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# UNTIL I BECOME HOME

a collaboratice newspaper\*

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*Until I Become Home* is a collaborative newspaper publication that focuses on the Balkan refugee route as well as communities and individuals that try to traverse it. The publication looks at the numerous journeys that people on the move make before—if lucky enough—they reach their desired safe haven in Europe. Through various written and visual reflections, it centres *on the route* as an interruption in the lives of individuals, whose goal to reach countries such as Italy, France, Germany, or Spain and be reconnected with their communities-in-exile presupposes the perilous journeys that they embark on.

While attempting to reach Europe, people fleeing war, conflict, poverty, or persecution are often pushed to the fringes, forced to live precariously in refugee camps, abandoned buildings, or improvised shelters in the forest. Their path to safe-

ty requires numerous and often deadly attempts to negotiate vast distances on foot, guided by the luminous light of maps on mobile phone screens.

The attempt to traverse the Balkan refugee route—a journey through land mines, razor wire, hostile natural environment, and police brutality—often requires invisibility. “One develops such a superpower by hiding as much as possible, blending in, not attracting attention or trouble”, Zied Abdellaoui would often mention. Yet the thick forests along the Balkan refugee route not only offer invisibility to people on the move, but they also utterly mask the institutionalized violence committed by the European Union member states, which use brutal means and tactics to deter migration while increasingly criminalizing solidarity shown by the local population. The thick forests and deep rivers also hide the deaths

of many who got lost, were left behind, or swept away by the current of the river in their attempt to cross it, those who froze or starved to death, and those who lost their strength along their journey.

On the other hand, the collaborative newspaper publication also aims to negotiate the invisibility of those who seek shelter in Europe by offering statements, poetry, oral histories, essays as well as a visual archive and collected images from the route. *Until I Become Home* is divided into three chapters: *We Could Live Another Day*, which looks into two possible passages to safety and the toll that one pays to endure it, *Rain and Fog. And Sometimes Sun*, which speaks of the everyday life of people on the move, and *I Became Home*, which offers an overview of a successful attempt to reach safety.



\*Initiated by Jošt Franko in collaboration with people on the move along the Balkan refugee route between 2020 and 2024.



# The Displaced

Mohamad Abdul Monaem

On the Aegean Sea,  
in an inflatable boat.

Eyes gaze on the other coast,  
eyes, round, painted only with fear.

Waves are hula hooping—  
the Turkish coast guards are still nowhere to be  
seen.

I tell myself:  
*If the guards catch us now,  
we could live another day,  
we could stave away death.  
Then again... if we jump... perhaps  
we can be a feast for migrating salmon...*

Eyes gaze on the other coast,  
eyes, round, painted only with fear.

Someone  
as the boat is halfway to—Greece  
—the seabed  
says, *I'm afraid of death!*  
and cries.

A woman, thirty,  
holding three in her lap,  
replies, *I'm afraid too,  
but pray to God,  
close your eyes,  
and make fear fall asleep at your feet.*

