Excerpt from LA FRONTIERA by ALESSANDRO LEOGRANDE

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La frontiera (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015) was awarded the Premio Pozzale Luigi Russo in 2016. Leogrande takes his readers aboard the ships plying the Mare Nostrum to capture words from the depths of the sea and introduce us to refugees who survived shipwrecks in the Mediterranean while attempting to emigrate, along with stories of human traffickers and smugglers. There is an imaginary yet realistic line, an open wound, a no man's land of which everyone is invisibly a part: it is the frontier that separates and unites the North of the world, democratic, liberal and civilized, and the South, poor, wounded by war, backward and undemocratic.

BORDER

by

Alessandro Leogrande

Excerpt of Selected Passages

English translation © 2015 by Anne Milano Appel

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.
Revelation 21:1-7

PROLOGUE

The diver descends to the bottom of the sea, lowering himself with the help of a cable that looks like a shaft driven into the seafloor. The man appears to dance, his black suit enveloped by a wash of tiny bubbles. At times hissing can be heard as air is expelled. A second diver, then a third, joins the first one. They all have COAST GUARD written on their right sleeve. Within a few seconds they surround the wreck.

Lying at a depth of forty meters off the island of Lampedusa, the fishing boat seems to have run aground, wedged in the pale sand of the seabed. The three scuba divers, air cylinders on their backs, tramp along the deck of the small vessel and enter through a side door. A few seconds pass, and they extract the body of a

woman.
She looks like an inflatable doll, gliding lightly through their hands there at the bottom of the Mediterranean. The woman is carried from behind, the body clothed in dark pants and a tee-shirt from which her arms and feet dangle. Her long frizzy hair is pulled back in a ponytail. The woman is moved and set down a few meters further on, in a corner of the deck. Then they enter the adjacent cabin. On the beds there are two bodies. Another one is vertical, head down. The tee-shirt shifts, from time to time revealing the lean belly, now grown stiff.
In a third cabin there is a man seated, mouth open, body motionless, eyes like narrow slits; his hands rest on a small table, as if he'd been there for months, waiting for that encounter.
It is extremely slow work. From the cramped cabins in which a strange calm prevails, despite the fact that everything is upside down, the divers retrieve the bodies of a young man and a girl, then that of another young woman. The absolute silence slows down every gesture.

Now the bodies are grouped on the sand alongside the wreck. They lie in a row, while the Coast Guard divers add others and still more. There are dozens, hundreds of them. They form a very long line. Some are lying face up, some with eyes wide-open, some with arms raised, others with their hands folded under their head, as if asleep. Some lie close together, almost embracing. Some are still wearing jackets, pants, sweaters. Others tried to get out of their clothes. Some have shoes on and some are barefoot. Some are impassive, others display a strange smile.
They are all Black, all young.
The divers continue their operation as if the water didn't exist. As though they were moving through a lunar landscape. The bodies laid out on the flat surface of the sand appear to be lying on bare ground. Whether held down by pressure or kept at the bottom by the water that caused their lungs to burst, none drifts up from the sand or floats. They are assembled into groups. They wait patiently, inert, as the divers continue to dance around the vessel. One at a time, they are harnessed and brought up.

On board the Coast Guard boat there is a flurry of people coming and going. Legs dart about, feet snap to, as the men in wet suits emerge from the sea. Amid the waves, in a dark blue area in front of the boat, several swollen bodies are floating, legs outspread, in an indistinct heap of colors.
In the general turmoil, the body of a child is laid on the wooden planks of the deck. He must be a year old, a year and a half at most, a red tee-shirt, tangled hair, chubby cheeks. Water streams off his limbs.
The head slumps to one side, lying there under the sun. Exposed.

1.
SEEING, NOT SEEING

His name was Shorsh, and I met him in the late Nineties. It must have been 1998 or 1999, around the time the first wave of Kurdish refugees arrived in Italy, a flood of men and women, most of them young, fleeing the murderous madness of Saddam Hussein.
One evening, at the student housing where I lived in the area of Ponte Milvio, Shorsh showed us a videotape. He kept it in the pocket of his heavy jacket, between crumpled sheets of paper covered with notes in various languages, some receipts, and a map of Rome with a few streets circled in pen. The VHS had no case. When he inserted it into the cassette player, all he told us was that it had to do with the Kurds. “It's about us.” A friend had given it to him at Stazione Termini, in the square in front of the train station, the night before.
Then the images began, and suddenly time stood still. I had never seen anything like it. The cameraman was moving among the low houses of a country village, advancing along unpaved dirt roads. Not a word of comment, not one background noise other than the measured sound of shoes on the ground. Then, abruptly,

two prostrate bodies, motionless, faces livid, in front of the dark wooden door of a house. They were not the only cadavers: a jumble of bodies, some sitting, some lying down, were strewn throughout the dusty streets. And when the man with the telecamera on his shoulder entered one of the low houses, not breathing a word, the situation was no different there. Other bodies were piled up on the floor in the tight spaces between tables, chairs, a few rugs.

Those stark images depicted the massacre of Halabja, a Kurdish town in Iraq that was gassed in March 1988, during the war with Iran. Not the massacre as it was taking place, but the calm after the storm, the end of life after the rampage. They depicted death in its obscenity.

Later, in the trials against the leaders of the Iraqi army, it would be termed an act of genocide in which five thousand people lost their lives. Five thousand men, women, elderly people and children along with their animals, which appeared numerous in the video, cows, donkeys, dogs and horses sprawled on the ground like the human beings beside them. The man with the camera seemed to linger on the horses especially, the gaping teeth, the flies around the now dried-out nostrils, the legs folded under as if made of rubber.

At that moment, there at Ponte Milvio, the raw images that bombarded us, with no comment whatsoever, with no explanation, seemed utterly devoid of decency, infinitely offensive, incomprehensible beyond the obvious fact of mass extermination, the perpetuation of a carnage so absolute as to seem remote from our horizon. At least from that of a group of Italian students, living in a dorm in Rome, at the end of the twentieth century.

I realized, suddenly, that I was seeing them without being able to interpret them. Yet to Shorsh those images meant everything. They weren't a product of History, they were his present. They were not a theoretical contemplation, they were living flesh. They explained in detail the reasons for his having fled to Italy, they revealed a past of unspeakable acts of violence that he had witnessed up close, that relatives or friends of his had witnessed, when they hadn't been its victims. The cassette in which they were kept was a sacred casket; and the tape, which at one point Shorsh gazed at as if it were a relic, blowing on it to get rid of every last speck of dust, was more precious than gold.

Since the evening before, he had not taken it out of his jacket pocket. Late that night we removed the hard plastic case from one of the many videos we had in the house and gave it to Shorsh. So he would be able to preserve that one and only thread that still bound him to his world.

It took me a long time to comprehend the power of those images. But finding it difficult to talk about doesn't just apply to the violence of that particular day, of that moment in time. It also applies to Shorsh's journey to a placid Europe, his status as a refugee in the ensuing years, and that evening at Ponte Milvio.

We had been working for a couple of months as volunteers at a school offering Italian lessons to immigrants; it had been started in a community center along the Prenestina, on the other side of the city. Before long the classrooms had filled with dozens of refugees like Shorsh, and it seemed we would be overwhelmed by the growing struggle to overcome mutual linguistic barriers. Many of us lacked the most basic teaching skills, though we took pains to fill poster boards with verb conjugations and essential phrases needed for elementary conversations. It didn't last long. But we made friends with some of the migrants, Shorsh among them, extending our meetings, and our chats, well beyond the few hours of lessons in the large cold rooms of the community center.

