around the horrendous journeys undertaken so far, and apprehension for what lies ahead, it can be difficult to let the individual shine through. But human interactions that take place around a fire at night, faces illuminated only by the flickering firelight, jokes, laughter, missing home, show us that we all carry with us our personal stories of home, teenage crushes, embarrassments and in these moments it becomes clear that by no means is the refugee experience all that defines these people.

Sitting around a fire one particular evening with a group of Pakistani men, Hannah painting in the near darkness, their questions for information about the journey ahead quickly fell away into laughter and shared moments of embarrassment.

"During my childhood I lived in a village. Yeah, I used to play in the village, guli danda, football. no, not cricket – but guli danda is just like cricket. We used to have fun, me and my friends."

He sat in the middle of the group with his headscarf bound around his head in exactly the same way you see in towns and villages across South Asia. His eyes crinkled with laughter as he opened the doors to his memories, the cheeky things he used to get up to in his youth. Four others sat and watched with laughter in their eyes, feeding cardboard and twigs into the fire.

"I had a girlfriend," he went on, "and I used to go to her house when she telephoned me. In our villages this sort of thing isn't allowed. Once when I was there her mum came home, and I had to hide in another room. Her mum came in and looked around, then she sat down. I had to walk past her to get out the house! So, I dressed in women's clothes, I put on the niqab, and went outside. When I passed her mum I said '*salaam alaikum*', she replied '*walaikum asalaam*', and I walked on. Then another day, this happened again, and I did the same thing."

Laughter filled the atmosphere between us and he grinned sheepishly before continuing.

"Sometimes I used to dress up in the *niqab* and go to the shop in the village, and ask for Pepsi, sugar, other things. Then I'd say I didn't have any money, I would write my name and come back later," and he agreed, I wouldn't go back later! Sometimes I'd walk around the village wearing the *niqab*, go up to women and say 'hello hello'."

At this point, one of the others spoke up: “Sat here talking with you people like this, it’s refreshed us. We’re not thinking about those we’ve left behind, the difficult journey, this torment has left us for the moment. We’ll look back on this time fondly, *inshallah*, we’ll remember this.”

Untold Stories of the Roma: Margarita

Podu Turcului weekly market – a cacophony of horse carts, pigs being sold from the boot of a car and homemade alcohol. Different Roma communities from across Romania gather here every Monday morning to sell their wares, and the usually quiet streets of Podu Turcului are full of life and laughter. The bars are already open at 8.00am, and groups gather over beer and succulent grilled sausages to catch up on the week's happenings. A dusty parking lot is filled with tables piled high with second hand clothes, horse saddles and harnesses; in the background the livestock market is full of strong, working horses and squealing, fat pigs.

Margarita was sitting on a small stool surrounded by second hand shoes spread out on a plastic sheet; she stood out amongst the other stallholders in her bright pleated skirt and colourful headscarf. Her deeply lined face crinkled into a smile as she enthusiastically gestured for us to sit down.

"Jesus didn't make a distinction between gypsies and non-gypsies, so why do people? We're honest people, we want to work and take care of our family. That's it." Her voice was strong and impassioned, her gestures were so emotive. "There's a lot of discrimination when people don't understand the gypsy culture. Where I come from, in Transylvania, it's different. People are more accepting there."

She gestured towards her wares spread out before her, shoes of all colours and sizes. "We have all of these things to sell and we try to come to places like this where people don't have much money, to try and help them in this way. The people are very happy to buy good things, these shoes come from Germany and England, and here we sell a lot cheaper than in the shops."

The Roma community are often portrayed as needy or disadvantaged. Margarita strongly tried to assert that she is neither of those things; rather, her resilient voice stressed the help that she tries to bring to people within her own community. She waved as we stood up to leave and, as we parted ways, she wished us "health, love and power".

28 September 2016

Tracing the lines of hope and remembrance: the Syrian camp, Calais

Following the night in the Sudanese camp, we hoped to visit the Syrian camp which is made up of fifteen men from a same village in Syria who have managed to resist attempts by the authorities to move them to the jungle an hour outside of Calais. Instead we found them perched on a platform next to a warehouse in tents and makeshift structures next to the port. We walked up to shouts of welcome from the group on men sitting outside a tent. In the middle was a man shaving with a little mirror. We sat down, and Hannah immediately took out her sketch book and began drawing him. “No no, not like this!” He protested smilingly, wanting to present himself in the most attractive fashion for his portrait. Sitting in amongst the tents there was a little kettle heating up on a gas bottle stove, preparing the warm water for the next man to shave.

Hannah began communicating in her broken Arabic and passing round pieces of paper, encouraging the others to participate in the drawing while Ed and I took out our violins and played a couple of tunes. People began dancing, shouting and joking; the charged atmosphere swept us all up and carried us through. They played Syrian music on their phones and we got up to dance with them. Hand in hand we moved round and round in a circle, stumbling over the steps as they leapt and stamped and shouted.

By sharing music, art, and dance we were now feeling at ease, familiar. Hannah sat with a small group, sketchbook on her lap, and impromptuly said, “tell me about your hometown, your village, what does it look like? I can draw it for you.”