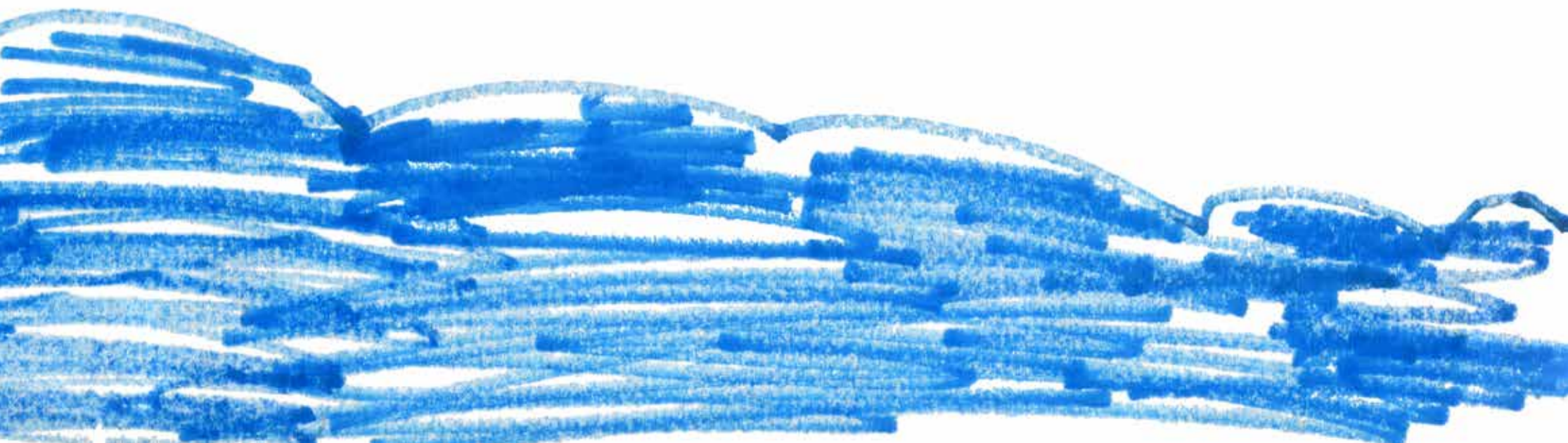
After that—screams, laments, SOS!, prayers  
never before heard by God till now—

and proclamations from the man handling the  
boat's motor:  
*It's nothing at all, nothing! It's just  
the rippling caused by a sea serpent—gone now,  
nothing, nothing at all!*

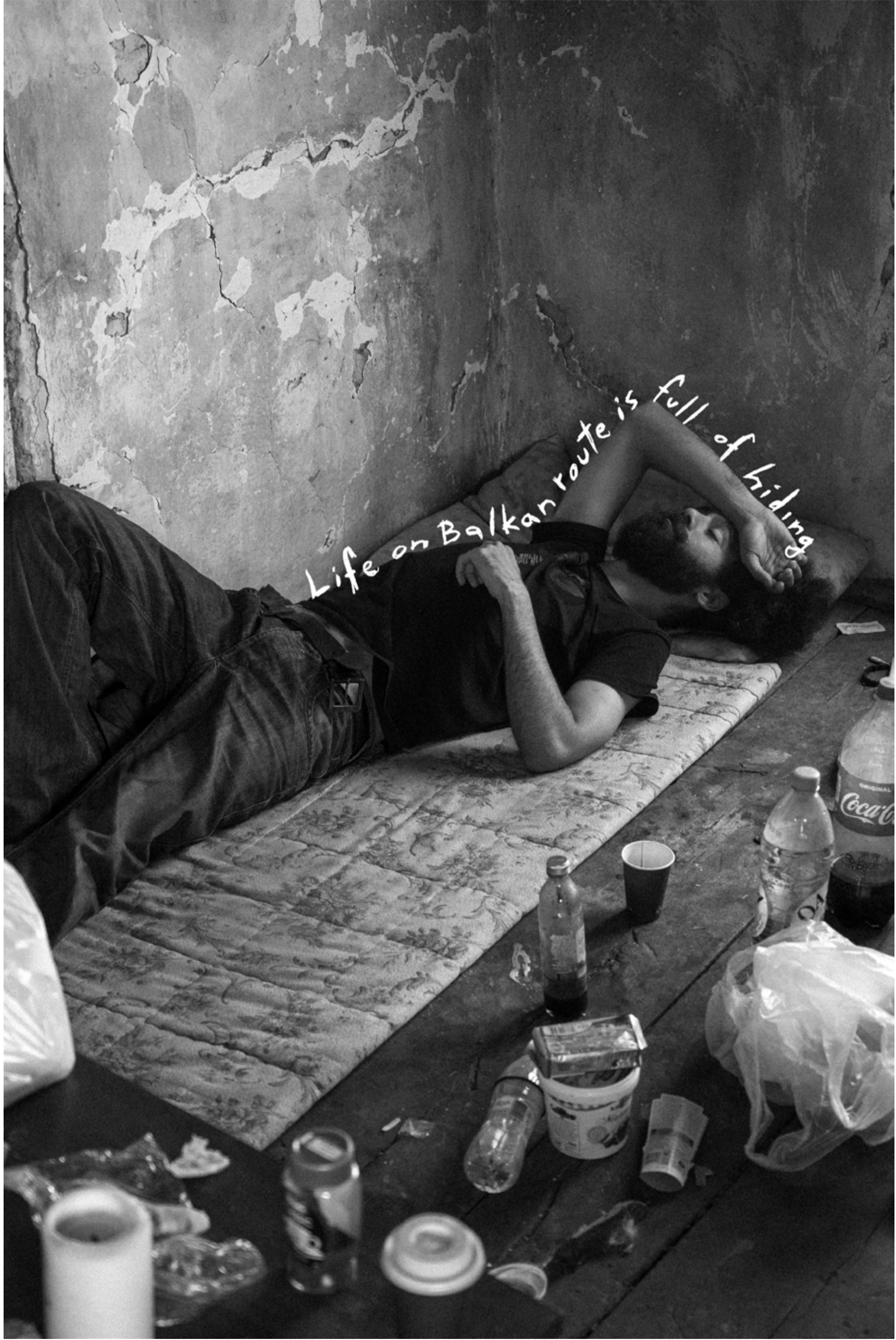
In the morning, the state news broadcaster an-  
nounces:  
“Twenty-three Migrants Rescued—Search Con-  
tinues for the Missing”.