For the first time, that night at Ponte Milvio, I had a sense of how difficult it was to understand life prior to the journey, the cluster of events that precedes each departure for the dozens, hundreds of thousands of migrants who flock to the borders of the European frontier. Yet no one's life begins the moment when the vessel carrying him appears on our coasts: the journey began earlier, even years earlier, and the reasons that determined it are often complicated.

It is not so much individual motivations that seem incomprehensible. Whoever sets out to leave does so to escape from a situation that has become intolerable, to improve his life, to give his wife or children a decent future, or simply because he's attracted by the lights of the city, by the desire for change. No, that is not what seems beyond understanding. What seems incomprehensible are the fragments of History, the social disruption, the global rifts that abrade individual motivations until in the end they are ground down. Incomprehensible because they are literally “from another world.”

That night, the violence against the Kurds of Halabja, the slow sequence of defenseless bodies, humans and animals, seemed almost pornographic to me because I knew nothing about their history, I knew nothing

about the mass murders perpetrated by the Baghdad regime. Or rather, I did not know enough. Not enough to be able to decipher those photos.
I think that is one of the main reasons why it is difficult for us to understand the “boat people” who reach European shores. It is easy for us to assign the category of “victim,” at least once we rid ourselves of the fixation that we are being invaded. But that category, in turn, is blurry, almost devoid of flesh and blood and history, like the images of Halabja scrolling before my eyes, without commentary, on an evening apparently similar to many others.

I saw Shorsh regularly for a while. Thick bushy mustache, hollow cheeks, a cigarette always in his hand, pants one size too big on legs you could tell must be very skinny. He wanted people to know that his name, in Kurdish, means revolution.
He was an excellent cook, though he ate very little of the dishes he prepared with such care. I remember that once, at the San Camillo or San Giovanni, he underwent an operation he was ashamed of. He wasn’t willing to talk about it. They’d found injuries to his anus, which continually produced hemorrhoids. They were the result of torture he’d been subjected to in Iraqi prisons: he said he was repeatedly forced to sit with his pants down on a glass bottle. At first, facing his tormentors’ laughter, he had felt only shame. But then excruciating pain had succeeded the feeling of nausea, when two of them grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him down on the neck of the bottle. It was for that reason that, a few months later, he obtained political asylum in Italy. Shorsh was in all respects a victim of torture.

Many years have passed, and I don’t know what happened to him. Some time ago I learned from a mutual friend that, after Saddam’s capture in 2003, he wanted to return to Kurdistan. He retraced the journey that had taken him to Europe, in the hope of building a new life there.
Maybe he lost his way in the twists and turns of the new Iraq, in the convulsions of a very lengthy postwar period that soon degenerated into a state of savage anarchy, from whose quagmire the cutthroats of the Islamic state emerged. Or maybe he managed to stay afloat.
But I’m just guessing. I never heard anything more about Shorsh. And now I feel guilty. Not because it was my obligation to watch over him. I feel guilty for the simple fact that I hadn’t understood a lot of things before he disappeared into thin air. Just as he’d appeared out of nowhere.

That’s why I developed this obsession. To try and make that “nowhere” a little less unknown. To try to go beyond the category of “victim,” which doesn’t explain anything about the complex lives of human beings. To try to unravel the threads of events that at first glance seem incomprehensible in the morass of violence, bereavement, oppression, which nevertheless determines the lives of so many.
More than fifteen years have passed since that night at Ponte Milvio. It was by spending time with Shorsh and some Kurds who arrived in Rome during those months that I began to see that crossing the European border was becoming a global phenomenon. That the barges which were then overrunning the Apulian coast, as they would later overwhelm Lampedusa and the Sicilian coast, carried not only refugees from the Balkans or Albanians fleeing the collapse of a claustrophobic dictatorship, but people from a more distant East. There was an East much further east than the Balkans. And there was a South much further south than the Maghreb. The remoteness of those countries and the scant knowledge we had of them often crossed over uncomfortably into exoticism. The boat smugglers’ trade gained prominence just at that time: when Italian coasts became the gateway for entry into Europe, and Europe tried to erect a series of walls to protect its borders.
Over the years I have known a great many men and women like Shorsh. I have lost track of most of them. Many of them plunged back into “nowhere” before I could learn more about them. Some died just when they thought they’d made it and had put History behind them.
And that is the reason for my obsession. If Europe’s coasts can only be a border, I might as well try to establish a few details in the sand, a few scraps of existence that would otherwise vanish as people vanished. The border is the world’s thermometer. A person who undertakes a dangerous journey in inhumane conditions, crossing borders that stand along the way, doesn’t do it because he’s eager for danger or death, but to escape from even worse conditions. Or because a world has been constructed at his expense which he sees as unalterable.

3.
HAMID

I returned to the Italian school for asylum seekers a number of times in recent years, and that's where I met Ali. It's called Asinitas and it's housed at the Christian community based at St. Paul Outside the Walls, on Via Ostiense, south of Piramide – one of those places far from the chaotic stasis of the historic centro where the capital seems to rewrite itself more quickly, or in any case less slowly, than elsewhere. You can tell by the buildings and new construction. You can see it in the street life especially, in the constant bustle along the congested streets of Ostiense and the coming and going at the Garbatella Metro station.
The school occupies a large room and a smaller adjacent space on the ground floor. Young people, some very young, mostly African, crowd around four or five small tables, with pens, notebooks, sheets of paper. With them are four or five volunteer teachers. They oversee the students' exercises, listen to their questions.
Marco, a friend of mine who had been one of the founders of the school, is now focused on something else: he put together a silk-screen printing workshop with some former students who had taken his classes. It's called On Guard! and, after gathering biographies similar to that of Ali, they published colorful and scrupulously edited books, that combine text and images. Because of the special process of silk-screen printing, the books come out in limited edition: their work is patient, meticulous, painstaking, requiring on average many hours, if not days, for every single copy.
The last time I was at the school, Elena, one of the teachers, was explaining some Italian words, her pencil pointing to a large tree with green leaves drawn on a poster hanging on the wall. The chaotic attention of the class immediately surprised me. Even amid the clamor of questions, perplexities, laughter, Elena's lesson was followed with great interest.
I had returned to Via Ostiense because two other teachers, Cecilia and Carolina, told me that there was a young man I should definitely meet.
I had told them about my idea: to try and collect as many stories as I could about the Mediterranean border and its crossing, the journeys by sea and by land, to hear from those who had made it and retrieve testimonies on those who had not made it.
"If you keep looking into shipwrecks," Cecilia wrote me via email one evening, "you absolutely must meet Hamid." Nonetheless, a few days later she asked me why, why now, had I decided to take on such a project, why didn't I deal with something else. My reply came spontaneously: "Because borders change."
The words popped out of my mouth unexpectedly. Then I thought about it, and I realized that no matter how trite, no matter how obvious, that really was the right answer to start from.
Borders change, they never stay fixed. Europe expands and the entry points change. Wars erupt, dictatorships fall, entire areas of the world explode and new prospects open up. These in turn create a world, a unique frontier society that defines the rules and roles within it. They are in effect free ports. But later on they too change over time, and are replaced by other free ports.
Borders change, I repeated to Elena. Just listen to the stories of those who journey, and you'll see. The paths pounded up until two years ago, maybe even as late as six months ago, become worn out. And others are quickly sought.
"So why shipwrecks?" Cecilia persisted. "Why do you keep wanting to tell about ships that sank?"
Maybe, I told her, because the wrecks are fixed points, chasms from which to try to climb back up, step by step, to reconstruct those changes. But I was less certain of this answer. In reality I would have liked to say: all those dead, the constant slaughter ... and the silence that surrounds it. That's it, the silence. The real answer is the silence.