They leaned in:

“There are the mountains, the river… the olive trees… and houses, my house is here… yes, the mosque.”

They began pointing out where their houses would be, showed us photos. They wrote their names in Arabic above their houses. Gradually the village took shape on the paper in front of us, and the story took a turn.

“Then there are the planes, flying over… and the police, with their guns… the graveyard…”

“Here a dead child, near my house. They died, the whole family… they were eating, in Ramadan… all the family died. Seven people. My house… BOOM! No house now. In the past, here was the house… Now, no house… bombs broken.”

One man started playing music on his phone, and sang. To us, to the image, but also to their hometown, “the olive trees, the olive trees…”

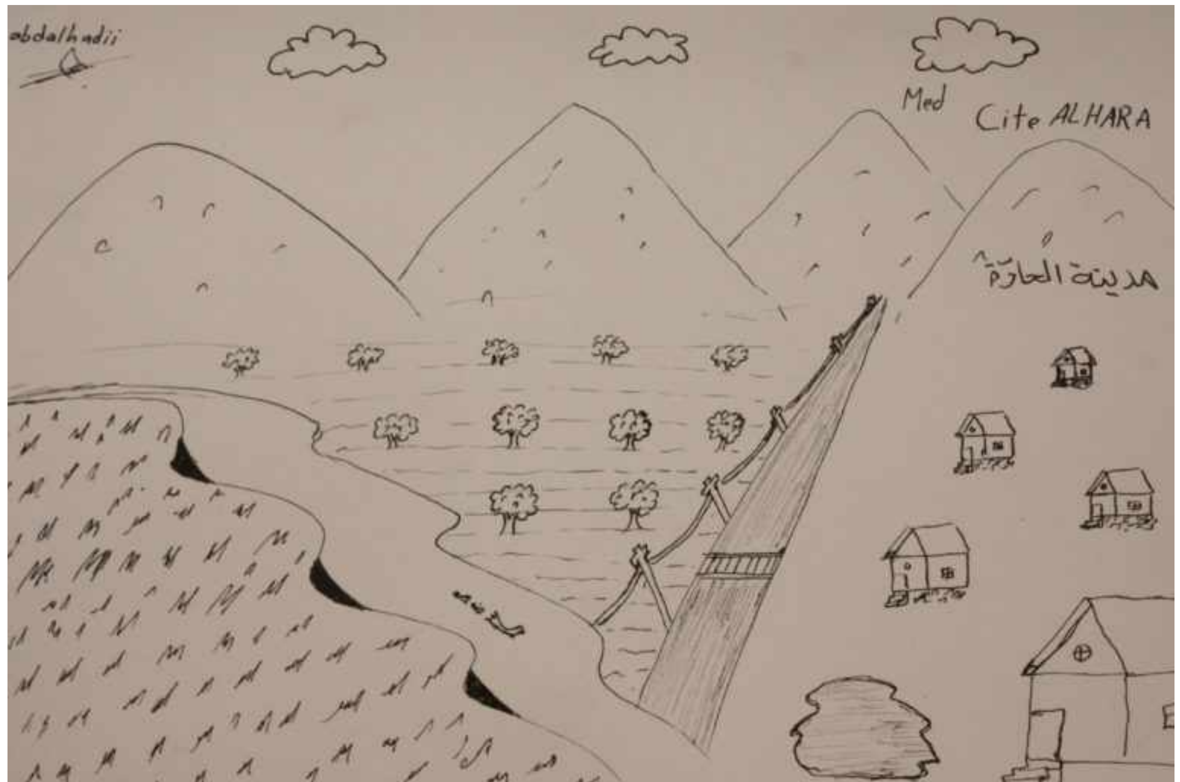
His eyes filled up with tears, “I want to go home, I want to return.”

But for many of these men there is no home to return to. I sat talking to one man, who told me that the difficulties and danger of life in Syria had forced him to flee. He travelled across the Mediterranean in a small boat, and then walked through "Albanie, Montenegro, Hungary", and on to Calais. He said that in their town there are about 35,000 people and that about 3,000 of them have fled. Two days ago another man in the camp had found out his house had been destroyed by a bomb. Fortunately his family had already fled.

"Here there are problems. At home there are problems. In England there are no problems. I try nearly everyday [to go to England], sometimes I try the train but it is very dangerous. People die in the trains, all the time. 5 days ago 2 people died."

We parted, trying to not to show how shaken we were by what we had just experienced, handshakes and "good luck!" and "see you in England!" "Insh'allah!"

As Hannah finished tracing in the streets and school of their village, one man tentatively reached for her sketch pad and pen and sat hunched over, drawing out his own memory of his village. [*Below*]



The next morning we passed by the Syrian camp again to give them some photocopies we had made of the drawing. After yesterday's highs and lows the atmosphere was slightly subdued; frustration, a sense of desperation and the desire to leave hung in the air. The man who had been shaving when we arrived the day before grabbed Hannah's sketchbook and started rifling through it. He stopped on a sketch and pointed at one of the men.

"This morning, he went under a lorry and made it to England."