On the shore, the woman kneels, naked, knife  
in hand,  
she cuts off her other breast,  
feeds her crimson milk to the sands—and says:

*I won't have need of them again.  
I won't have need of them again.*







Life on Balkan route is full of hiding

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# Land Mines, Rivers, Police Batons, and Mountains

Zied Abdellaoui

I left home because I spent eight years in my country trying to make a revolution, but in the end, the regime stole it. The Islamic regime crippled our effort and killed the revolution. And I didn't want to live under such dictatorship anymore. I wanted to finish my studies and, if all would go well, become a lawyer. And I wanted to live in a democratic society. I knew that I would rather be hungry and free than fed as a slave.

That is what becoming a migrant was for me. I wanted freedom, and I wanted to continue my education. So when I decided to leave Tunisia, I had two options: to go to Europe or the United States. I tried my luck with the Green Card lottery in the United States every year... But I didn't stand a chance there. So the other option was to go to Europe.

There are two ways how you can reach Europe: by sea, which takes two nights and is extremely dangerous. Or by land, traversing the Balkan route. Knowing that I would be put on an old, overcrowded fishing boat and not wanting to end up on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, I chose the Balkan route. I flew to Istanbul because I didn't need a visa to travel to Turkey. Then it took me six or seven days to walk across Greece. After that, I rode buses, walked, took trains, and then walked some more. I spent all my money before I reached Bosnia.

Bosnia is where the real struggle for migrants on the Balkan route begins. In order to cross this last stretch of land and reach Italy, you need to navigate land mines, rivers, mountains while constantly hiding from the police and their brutality. You need to cross an area of death and a space full of hate. It's called the Game—a game of chance and luck. I played the Game nine times, making nine failed attempts to cross the distance that one can make in three hours by car and with the right papers, and it took us two or three weeks to walk through the forest, often passing the bodies of our comrades who did not make it, serving as a stark reminder of the perils of our journey and the dangers that still lay ahead. At the same time, the police were looking for us like they were searching for gold. It has become an ideology for them and the people of Croatia. They hate us. They hate us because we are migrants. Their hatred of us has become part of their everyday lives.