Hamid is a young Somali. He just turned twenty-one and has been coming to the school for several months. He's been in Italy for four years, and in the three years prior to his arrival, from 2008 to 2011, he was in Libya. I absolutely had to meet him, because he is one of the very few survivors of one of the worst shipwrecks in the Mediterranean: it took place on May 6, 2011, off the coast of Libya, while the war against

Gaddafi raged on.
When I see him approaching me at the end of class, as the other boys are leaving to return home or go to work, my first thought is that he's much younger. Skinny, with big eyes and shining white teeth that protrude a little, his expression is that of a child. He's dressed entirely in denim, a green baseball cap on his head with the word BOY printed on it. He wears it pulled down over his eyes.
We sit down at the corner of a long table still littered with felt-tipped pens and sheets covered with scribbles and doodles. And within a few minutes, wringing his hands and twisting his fingers, he tells me what happened on that night in May.
"There were 750 of us. We were aboard a large, three-story ship. 650 of us died."
In the months preceding the sinking, he says, he had worked in a warehouse for a company just outside of Tripoli. That is how the Libyans do things, he adds: you wait in the street and when they want, they give you odd jobs, they take you to work, they explain what you have to do and at the end of the day they pay you. Then, if you are good, you can find something more steady.
Since he could not go to Italy, "because they had closed the sea," he had decided to remain there, to stay there permanently one step away from the final stage, one step away from the journey to the Italian coast. He had learned Arabic and was happy to have found the job in the warehouse. "They paid nine hundred dinars a month, roughly seven hundred dollars at the time. A very good wage, because food there is cheap."
Hamid really would have remained in Libya, but then the war changed everything. Along with the other young men in Tripoli's sizeable Somali community, made up of those itching to go, interminably awaiting the Great Journey, and those who, like him at the time, had reluctantly decided to remain on the other side of the Mediterranean, he finds himself at the mercy of much larger events.
Hamid has a subjective view of the war in Libya, basically the only perception that counts when everything around you explodes and every reliable reference point is lost. The great fear, as he sees it, is that the rebels and the enraged mob calling for the fall of the rais will mistake you for a mercenary in his pay from the South, from countries beyond the desert. "Then, if they saw you on the street and realized that you were not Libyan, if they saw that you were Black, they would kill you. We stayed shut up in our houses. We stayed in our houses for a month, only once did we buy food."

Then, at some point, word spreads that the Libyan soldiers themselves want to send all the Blacks then in the city over to Italy. Suddenly the sea is no longer closed, the impenetrable wall seems to crack open at infinite points, even as lynchings in the street continue and from high in the skies NATO planes keep bombing. Gaddafi tries to play his last card: the migrant bomb, the toppling of borders. If I fall, his reasoning more or less goes, the last bastion in defense of Fort Europe falls. If I fall, you will be invaded... And so by the thousands he pushes the same people whom – in accordance with bilateral accords with Italy – he had long kept locked in prisons and concentration camps in the desert, towards the lush coasts that, for some years, he had indirectly promised to protect.
"They were the ones who drove us out, to Italy. My boss at the company told me to try to get to the coast or to the border, the border with Tunisia, otherwise I would not be saved. It was he who accompanied me to the area near the sea, where all the foreigners were."
As Hamid tells it, Libyan soldiers and traffickers seem to plan the journey in unison, almost helping each other out. None of the migrants pay a single dinar for the departure. The journey is gratis. Never in a million years could he have imagined such a thing a few weeks ago, but it's the truth: they will be transported to Italy without having to struggle to scrape up the necessary sum.
When they are put on board, the Somalis and Afghans are ordered to go below, into the hold, but they protest. Pandemonium breaks out and in the end the soldiers give up. They let them board last, even though as Hamid recalls there are a great many of them, about two hundred and fifty, and they allow them to stay on deck, in the open air. Four hundred refugees are crammed into the hold, however. There are Bangladeshis, Arabs, Africans from other countries ... There are also about thirty women with children. Because the women were wailing, a Libyan soldier squeezes them into a small cabin next to the captain and orders them to be quiet.
"They were not saved. When the ship sank to the bottom, the cabin door was locked. The captain, however, an Egyptian, was saved."
When they start out from Tripoli, around five in the morning, it is not yet hot. After barely twenty minutes,

the ship capsizes.
“At that moment I was on the phone with a friend of mine who had been in Tripoli with me. Months before he had gone to Tunisia, to a UN refugee camp at the border, and from there they had sent him to America. I was talking to him on the telephone. He was telling me that he had just landed, that everything had gone smoothly, when the water entered the ship.”
Hamid can swim and, like everyone on board who can swim, he manages to stay afloat. He immediately realizes that the best thing to do is to quickly move away from the ship to avoid being sucked into the vortex that the vessel’s sinking would soon create.
“Everyone who could swim did so. All around people grabbed onto one another, pulling each other under.”
In the dark he can make out lights along the coast. Never losing sight of them, he is able to get to the beach, exhausted. He takes two steps, gasps for breath, and drops on the sand.
With no time to catch his breath, he sees two Libyan ships arrive. Uniformed men, with whistles, ask the few survivors to help them recover those still in the water. There’s no time, they say, you have to hurry.
“I retrieved the ones who had on a life jacket and the women with bags that held clothes to change into.”
Sealed with tape so as not to let in water, the plastic bags with their good clothes – the ones to put on once they landed in Europe – become a kind of inflatable. They’re buoyant, and many people cling to them so as not to go under. “We also saved a woman who had a baby little more than a month old with her. She had found a piece of wood to stay afloat.”

The recovery operations go on until eight in the morning. For hours Hamid, aboard the rescue ship, is shuttled back and forth between the beach and the disaster site. When he’s done lending a hand in search of the missing, he can finally go home, that is, to the little house where he was living with friends, barricaded inside. There had been eight of them before, now they are down to three. The bodies of the five who disappeared are not recovered.
“For three days I did not go out, I felt like I was losing my mind, I kept seeing the people in the water crying for help. I watched them die in front of my eyes, begging me to help them, to save them. I heard their voices for a long time.”
Here Hamid’s story proceeds haltingly, moving in ever widening circles and retracing the same ground, as if a veil were obscuring his eyes and he suddenly felt nauseous. He whispers something to the effect that he had headed straight for the beach, and that only afterwards, at a later time, did he go back to help rescue the others. He repeats it again, as if he has not been able to find peace, even after years have passed (“everyone thought about himself”). Then I ask him if he ever heard what caused the boat to sink, whether in the days that followed anyone had the fortitude or the decency to clarify what had happened.
“Someone said that the captain made the ship capsize,” he says staring at his entwined fingers, “because if he had gone too far away from the coast no one would have been saved. He had been forced to set out, so that is what he decided to do.” Frankly, of all the possible causes for a ship to sink, I would never have thought of the deliberate decision to capsize off of one’s own coast, to prevent an even greater hecatomb offshore. Try as I might to follow the captain’s reasoning (which Hamid instead seems to be able to do), I am unable to grasp a glimmer of logic. Let alone in the face of six hundred and fifty deaths.

