

“Millions of people flee violence every year, yet most will never attain official refugee status . . .”

We Are Not Refugees

True
Stories
of the
Displaced

Agus Morales

TRANSLATED BY CHARLOTTE WHITTLE

We Are Not Refugees



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

North Atlantic Ocean

MEXICO

Mexico City

Medias Aguas

Iztepec

Tapachula

HONDURAS

Suchiate River
GUATEMALA
EL SALVADOR

South Atlantic Ocean



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Before We Begin

I MET KHALID in an Istanbul apartment in spring 2013. He had fled the violence in Iraq. He was suffering from hypertension, diabetes, asthma . . . he was taking pills of every color under the sun and couldn't stop complaining about his illnesses, even though he'd just received the news of a lifetime: he'd been granted asylum by the United States. At my assurance that an ideal future awaited him, Khalid finally allowed himself to be carried away by euphoria—he lifted his hands as if turning a steering wheel, and then he waved and bestowed a haughty glance on an imaginary crowd. I'll buy myself a great set of wheels in Detroit, he seemed to be thinking.

This is an image that President Donald Trump would like to suppress. With Trump's rise to power in the United States, the construction of the refugee as an enemy—a criminal, a terrorist,

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a threat to U.S. safety—has reached its peak. The fact that most people seeking asylum in the United States and Europe are like Khalid—ordinary people trying to escape violence—is a reality that Trump and his supporters deny. Refugees, then, become objects of fear; the human dimensions of their stories are erased and replaced by a caricature promoting the agenda of a president for whom fear is politically expedient.

The truth is that the story of Khalid's asylum is an exception. He is part of a minority. Millions of people flee violence every year, but most will never attain official refugee status, whether in the United States or anywhere else. Their requests are likely to be denied because asylum systems, even where they exist, are not prepared to deal with millions of applications. In the case of the United States, new restrictions banning citizens of predominantly Muslim countries (which were challenged in court after they were issued) paint an even more dreadful picture. But most important, many in need of asylum will never even reach the point of being able to apply. The vast majority of those fleeing violence remain in their own countries or in neighboring ones, experiencing scenarios very different from that of Khalid, and many do not identify with the label *refugee*—because they haven't obtained asylum, because they don't want to become refugees, or simply because they don't want to be labeled at all.

Although there is no single, universal refugee experience, most of the people whose stories appear in this book share a struggle to escape conditions of brutality and privation that most of us can only imagine. The paradox is that we tend to focus precisely on these moments of crisis, and fail to understand what happens before or after they flee. We think of them not as human beings, but as either victims or objects of suspicion, depending on our ideology. We tend to define these people exclusively by their wounds.

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But to come closer to understanding their situation, we must listen to them speak not only of hardship, but of hope; not only of moments of crisis and escape, but also the tedium of waiting, and of uncertainty. Only then can we engage in the cultural battle to define who these people are. And maybe the answer is much simpler than we thought.

Over the past decade, I've spoken with hundreds of refugees and nonrefugees. Some of them were unwilling to speak publicly due to fear of reprisal, even death, at the hands of security forces and militias. But many were eager to talk, to give voice to the experience of millions of others like them whose stories will never be heard. Why risk speaking to a journalist, a foreigner and stranger, after you've fled air strikes in Aleppo or gangs in Honduras? I wouldn't have done it myself had I been in their shoes. And yet many of them did. These are their stories.

Barcelona, January 2019

*For Anna, travel and life companion, for making me a
better journalist, and above all a better person.*

For Magdalena and Antonio, migrants.

And grant me my second
starless inscrutable hour

SAMUEL BECKETT,
Whoroscope

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HIS LAST ACT OF FREEDOM was to gaze at the Mediterranean.

Ulet was a fifteen-year-old Somali boy who'd been enslaved in a Libyan detention center. He boarded the rescue boat wearing a yellow tank top, with black bruises on his tailbone that were revealed when the doctors lifted his shirt. He couldn't walk unassisted: he was like an ungainly bird with broken wings. The nurses took him into the clinic, and at first, he seemed to be responding to the treatment they administered for dehydration. “Mom” and “Coca-Cola” were the only words he could utter.

Ulet was alone, a child with no known friends or family. The Somalis traveling with him said that he'd been tortured and had done forced labor in the detention center, without anything to eat or drink. According to the medical team on board the boat, he

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was also suffering from a chronic illness, though we'll never know which one.

It was incredible that he'd made it so far in that condition, to the crossroads of Europe and Africa; to the coordinates where every life begins to matter, if only a little; to the territory where death is explained and becomes news. The symbolic hinge between the North and the South: a haphazard line, in the middle of the sea, that marks the difference between the lives that matter and those that don't; between European land and African limbo.

A few nautical miles, but a world apart.

When Ulet arrived on the boat, he could only stammer, sputter, murmur his wishes. Wearing an oxygen mask, and with the marks of violence on his back, he struggled to survive, clinging on to his life. There wasn't a single familiar face there to encourage him.

After the rescue, the boat sailed on for hours toward Italy. Ulet began to feel better, and asked the nurse to take him out on deck. From there, he watched the rhythmic movement of the waves, felt the Mediterranean breeze on his face. Far from Libya, the inferno of war and torture that had determined the course of his life, he lost consciousness.