People believe what the state keeps telling them—"migrants will come and take your jobs, they will violate your daughters, they will come and eat your bread, they smell bad and are savages, they are uneducated, they are a threat to your comfortable life and situation in the European Union..." After repeating this time and time again, it becomes part of the ideology of the state and its people. Something similar happened during the war in the Balkans. In the 1990s, before the war began, Serbian politicians kept saying that the Ottomans, Muslims, would ruin the region. They kept spreading stories about what happened five hundred years ago. They kept repeating these stories because they knew they would go to war. So they spread the propaganda. This was the doing of Slobodan Milošević—and he ended up in the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

Because the state has a monopoly on violence, they beat the people who are illegal. It's not a simple coup de pied and hauling us back to Bosnia—they beat us until they break our bones, break our skulls. They beat us until we become blind. They beat us until they kill our body or spirit. They try to kill our dream of a better and safer life. Yes, I tried to cross Croatia and enter Europe illegally. I am an illegal. But my life is still legitimate. I am not a criminal. With the level of violence and brutality the Croatian state uses, it seems that they want to end up in the Hague as well, just like the war criminals of the war in Yugoslavia.

It's been years of living precariously since I started my journey. Years of living in overcrowded refugee centres, squats, abandoned buildings... I've become tired. I've become tired of living as an illegitimate person. But until my luck turns around and I make it to Europe, I will continue to live like this.

I know that some of my comrades who came before me and managed to traverse the Balkan route now live in Milan, Udine, Trieste, Padua, and Turin. But they live on the street. They have gone through a shock culture—they walked for twenty days in the forest... Avoided police, and landmines, and hunger, and cold... And once they reached Europe, they ended up on the street. I know one can always end up like that. But I would rather be hungry and free than fed as a slave.

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*Zied Abdellaoui is an asylum seeker from Tunisia. He studied political sciences. At the time when the article was written, he had been stuck in Bosnia for over three years.*

# The Balkans, the ladder of the East...







I am tired of shit life.

I've been living  
like this for too long

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What we see when we walk for days?

Vahida and Walid\*

Grass and leaves. Trees. Rivers.  
Plants. Broken branches. Old  
tents. Sleeping bags. Cars. Roads.  
Big mountains. Clouds. Hills. Val-  
leys. Big trees. Mud. Bushes. Soil.  
Mushrooms. Cans of food. Shoes.  
Backpacks. Abandoned houses.  
Campfires. Towns. Trucks. Bus-  
es. Narrow paths. Highways. Po-  
licemen and soldiers. Other peo-

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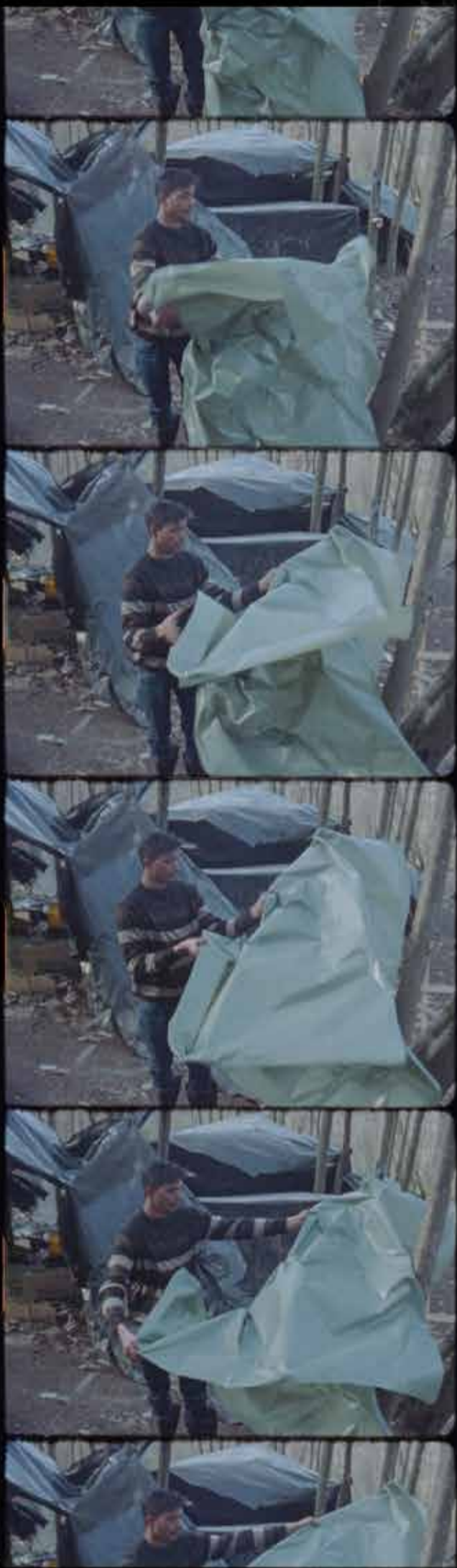
*Vahida and Walid\* (pseudonyms) are ten and twelve-year-old sister and brother from Afghanistan. The article was written just after the Taliban returned to power in their home country.*