In the weeks that follow Hamid finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand there is the sea that has finally been “opened,” as he keeps saying, yet is beset by death and danger. On the other hand there is a country where violence and lynchings continue. Turn on the TV and all you hear on every channel is that foreigners must leave the country unless they want to be killed. He thinks there are few ways out, but he also thinks that if he was saved among the hundreds dead or missing, it is because it was “God’s will,” and so he decides to try his luck again, to challenge the sea one more time. In Tripoli he would die for sure, at sea maybe not. And pursuant to this absurd probability calculation, he returns to the coast where the traffickers operate.
This time he decides not to make use of one of the free journeys offered by the soldiers. He pays three hundred dollars, still far less than before the war, and is given a guarantee that he will embark aboard a smaller ship than the one that sank.
Less than a month later he is in Zohara, a village on the coast, about fifty kilometers from Tripoli. For a week he waits in a hut built on the beach, which night after night is filled with people waiting. One night, when a

number sufficient to set sail has gathered, they are abruptly told that they will leave in a few hours.
The journey this time is not as arduous as the previous one, but another “casino,” mishap, occurs. “Casino” is a word that Hamid uses often. After listening to him for a while, I understand that for him “casino” is more or less the indistinct sum of hurdles that the Great Journey entails. Not really disasters, ships sinking or people dying in the desert, but a less serious level of threat, a glitch or snag, which can send you back to the starting point, because nothing ever goes smoothly when you set out on the journey to Europe.
“We left at night, around two in the morning. We sailed under the stars and throughout the following day until six in the evening, when the engine propeller broke.” There is a boy on board, a mechanic, who tries tinkering with the engine, but doesn’t know much. All he can say is that they will perish unless they are found by someone on their route. “But then he, the mechanic, called someone in Lampedusa and said that there were women and children on board. The phone number had been given to us by a Libyan, telling us to use it only if there was a problem.”
I imagine the number is linked to the port authority. Those on the other end of the line reassure them. They say they’ve spotted them and tell them to wait, they will be there soon.
“We waited five hours, then a helicopter appeared, took pictures as it circled around, and went away again. After a few more hours two Italian military ships arrived. They came alongside, lowered a bridge and three people climbed aboard our vessel; one went forward, one aft, the third went down to the hold. They made us transfer onto the military ships, first the children, then the women and finally the men. When I saw the Italian soldiers, and recognized their uniforms, different from those of the Libyans, I realized that I was saved.”
Hamid stays in Lampedusa one day only, just long enough to get fingerprinted. The following day, a military ship transports him and the others to the mainland. Here their paths diverge: in accordance with the North African Emergency plan, hurriedly formulated with the explosion of the Arab Spring, the refugees are doled out among the various regions of Italy.
After landing in Taranto, he travels through Italy by bus. First he goes to Campobasso, then to Latina, then to Aprilia, where he finally finds housing in a small shelter for fifteen people.
“I stayed there a year and a half, until I got my refugee papers, the political asylum seeker’s card; then they told me that, since I had a card, I had to leave the center. They would give me five hundred euros if I signed a piece of paper, otherwise if I didn’t leave the center they would call the police and I would be thrown out by force, but with no money. So I chose to sign and take the money. We asked the manager of the center to help us find a place to live. We rented an apartment in Aprilia, we were there seven months, then I found a place to sleep in the Tor Vergata center, and that’s where I am now.”

It’s been many hours since Hamid began his story. Time flew by, as his words became hypnotic, almost rarefied. In the big room of the now empty school, Carolina came and sat beside us to listen to what the boy was saying. She also brought us tea. Though I could only manage to drink a few sips.
After such a story, the only thing I can ask him, the most banal question of all, is whether he still dreams about the ship capsizing in May 2011.
I remember it, more than dream about it, he says directly.
“I remember it every time I hear the news of other shipwrecks on TV, of so many dead. When I hear someone from Africa who says he wants to leave, who wants to travel the same routes that I traveled, I always tell him how risky it is. I tell him not to try it, but they don’t listen to me, they tell me I’m a liar, that the mere fact of being in Italy has improved my life, that I have a future and they do not. They do not believe me when I tell them how tough it is to get here, no one believes it, no one. They leave, they leave without listening to you, and they will continue to do so.”
Then he tells me that when he was in Africa, he imagined that as soon as he got to Italy, to Europe, he would immediately have a job, a car, a place to live ... “That’s what I thought,” he smiles, “but it didn’t happen. Many Italians don’t have a job themselves. When I was in Africa, I did not think that could be possible.”

Picture 650 bodies. Picture 650 bodies of men, women, children, old people. Picture them one by one and lay them out in a row. How many meters long is the row? How far does it reach?
Don’t think about their faces, don’t think about what they have suffered. Just think about how many of them there are. Do they all fit in a medium-sized apartment? Do they fill a movie theater? Are the tiered stands of a stadium enough to hold them?

There is something incalculable about every mass drowning, every shipwreck. At first glance, there is something that renders these events similar to one another: the anguish of death, the difficulty of rescue efforts, the pains to relate it shown by the few survivors, the inability – often – to get past it, to leave behind what happened. But at the same time there is something that makes each of these events unique, even those that have not made headlines.
If there is one thing I've realized over the years, it is that every shipwreck is an event in its own right. It demands to be released from oblivion, just as it wants to be grasped in its singularity.
That's what I'm thinking, as I watch Hamid pull the hat more snugly down over his head, the hat with the word BOY that he has not taken off throughout our conversation, and I ask him something that has only occurred to me now, but that maybe I should have asked him at the beginning: at what age did he leave Somalia? How old were you, I ask him, when you set out on the Great Journey?
"Thirteen."
I think I heard wrong, so I ask him again: how old were you when you left? "Thir-teen years old." I look into his eyes and I still think I heard wrong, even though this time I clearly understood his words, the "thirteen" divided into syllables as he has been taught to do, for difficult words, during the lessons that are held in the large room in which we find ourselves.
What can bring a child of thirteen to abandon everything and leave? Any explanation based on economic motives for the journey, on finding a decent job, any consideration of Somalia's recent deterioration, the clan and tribal wars, the implosion of a country, seem utterly impotent with respect to the decision of a thirteen-year-old to leave his home. What drives him? What attracts him? What prods this crusade of children and young people toward the long-dreamed-of gates of Europe?
I imagine that he did not set out on the journey alone, that he had decided on it along with others, and I ask him.
This time Hamid does not respond. He stares at the table and doesn't answer. Then in a faint voice he says: "I left with my brother, but he died during the journey. When it happened, I was in prison in Libya. They had captured me at sea. He was three years older."

After talking for hours, I have the feeling that what he has told me up till now, the interrelated tragedies experienced thus far – one of the biggest shipwrecks off the coast of Libya, the drownings, the bags of clothes that turn into floats, the rescues, the friends who have disappeared, the lynchings in the streets, and then a new journey and new dangers, and the nightmares at night – all that is only a small chunk of what Hamid is keeping locked up inside him. As if a wall in a house that we think we know suddenly crumbles and a series of endless rooms opens up which we hadn't imagined existed. I get the feeling that if he was able to recount with relative ease – except for a few painful passages – an event that many survivors of other shipwrecks would not have been able to, it is because there is something even more unspeakable hidden within him. A wound that has to do with the disappearance of his brother.