They tried to resuscitate him for half an hour, but he died of pulmonary edema, according to his death certificate.

If Ulet had died in Libya, no one would ever have known.

I WANTED TO WRITE a book about people who, like Ulet, are fleeing war, political persecution, and torture. I wanted to write a book that followed the paths of their lives, that didn't end with the traumatic moment of war or with the joy of finding refuge. I wanted to write an endless book, full of stories that went on forever. I wanted to write a book about the people that both official

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and unofficial sectors in the West are trying to turn into the enemy of the twenty-first century.

I wanted to write a book about refugees.

I had almost finished it when I thought of Ulet. And I realized he wasn't a refugee.

I thought of Ronyo, a teacher from South Sudan, who was still in his own country. And I realized he wasn't a refugee.

I thought of Julienne, a Congolese woman who'd been raped by the Interahamwe militia. And I realized she wasn't a refugee either.

Then I thought of those who were, at least in theory: Sonam, a Tibetan librarian in India; Akram, a businessman from Aleppo in the Greek port of Lesbos; Salah, a young Syrian who was granted asylum in Norway. And I realized they didn't identify as refugees.

The librarian was born in exile in India, and he identified only as Tibetan: he didn't feel like he had anything in common with Syrians or Afghans fleeing from war.

The businessman from Aleppo had plenty of money before the war, and he said he had nothing in common with the refugees who were fleeing northward.

The young Syrian granted asylum in Norway had become part of a global minority that enjoys relative freedom of movement. He knew he no longer had anything in common with those risking their lives at sea.

Seventeen countries and around two hundred interviews later, I realized that the word *refugee* is used mostly in the countries that host them. For the displaced people whose voices we hear in this book, the word *refugee* acquires its meaning when they attempt to defend their rights and seek international protection, but it is rarely one they use to refer to themselves. Perhaps

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the word *refugee*, so often repeated by Western media, is meant mainly for a Western audience.

According to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees—the famous Geneva Convention of 1951—a refugee is someone “who, as a result of events occurred before January 1 1951 and owing to well-founded fears of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, belonging to a given social group, or for political opinions, finds themselves outside their country of nationality.”

Here, the word *events* refers to World War II. The Geneva Convention and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were established, in the beginning, to serve Europeans. Many refugees were illustrious figures: writers, painters, scientists. In these instances, the refugee carried an aura of prestige and was seen as deserving, persecuted, and fleeing brutality.

Now, war is located elsewhere, and (non) refugees are, too. Some 84 percent of refugees come from developing countries. Three of those countries—Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia—contribute over half of the total. Today, refugees are largely non-European, and they are seen as persecuted and fleeing brutality—but undeserving.

These refugees make up almost 1 percent of the world’s population. More than sixty-eight million people. Barely a third of them are in fact refugees who have crossed international borders, and almost all the others are internally displaced people, also known as *IDPs*: this isn’t just a refugee crisis. Almost nine out of ten live in developing countries: this isn’t just an American or a European crisis.

Is almost 1 percent of the world’s population an accurate figure? The official figures from the United Nations (UN) do not include, for example, the Central Americans fleeing from gangs and trying to cross Mexico to reach the United States because

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such people are considered by the United Nations to be migrants, not refugees. Often they face death if they dare to return home to countries like Honduras, where the daily murder rate is higher than that of Iraq.

There have never been as many refugees as there are now.

There have never been as many refugees in poor countries as there are now.

There have never been so many people fleeing war zones and other crises, vulnerable people for whom we have no collective name. This book is about both refugees and nonrefugees. About those who have arrived, and those who never will. About people in Hamburg, Oslo, and Barcelona, but also—and especially—in Bangui, Dharamsala, Tapachula, and Zaatari. Because those are the scenes of populations in motion, forced to flee from violence: Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Middle East. And also Europe.

There’s no portrait of refugees as the invading enemy in this book, of the kind that certain sectors of the right want to construct: there’s no Islamophobia, no racism, no defense of borders.

There’s no portrait of the vulnerable friend in this book, of the kind that certain sectors of the left want to construct: there are no angelic figures, no pious lies, no defense of open borders.

But there’s no false sense of impartiality in this book, either: there are people who struggle, who cry, who get angry, who refuse to give up; who try again, and again, and again.

And there is also injustice. Because sometimes the world is a terrible place.

AFTER ARRIVING in the Italian port of Vibo Valentia, the body of Ulet, the fifteen-year-old Somali boy rescued on the high seas, was removed in a wooden coffin.

The Italian police said they were looking for somewhere to bury him, which was no easy task because Vibo Valentia was a

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small city, with no room in any of the local cemeteries for this Somali who crossed the Horn of Africa to reach Libya, who was enslaved in a detention center, who was beaten and humiliated, who managed to board a small migrant boat and cross the Mediterranean, and whose harrowing story is similar to that of so many others; for this Somali who had the crazy dream of making it to Europe by sea when he was on the verge of death, with nothing but a yellow tank top for protection, and who died fleeing from slavery, at the very moment when he was about to achieve his goal.

For this Somali who was never a refugee.