ple. Empty water bottles. The sky.  
Deer. Mice. Wolves. Dogs. Fences.  
Caves. Insects. Bridges. Train  
tracks. Dirty clothes. Rain and  
fog. And sometimes sun. Empty  
power banks. Highways. A lot of  
birds. Dark nights and very cold  
mornings. Dead people. Flow-  
ers. Broken phones. Shadows.  
The moon.





We found a woman in the jungle.



Smugler left her behind because she was pregnant, 1005/024.



## I Am Exhausted from Life

Matiullah Intizar

My perilous journey to Europe included unforgettable moments as well as some of the saddest memories and unbearable suffering. It lasted for almost five years after I left my country because of war, insecurity, corruption, and the daily loss of life. I left Afghanistan with hope and a dream of safety, peace, and the opportunity to continue my education. It took me five years just to reach Europe.

I felt hopeless, homeless, like a beggar. It seemed to me that there was no more humanity, that there was no more compassion left for our fellow human beings. I was pushed back three times from Slovenia to Croatia, and then to Serbia, and the same happened three times on the Croatian-Serbian border. Each time we reached border scanning points on the Croatian-Serbian or Slovenian-Croatian border, the police found us. They beat us. They took our belongings and

handed us over to the Croatian or Serbian border police. The Serbian police simply let us go.

Still, I know that I am lucky. Some were not. One of my close friends died right in front of my eyes in Macedonia, from an electric shock while he was trying to get off a train. I saw it happen. He came from Greece to Macedonia on a cargo train, hidden on an oil tanker. He was trying to get off the tanker when his head touched the electric cable above. He was electrocuted and fell to the ground. When I held him, I saw that his whole body was covered in burns. I started crying. I was so upset. I asked myself: "What kind of life do we have?" My friend was in a coma for three days, then his soul was taken by angels. May it rest in peace.

I am exhausted from life. I wish that I could return to my country...

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*Matiullah Intizar is an Afghani refugee living in a hosting facility in Italy. At the time when the article was written, he had been waiting for his asylum request interview.*

## Between Hopes and Fears

Zahra and Yasmin

[beginning of transcript]

*We live in a crack-house. The owner is a heroin addict. We didn't have any other option. It was either to go live in the woods as the only two women among a group of men where we feared that we would be harassed or robbed and couldn't do anything to protect ourselves or to live in a house where people come to get high. We felt this was a safer thing to do. At least here we can lock the door. And as long as we pay for our room, no one harasses us. Though I am still afraid. And I worry what the future holds for us. How long will we need until we reach safety? What if we run out of money in the meantime? Will we be forced to take more difficult decisions? What if we are sent back to Iran if we get caught again? What if the police will be more brutal the next time they catch us?*