Only with great effort was I able to reconstruct what happened in Hamid's life prior to the fateful shipwreck in May 2011. I tried putting together the few words he let slip that day, then compared notes with Carolina and Cecilia, who in the previous months had managed to learn something about his stormy past.
Following years of wandering in Africa, in 2010 Hamid and his brother, whose name he has never revealed to anyone, finally manage to embark for Italy.
After two days at sea they are overtaken by a naval vessel flying the Italian flag. The gray ship comes alongside and, in a few words of English mixed with Italian, the soldiers who join them on board convey that they will take them to Italy. Euphoria on the fishing boat mounts, some shout, others laugh. We did it, Hamid thinks. This time we made it.
But as soon as they board the military ship, they see that standing alongside the Italians there are also Libyan soldiers. The ship is not bound for Italy, but for Libya, it's bringing them back. A friend of Hamid figures it out. He's the first to realize that they've been fooled. He protests, other young men join in, so the Libyans start bludgeoning the crowd. They strike out vehemently with cudgels and Tasers that cause electric shocks, while the Italians stand and watch, not lifting a finger to prevent the carnage that is taking place on one of their ships. No one stops the beating.
At the port, Hamid and the others already know they will end up in jail. There are two ambulances for the

most seriously injured. And that gives Hamid's brother an idea: although he is not among those worse off, not one of the more seriously injured as a result of the soldiers' bashing, he pretends to be in bad shape and has them take him to the hospital. He stays there for one night only. The following day he manages to escape, I think by paying someone.

The two boys' paths now diverge. Hamid's brother remains in Tripoli, although he is in effect an "illegal" and must be careful not to make the slightest mistake to avoid being caught. Hamid on the other hand, along with most of those brought back to Libya on the Italian ship, is sent to prison. The detainees, he recalls, were almost all Eritreans or Somalis captured in the Mediterranean.

He is in there for seven months. Twenty-three people crammed in a small cell, from which they are never allowed out. The air is unbreathable, the small toilet pit in the corner is perpetually clogged and with the heat the stench becomes unbearable. Flies swarm over everything. In the morning a modest ration of bread and water is distributed for the entire day. But even worse than hunger and the appalling sanitary conditions, the most brutal enemy for a detainee in Libyan prisons is apathy. In the days that pass, identical to one another, existence is reduced to that of a vegetable, and Hamid knows that to keep from going crazy he must exercise his mind. So he decides to learn Arabic, to study it by memory, without books, by talking with others, or at least those who are willing to talk to him.

The news of his brother's death reaches him in prison. A few weeks after he escaped from the hospital, his brother had tried to embark for Italy again. He had done so as soon as a new opportunity presented itself, but this time – even before running into an Italian Navy ship engaged in driving back the migrants – the fishing boat had sunk and no one survived. Hamid learns all this a few weeks after the incident, from a Somali, a mutual acquaintance of theirs, arrested like everyone else who tried to leave at the time and brought to the same cell. When the man started talking about it, telling Hamid how the brother's vessel had sunk and offering his condolences, he didn't realize that Hamid knew nothing about it.

To get out of prison, after seven months of detention, it seems that Hamid did not have to pay his corrupt jailers, as is often the case; instead he tells me that on the occasion of Ramadan there was a kind of amnesty. And so, once he was released, he returned to Tripoli, found work in a warehouse and then, when war broke out, he tried to leave again ...

Hamid was unable to tell me about the wound that gnaws away at his mind, a wound that is still open, not yet healed, buried more deeply than the memory of the great shipwreck of 2011, which nevertheless constitutes the pivotal event of his life, of his having grown up too fast.

That afternoon, seeing the word BOY on his peaked cap once again, I realized that there are tragedies that, even when explained rationally, conceal others, in a play of mirrors virtually impossible to decipher, to entirely resolve, for those who live on this side of the Mediterranean.

The last words of our conversation at the school went in a totally different direction: his mother who is still in Somalia and who calls when she has a bit of money, the political asylum which lasts for five years, his other brothers who are still in Africa and who would also like to leave ... But not a word did he add about the brother whose name no one knows. He told me that his dream is to take a course to become a baker and to open a pizzeria somewhere in Rome. Knead the dough, roll it out, work it, add toppings, slide it in the wood-burning oven, then stand there blankly, watching it as it bakes, rises, swells, comes to life. When the edges of the crust are black, he says, it's time to pull it out.

11.
IN SINAI

We are in Sinai, in an unspecified location near the border between Egypt and Israel. The soil is parched, so parched it's become sand. Only a few shrubs rise from the ground, as a merciless sun beats down.

On the scorching plain, battered by wind and dust, two Chinese pagodas stand. The pointy, upward-curving red roofs thrusting into the sky seem like the product of an hallucination, as remote as can be from this corner of the desert. Nevertheless, those Oriental roofs on top of a two-story house with whitewashed walls are a specific status symbol. That's the way human traffickers build their homes. The pagodas are an emblem of

their power, a mark of their aesthetic taste.
The “goods” being held hostage are kept in underground cellars. Young men like Behran. Girls who have been raped. Families torn apart. The jailers, rifle on their shoulder, stand guard over them. They have regular shifts, they relieve each other at specific times. Not a sound can be heard. From beneath the pagoda they can surveil the barren wasteland around them for kilometers and kilometers: during the day at least, not even the slightest movement of men, vehicles or animals escapes their watch. But at night there’s an opportunity. The surveillance eases off. The darkness blurs any movements. The brightness cast by the powerful spotlights located under the roof only reaches to a certain point. That’s when it’s possible to act, to make a move. Right then, at that very moment, is when those trying to free the hostages descend on the pagodas.
They are led by a diminutive woman. A black veil, long and thick, covers her head and face. It falls over her shoulders, down her entire body to hide the green tunic she’s wearing. You can barely see the eyes and the dark complexion framing them.
With her are a number of men, all young, some of them armed. One, taller than the others, seems to be the person in charge. A skinny man with a curly beard, wearing a long white tunic that tops his shoes and a red and white keffiyeh on his head, he directs them with swift hand signals. He is an imam.
In the moments preceding daybreak, when silence reigns under the pagodas and the heat of the previous day is now merely a memory, the woman utters two or three words in Tigrinya.
It is the signal that the tortured hostages have been awaiting. They’ve been waiting for days, weeks, months. The woman speaks and they rush to the exit. They are met by the armed men and handed into pickups, which immediately race off into the desert. At that point there’s nothing the jailers can do about it. They try to stop some, they fire in the air, they rail against the woman, they would like to kill her right then and there, before their eyes. But they don’t do a thing. The imam dressed in white is watching them. They can’t lift a finger against him and those he protects. Their leaders had been warned to stop the trafficking, now they have to let the goods go as dawn casts its light on the arid land of Sinai, on the shrubs, mosques, pagodas.
The imam, in silence, follows the hostages’ escape with his eyes, indifferent by now to the rage of those who tortured them. The woman with the black veil stands beside him.

The name of the petite woman who liberates the hostages is Alganesh Fessaha.
It was Don Mussie who recommended I meet her.
As I read the reports and accounts on the trafficking of hostages in Sinai, I found it hard to understand those cases where the survivors had managed to make it out of a hell like that. Sure, there are those who pay. There are some who find a way to have their relatives shell out considerable sums of money. But what about the ones who can’t afford to pay or who can’t find anyone willing to do it? Is it possible to get out of that hellhole without paying a cent? Are there cases like that? “Yes,” Don Mussie had told me, “but you should talk to Alganesh. She’s the one who goes to rescue them.”
Alganesh lives in Milan and directs the efforts of an NGO that deals with Eritreans who are fleeing the regime. The association is called Gandhi and it also handles human trafficking in Sinai.
“It all started by accident,” Alganesh says when we meet to talk about her work. It is only after phoning the association’s headquarters for several weeks that I manage to find her and set up an appointment. Alganesh is one of those people who are constantly traveling and constantly busy, who develop a unique ability to never appear tired, never raise their voice, never get overwhelmed by anxiety or despair, despite being called upon relentlessly to solve a multitude of problems.