*It's funny to talk about our situation today, on 8 March. International Women's Day doesn't really mean much when you are fleeing your home. It's hard to feel empowered when you must stay hidden. Because for us, to be seen is to be in trouble. So our focus for this day is survival. And my only wish is for my daughter to have a safe future ahead of her.*

[end of transcript]

# Every step I took on this ladder

# was like reaching the top of Mount Everest...

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*Zahra and Yasmin (pseudonyms) are Iranian asylum seekers. At the time when the article was written, they had been stuck in Bosnia for over three months.*









## Run

Desmond Happy

Run run run run run run from all those who use the names of refugees for their personal gain run from those who use your misfortune for their advantage run from those who don't care about you but only about their self-advancement run run from where the locals and authorities don't care about what happened to you run run from those who want to use you to show off who is more powerful run run from those who want you to see them as God run run from all those who are happy when you're crying run run from all those who think your life is in their hands run run from all those who find happiness in brutalizing you run run from all those who can only be happy when they bring you down run run from all those who try to make you feel as if you don't belong in this world run run from those who have used you for their political advantage run run from all those who use the names of refugees for their personal political agenda I say run run from those who will only be happy to see division among humans run run from those who don't like to be where the spirit of humanity is trying to build run run get up and run and keep on running until you get far away from those who know less or nothing about what you're going through I say run as far and fast as you can.

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*Desmond Happy is an asylum seeker and poet from Cameroon. At the time when the poem was written, he had been living in a refugee camp in Bosnia for several years.*

# I burned my identity step by step, rung by rung

## Five Years and Six Months

Wassim Gujjar

It's been five years and six months since I left Kashmir, five years and six months since I last saw my family. I left my hometown amidst the growing violence and insecurity, and after the constant fear and uncertainty made life unbearable. My parents persuaded me to leave, fearing that my future in Kashmir would be crushed by bullets. We couldn't gather enough money for a flight to Turkey, so my cousin and I footed it all the way from Kashmir.

During the long journey, we experienced the best and the worst of humanity—when we had nothing, people would sometimes share their shelter and food with us, and even when we had nothing, some still stole from us. We often slept outside to save money. Whenever I called my parents, I lied that everything was going according to plan, and that I was happy, even though I sometimes went on for days without food.

When we started the journey, it took us almost a year before we reached Turkey and then a few more months before we made it to Bosnia. Afterwards, we were stuck, and the real struggle began. We could not continue. I didn't understand why the Croatian police would not listen

to us when we told them that we were fleeing our country because we were afraid? Why did they just put us in a van and drive us back to the border and told us to go back to Bosnia? We were told that we were lucky because at least we were not beaten when the police found us. I have tried many times to play the Game and to reach Italy, but I was always found and returned to Bosnia. Now, it's been almost six years since I left my home and almost six years since I started the journey that cost me my youth. When we recover our strength, we will try again. Perhaps this time, we will make it without the police finding us. Or perhaps this time, they will listen when we say that we fear the violence in our country.

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*Wassim Gujjar is an asylum seeker from Kashmir.*





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# I Sang at Night So That Birds Could Sleep in My Chest

Mohamad Abdul Monaem

(1) The Balkans, the ladder of the East... After the rubber boat sank midway between Izmir and Pasas Island in the Aegean Sea, a Turkish rescue ship arrived and threw rope ladders for us to cling to and climb aboard. Every step I took on this ladder was like reaching the top of Mount Everest... and then... As I reached the last rung, two strong hands grabbed me under my armpits, pulled me up, and threw me on the ship's metal deck like a salmon that decided to migrate north and got caught in fishing nets—eyes open to the sky, and below me was a valley at a depth of one thousand five hundred kilometres between Aleppo and Izmir. As for the rest of the fish that were thrown beside me, they probably came from... other places like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq; people from all over east flee north...