At certain times she receives pleas for help that are increasingly persistent. Some come directly from the dungeons under the pagodas or from detention centers in remote locations in the Sinai desert. “The captors give the hostages satellite phones so they can call their relatives and ask them for money for the ransom. But many know that they will never be able to scrape together the necessary payment, so they call me directly.”
They call her because her name and telephone number, like those of Don Mussie Zerai, are written on the walls of the various transit points along the route of the Eritrean exodus. On the walls of prisons, in the shelters of intermediaries, in the cells and barracks of the kidnappers’ camps themselves. “People call me with the satellite phones pretending that I am a relative of theirs and ask me to pay the ransom. We speak in our language, we exchange the necessary information. The trouble is that the Bedouins too sometimes understand it and then unforeseen events arise.”

Alganesh is very clear with the hostages who call her, even if they've been tortured with burning plastic, sodomized with a pole, forcibly stripped of their fingernails, slashed by knives, raped many times over, or exposed to live electrical wires. She will never pay, she says firmly, the Gandhi association will never pay. Their response will be different.
This petite woman with the long black hair, a perfect Milanese accent, her vigilant eyes always on the speaker, gathers as much information as necessary. She asks them what they see from the window or on the rare moments when they are let outside. Whether they recognize a mosque, a building, a car or a license plate, what the place where they are held is like.
She conducts a kind of informal investigation, follows the traffickers' trail. At this point the role of the sheikh – the skinny man with the curly beard – becomes crucial.

His name is Mohammed Abu Bilal, and Alganesh met him a few years ago. She had heard from some young men who had escaped from Sinai's hell that they had been liberated by a Muslim gentleman with a courteous manner and distinctive bearing. It had been he, along with other men, who loaded them into a van and left them on the outskirts of Cairo. He was not a soldier, not a man of action. Rather he was a kind of spiritual guide.
Alganesh decides to fly to Egypt to meet him. At first she thinks he may be linked to the traffickers, that he passes himself off as the sympathetic face of the group, but may not be all that different from the captors. She's worried about being duped by Mohammed. But then, when she meets him, she realizes that he is in earnest. And that he is motivated by a mystical zeal.
In the upended world of Sinai, Mohammed Abu Bilal is a Salafist imam who belongs to one of the most powerful Bedouin families on the peninsula, a family known throughout the region. His father is also a religious authority.
For him human trafficking is simply contrary to the precepts of the Koran, which he intends to follow to the letter – an unclean thing that makes everyone involved in it unclean. So he decided to do something, within the world he knows so well, to stop the spiral of violence and put a stop to the traffickers' handsome profits. No matter what it takes.
Nevertheless, his action would not have been so instrumental if he had not crossed paths with Alganesh, the petite woman from Milan who goes around Sinai draped in a black veil. She knows the victims' world, their language, their stories, as well as he knows the traffickers' world, their codes, their laws, their alliances. Together with his men, they are a perfect action machine. According to Alganesh's calculations, which she reels off as if she were stating the most obvious thing in the world, in a few years they have managed to liberate 550 hostages.
Actually, she explains almost defensively, the armed operations involving guns in the dead of night are only the final phase of the "strong-arm tactics." So far no hostage has been killed in those skirmishes, nor have there been prolonged firefights. No one has dared to shoot at the sheikh and his family members. At worst, they burned some of his companies' trucks in retaliation. But nothing more. In the network of powers and alliances that link the families of Sinai together, Mohammed Abu Bilal is an untouchable. All the more untouchable because he is a rigorous interpreter of Salafist ideology. He is well aware of it, and perfectly mindful of the extremes to which he can go. If anything it is Alganesh who is in danger. By now the traffickers know who she is and what she does, they know her face and even her voice, and they're just waiting for the right moment to strike: "They will do me in when I am not with him, that is what they have told me. They threatened me by phone, even in Italy. Not just them, in fact, not just the kidnappers. Some agents linked to the Eritrean government as well."

I met Alganesh again in Rome, when she came for a meeting on Sinai held at the Chamber of Deputies. I asked her to describe to me in detail how they plan their operations, even before they get to the "strong-arm tactics." After some initial hesitation, she decided to tell me about it.
As soon as she receives a phone call and collects the necessary information, she goes to Mohammed. They compare the information in their possession, and establish priorities for their intervention. Right after that, the sheikh's men begin the first on-site inspections.
"Once they've discovered the prison, we go into action. In the first phase we always try to talk to the owner of the house. We tell him that we know he has captured people and is holding them hostage. But he, or those

who work for him, almost always deny it. Mohammed goes back several times, confers at length, tries to convince them to release the hostages, reminding them of the Koran and what it decrees. During the negotiations money is never offered, although at times the captors, pressed, attempt to sell what they call "goods." The discussions can take hours, even days. When it becomes clear that there is nothing to be done, we plan our next action."

Usually it takes them a few days before they swoop down on the houses with the pagoda roofs in the dead of night. The blitz is arranged down to the last detail. They station themselves outside – she, the sheikh and another ten or fifteen armed men – and, at the signal agreed-upon earlier with the captives by phone, they shout to them to come out.

To tell it like that, it seems easy. Yet I imagine that there are bound to be confrontations, scuffles, tensions. The danger that someone may lose his head, faced with the escape of the "goods," is always right around the corner.

Alganesh is well aware that liberating the hostages this way is like emptying the ocean with a bucket. Still, it's the only thing to do in certain tight situations. Which is why at least once a month she leaves her association's offices in Milan and goes to Sinai to be part of Mohammed Abu Bilal's operations. Thanks to their mission, human trafficking in Sinai has emerged from a shell of absolute silence.

Though there are also some who are saved in this story, there are many who are drowned. It is impossible to determine how many people have died during this period, slaughtered like animals by the traffickers the moment they realized that no one would pay for them. Some say five thousand, some as many as eight thousand. Alganesh is inclined to think that the right number lies somewhere in between.

Like Don Mussie Zerai, she too saves photos of tortured bodies, flayed feet, broken arms, backs scored by whips, fingers without nails, swollen eyes... She also saves pictures of dead bodies abandoned in the desert, often just a few kilometers from the Chinese pagodas that rise on the barren landscape – corpses oddly slashed, cut into, then carelessly sewn back together.

Alganesh is convinced that Sinai has become the epicenter of extensive organ trafficking and that bodies unclaimed by anyone are the raw material for this trafficking. The photos that she has collected, as well as the accounts of some of the liberated hostages, are evidence of this.

One man's story in particular. He is a former soldier in the Eritrean army, a sergeant who fled the country to avoid forced military service for life. As soon as he left Eritrea, he was captured by the Rashaida, then sold from clan to clan like a bundle of goods, until he was transported to Sinai. There he ended up in a prison camp near El Arish in the northern part of the peninsula, on the border with Israel, one of those places where traffickers' houses with pagoda roofs abound.

Like most Eritreans, the former soldier did not have enough money to pay the ransom, nor was he able to come up with it by telephoning relatives. He simply could not get out of there on his own. So, along with a twenty-seven-year-old man, also Eritrean, he had to endure the entire gamut of abuses common in the Sinai camps.

"Once they see that they can't wring anything out of them, the clans take it out on the defenseless bodies, squeezing them like lemons, out of rage, sadism or frustration," Alganesh confirms, her face taking on an anguished expression. But maybe even in those cases raw violence always has an economic purpose: to get to the extreme proposition, one that involves having the hostage pay the ransom himself, with his own body, by selling an organ.

Their proposal to the soldier is to remove a kidney in exchange for his release. But he refuses, something stops him. He doesn't have the courage or, more simply, the desperation necessary to do it. The other young man, however, after the usual beating in which he is left near death, is carried to another room. To a different room than the one where the prisoners are kept chained.