(2) Since I left my home, heading into the unknown, and crossed the first checkpoint of the Syrian soldiers, who did not search for anything on me except the amount of money that I paid for the crossing, I had the feeling that all the militias on the road were ready for this crossing, and that the price was set from one checkpoint to the next and from one militia to another until I reached the Greek island of Chios after about a month-long journey. On Chios Island, we were received by international organizations that provided us with the necessary aid and temporary accommodation in tents. Then we were investigated by the police and moved on to the borders of ever new countries—Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria...

3) It was five after midnight when I reached the Austrian border, and the policewoman said to me: Sorry, you must return to Slovenia. We have now begun to implement the Dublin Agreement. She put handcuffs on my wrists, and then the Slovenian police took us away. Of course, I had studied all international agreements, including European ones, and I just forgot that the issue of distributing slaves who arrive at their own expense these days, fleeing the hell of war, requires arrangement and coordination between countries... Not all the novels that I had read helped me to understand that situation, nor the poetry of Rasul Gamzatov, not even the music of Beethoven, so I decided to surrender to the agreement.

(4) Šentilj, Postojna prison, and after ten days, the police car takes us to the Asylum Centre Vič in Ljubljana. Investigation, translators, lawyers, taking mugshots from different angles and then a full-length photo, holding a number in front of me. Then to the facility on Kotnikova ulica, where refugees stay while they wait for the decision. Residence. It was not a long way to the room, and the ninety-five bicycles to the sixth floor were not dangerous, as were not the rungs of the Balkan ladder. But there was no ladder leading to the roof of the building, the bicycles ran out, and the roof was still above my head. I wanted to reach a floor with a blue-sky ceiling. Or the moon, which too is the source of light in the night of free Europe.

(5) On the steps of the Balkan ladder, I burned my identity step by step, rung by rung, and I threw my memories at the door of the border police after they were done interrogating me. Now at the asylum facility in Ljubljana, I redefine myself every morning and raise the questions of existence once again. But the taste of coffee is not the one I know, and I have no connection to the man who shares the room with me, even though he is Syrian like I am—yet am I really Syrian?—and what is this identity that I've escaped from, or the identity that I carry now. Even though I am Palestinian—still, I do not know Palestine, I was born in Aleppo, without a national card. These days I decided to belong, to love, to give the new place my name and my soul. I loved the Medina River, I loved the old neighbourhood, I likened it to the old Aleppo so that it would be closer to me. I climbed Ljubljana's castle hill and looked from there for my home as I used to do when I went up to the citadel of Aleppo. I forgot the slow routine that I was waiting for.

(6) To obtain residence and bring my family. Two years had to pass for them to arrive. During that time, I wrote many poems and a novel, and I sang at night so that birds could sleep in my chest. And I became home, even if only in a dream.

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*Mohamad Abdul Monaem is a Syrian poet, writer, and publisher of Palestinian origin. After his home in Aleppo was demolished in the civil war, he fled with his family and found refuge in Slovenia.*

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# And I became home, even if only in a dream...

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**Images**

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**Design**

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**Printed by**

Collegium  
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**Published by**

Založba ZRC,  
Kunsthhaus Graz

**Publication date**

2024

**Print run**

1000

**Price**

5 EUR

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Nika Autor, without whose love and support this publication would never have been possible, as well as to Gerhild Steinbuch, Susan Meiselas, Tevž Logar, Oto Luthar, Marina Lukšič Hacin, Jure Gombač, Andreja Hribernik, Dušan Letnar, Manca Gašperšič, Jahangir Alom Sumon, Suhel Ahmed, Ahmed Kawsar, Hussain Tahsan, Zeeshan Shani, Raja Abdeel Khan, Raja Mobeen, Mohammad Shamrez, Kamran Kami, Adrohman Begum, and numerous others for their support, deliberation, and kindness throughout the creation of the publication.

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<https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610508700>

Kunsthhaus  
Graz



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Slovenian Migration  
Institute