But before he is taken there, the soldier says, something strange happens. Entering that place of torture and cruelty, alien to human society, is a doctor holding a cooler chest. He examines the young man's nearly lifeless body, palpates it, then takes out a syringe and injects him with something.

Only then does the soldier realize that they are anaesthetizing the man. But by now it is too late to protest, and in any case he would not have the strength to do it: the doctor has already told the guards to carry him into the other room.

The soldier never heard anything more about the young man. He only saw his defenseless body, clumsily

stitched back together, which was taken away by the guards. Meanwhile, the doctor had already left with his cooler chest.

Stories like that seem incredible. But then the photos multiply, of bodies found in the desert, abandoned like carcasses after being sewn back up any old way. Long slashes on the back or hips appear sutured together hastily.
Alganesh shows me some of the photos, and indeed the stitches mark precise lines on the cadavers' chests, suggesting that it is not purely a coincidence.
"You have to think about their number," Alganesh eyes me severely. The bodies stitched back up in the photos are numerous. Some lack kidneys, others the liver, still others the corneas.
After the release of the cadavers' photos, rumors intensify about the special campers that suddenly descend on the sundrenched, windswept Sinai, in search of the "goods" detained in the prison camps. According to the accounts of several survivors, the vans are actual operating rooms on four wheels, equipped with sophisticated equipment, monitors, cots, surgical instruments and portable refrigerators.
Clearly, Alganesh says, it would have taken more than Bedouin clans committed to trafficking and torture to set up such a system. Physicians were implicated, an efficient structure was put in place. Above all, there is a well-connected network to the kidnappers.
But to confirm a story like that – I ask her with a bit of skepticism that I imagine can be heard in my voice – shouldn't it be determined whether there are links with the black market organ trade in affluent countries?
"There is not only a strong demand for transplants from Europe and North America," she replies, still holding one of the photos of the recovered bodies. "Cairo in recent years has become one of the global hubs of organ trafficking."

This is confirmed in February 2014, when a vast operation by the Egyptian army, which also involves the use of Apache helicopters, attacks the house topped by a pagoda. The troops bomb the dwelling making little distinction between victims and captors, and those hostages who are able to, manage to escape.
It is then that the Egyptian military pinpoints the exact whereabouts of the detention center: it is located in Al Mahdia, near Rafah, right on the border with the Gaza Strip.
The operation has been planned against Abu Abdallah of the Sawarka tribe, one of the masterminds of human trafficking along with Abu Khaled, Abu Ahmed and Abu Hitler (I wasn't able to learn if that is his real name or a nickname).
Abu Abdallah becomes a target for the military when he decides to invest the proceeds of the trafficking, which for years was tolerated by the Egypt authorities, in the purchase of arms on behalf of the al-Qaeda terrorists who infest the Sinai Peninsula. When the military government announces its intention to clean up the peninsula, Abu Abdallah's name is included on the list of enemies to be eliminated.
When they enter the house with the red roof, the troops engaged in the operation discover the detention and torture cells: incredibly filthy, grimy, with no light. Then they uncover a staircase leading down to the underground rooms and there, after making their way through a narrow corridor, they find themselves face to face with an operating room for organ harvesting.
They can't believe it. The most surreal, bizarre details, repeated in dozens of testimonies furnished by those who were rescued and told to people like Alganesh, are arranged in order before their eyes. There is an operating room with all the necessary surgical instruments, beds and monitors. A room rigorously aseptic, unlike the putrid cells from which the "goods" are taken.

It had been thought that medical teams aboard campers equipped for any eventuality were the ones harvesting the organs. That they would drive into the courtyard of the house-prison, procure what was necessary and take off again immediately, later leaving the defenseless bodies in the desert, deprived of liver, kidneys or corneas. Now, however, as revealed by the sergeant who didn't feel like having a kidney removed, there is evidence that there were also rudimentary hospital facilities in which to operate.
Learning of this, Alganesh doesn't bat an eye. According to her, organ trafficking, like that of human beings, is too extensive and profitable to be suppressed by a simple special forces assault, such as the one on the house with the pagoda roof.
Abu Abdallah managed to escape. It seems he found refuge in Gaza and, once there, erased his tracks. But

it’s not only that. “The trafficking will move south, toward Sudan. Like that of the hostages themselves, the trafficking of their organs will migrate southwards.” Rashaida clans have already taken control of the situation: “Somewhere in Sudan there must be a distribution center.”
The person who is satisfied, however, with the work that has been done, and with the actions he personally carried out before the military made a move, is the sheikh. Now that many of the informal prisons have been destroyed along with a number of houses that proclaimed the traffickers’ blatant power, Sheikh Bilal regards the ruins proudly. Nowadays he likes to repeat Alganesh’s words, such as: “The hand of God goes where we cannot go.” Or: “Those who up until yesterday lived grandly thanks to the lives of others are now begging on street corners.”
A decisive role in identifying the hideaways and chipping away the pall of silence erected around them was played by a number of pentiti, individuals turned informants. These collaborators emerged not so much from among the leaders, but from among the trafficking drudges, the prison guards, those who did the torturing on behalf of their superiors. Some of them were persuaded by the sheikh’s words and decided to do a double-cross, maybe undetected until the end. It was they who, in some cases, refrained from shooting the escaping hostages in the back or prevented the skirmishes from degenerating into a massacre or, better yet, allowed the victims to talk on the phone a few seconds longer than strictly permitted. It was they who opened small chinks in the wall, just as others diligently did everything they could to close them back up. By continuing to rape, beat, torture, as though butchering meat in a slaughterhouse. Blind, totally blind, in their obedience to orders they’d been given.
“It is also a matter of ignorance,” Alganesh says, resorting to a word that has always struck me as too wide-reaching to analyze human wretchedness. “When this is all over, I am going to build a school for the children of the Bedouins. We are talking about children five or six years old, running around with big knives and driving off-road vehicles, unable to see anything through the windshield. If these children went to school, they would never tell another human being that he is inferior to their camel, they would never help move corpses from room to room as if they were playthings. They must be helped, they must learn that life is not like that. A school, I tell you, will be my first project. Many people are against it, they say: what, after they massacred your people, you want to do such a thing?”
Alganesh has faith. She believes in the painstaking work, one step at a time, that comes from dedication and perseverance. She believes that there is a time for action and a time for rebuilding, and that if you don’t tend to the second, to the daily effort that rebuilding requires, the first is wholly futile. Even when it takes the spectacular form of raids in the desert, it is likely to be illusory.
I look at Alganesh, the slender body, the long black hair swept up in a foulard, the serene eyes whose depths hold an immense patience and infinite compassion for the incessant, needless suffering in the world, and for a moment I think how improbable her friendship with Sheikh Mohammed Bilal is. When I mention it to her, Alganesh smiles faintly, her teeth gleaming white: “For five years I have been eating and sleeping at his home, by now I am nearly one of the family. But in all that time he has never shaken my hand.”

29.
VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD

On a sunny afternoon I enter the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. It is unusually empty, a handful of tourists wander around in the shadows. I automatically head towards the Caravaggio paintings displayed on the walls of the Contarelli Chapel, the first chapel to the left of the altar, and I realize that it’s been years since I stepped foot in there. It’s been years since I’ve seen “The Calling” and “The Martyrdom” of Saint Matthew, although those works painted between the end of the sixteenth century and the dawn of the seventeenth have always been with me, tucked away in a corner of my mind, at the base of many reflections and many conversations.
So I find myself spellbound gazing at “The Martyrdom,” which as always captures my thoughts even more than “The Calling.” The scene of raw, absolute, swift violence causes our frailties to come forth, faced with the mystery of evil. Concealed in the recesses of the work is the enigma of not acting.

An elderly man is lying on the ground, his beard gray, his hair balding, he seems to have slipped a few moments before. It is Matthew. He has one arm raised, trying to ward off the impending blow. But his wrist, the wrist of the raised arm, is gripped by the fingers of the assassin.
The latter is the fulcrum of the painting. The focal point around which everything revolves is the insensitive executioner, not the victim. The old man is clothed. The killer instead is naked, a strip of fabric covering his genitals. He looks directly at Matthew: with one hand he blocks his wrist, with the other he wields a sword. Caravaggio does not portray the killing, but rather the moment before the slaughter. He decides to fix on canvas the second before the violence is committed. He suspends time precisely at that instant. But the violence, whose intention is unleashed like thunder from the body of the executioner, has already exploded throughout the painting. It has already radiated in concentric circles toward all four corners of the canvas. You can hear the cries, sense the feral tension, smell the acrid odor of fear. The scene is crowded with people drawing back from the executioner's hand. Some are fleeing, some screaming, some stumbling as they bolt, some, like Matthew, also raise a hand protectively. They are all points of a widening circle. No one moves in the opposite direction, let alone tries to stop the sword. And it is the same reaction, I think, that anyone would have faced with a mafia-style execution or a terrorist attack in broad daylight in the middle of the street or in a crowded place. It is the same reaction that we all have, generally speaking, when we encounter violence. More precisely when confronted with weapons that are about to cause a violent death: an unsheathed blade, a gun about to be fired.
Extreme violence is terrifying. Its manifestation devoid of alternatives petrifies us. At most, we scream, we run away, but rarely are we prepared to intervene.
And so before long Matthew, the victim, will be slain. For over four hundred years, however many gazes are directed at the painting, he is about to be slaughtered. In just a few seconds more. The victim, when all's said and done, knows how things will end.

But he's not the only one. In the pattern of interwoven glances that holds the painting together, first and foremost are the eyes of the victim and his executioner, their expressions so different as they fix on one another. In second place are the looks of revulsion, panic and dazed resignation of everyone present, whose eyes converge toward the center, even as the waves of violence explode outward. But then there are also the eyes of a man with a beard.
He stands behind the assassin, located to his right, a few feet back. He is looking at Matthew there on the ground, and he too knows exactly what is about to happen.
The man, according to all the critical texts on the painting, is Caravaggio himself. The portion in which the bearded face appears is a self-portrait. Yet in the church's dim shadows, relieved only by spotlights, that section of the canvas seems like a manifesto rather than a likeness of the artist to be handed down to posterity. An incandescent reflection on violence in the world, and on the relationship that the viewer establishes with it.
There is pain mixed with commiseration in those eyes: an infinite sorrow. Unlike the other onlookers, Caravaggio does not flee, he looks at the victim because he cannot help but stand with him and see how what is about to happen will turn out. He has already guessed the outcome, but he does not intervene. He knows he cannot intervene, that he cannot stop that sword. His commiseration is all the more agonizing because it is utterly impotent. The lucid interpretation of the facts, and even the genius of art, will not stop the killing. He can only feel pity.
Painting his own gaze, Caravaggio defines the only way to be able to observe the world's horror. He geometrically establishes the right distance at which to stand in order to focus on the beast. Inside the canvas, plainly in the midst of things, not outside, paintbrush in hand. Yet he also knows that his gaze is ineffective, it will not change the course of things. It will not prevent the slaying of the old man crumpled on the ground as he tries to ward off the sword's blows with his bare hands.

The coin-operated spotlight illuminating the painting switches off abruptly, and I realize that I don't have any more change in my pockets to turn it back on. I turn around looking for help from some tourist, but there is no one around anymore.
The painting is suddenly plunged into darkness. I can still make out the body of the executioner, but Caravaggio's face is barely distinguishable. It has vanished almost completely by now, lost in the shadows.

I stay a few more seconds to try to reconstruct its features, but it's pointless, I can't do it. It's gone. Then, hands in my pocket, I head towards the central nave with its marble and granite bays. Only when I reach the entrance, beneath the organ that seems to be supported by the statues of four angels, does the noisy clamor from the street fully reawaken me.

Now I wonder whether Caravaggio's gaze may not also be our gaze when confronted with shipwrecks, migrants' journeys and especially the political or economic violence that spawns them.
In the best of cases, of course. That is, when our gaze is not contaminated by apathy, by indifference, by our very queasiness over the obscenity of death. When that gaze is not already, from the beginning, complicit with the executioner's sword.
The moment we observe the world with the same eyes as Caravaggio, it is revealed to be a universe of savage violence. Still, it's not the violence itself that dismays us. Rather it's the fact that even when we fully understand its laws, we are unable to stop it.
Can evil be eliminated? Can safe zones be created within which its impact might be less devastating? Is it possible to put an end to the causes that engender the mass exodus of entire populations? Are we willing to assign the label of silent exterminations to those causes?
And most importantly, are we able to understand that the journeys occur after all this?

Journeying halfway across the world to reach Europe is not only a geographical fact, it is not just about customs, border police, passeurs, boat smugglers, traffickers, detention centers, military ships, transport trucks, rescue efforts, humanitarian aid, running and being chased, being stopped and refused entry. It's not just about these, although, for many, these may all coincide with the most salient event of their lives. It has to do first and foremost with the person himself. Scaling walls is primarily an individual experience.
At the heart of every journey there is a dark underbelly, a shadowy dimension that is rarely revealed, even to oneself. A tangle of concealed motivations and wounds that often remain such. At other times, however, there are journeyers who have been through so much that they are overwhelmed by it. They are so weighed down by the violence and traumas they have had to endure, so nauseated by the stench of death that they have come face to face with, that all they want to do is talk about it.
Those are the moments when they need to meet another journeyer. Because only another journeyer can understand the burden of what they will relate, only another traveler can show them the way to lighten the burden. Everyone else remains always some distance away, on terra firma, unable to grasp the meaning of what is told.
It took me a long time to understand it. We have to become journeyers to decipher the motives that prompted many to leave and many others to meet their death. Sit on the ground around a fire and listen to the stories of those who want to tell them, as other travelers have done since the dawn of time.
Learn what borders are like from the voices of those who have crossed them. What the cities and rivers are like, the walls and those who guard them, the prisons and their wardens, the armies and their generals, the predators and their safe houses. What the fellow journeyers are like, and why – at a certain point – they are called kindred fellows.
What the boats are like.
What the sea's waves are like.
What the dark of night is like.
What the lights that illuminate the darkness are like.
Those voices are formed with the same stuff of dreams. They are filled with anger and utopia, desire and fear, compassion and wrath.
The first heaven and earth no longer exist where a new heaven and a new earth take shape from what they say.
Often they get excited. Their eyes widen and their mouths twist to form the syllables that compose the word on which all the others depend. And each time it is pronounced, the new world hastens its coming as the old one slowly fades. The desire grows, the heated passion becomes ingenuous and the dead seem less dead, so that fate may be challenged yet again. The word indicates a line leagues long and years wide. A rift that cuts through matter and time, through nights and days, across generations and the very voices that speak of it, that come tumbling out, one after another, contradicting one another, contracting and expanding.

It is the border.
For many it is synonymous with impatience, for others with terror. For still others it represents the earthworks of a fort that must be defended. Everyone sets it above the other words, as if the others existed solely to describe the border’s features.
The border always runs through the middle.
On this side lies the previous world. Over there lies what is yet to come, and that perhaps may never come.

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