DROWNING ON DRY LAND,

A TALE OF ELEVEN LIVES

*© 2018*

*Jane Rose Speiser*

*to my brother,*

*whose generosity*

*made the completion*

*of this book possible*

'This book is not an easy read.

It probably does not flow

as smoothly as I would like.

But it bears witness to events

that have happened in this world,

choppy as they are,

incomprehensible as they are.

In the world that we all dream of,

this book would not be necessary.'

1. Let us begin.

This is a book in two voices, both of which are my own. One of them is the public voice, of the events that have occurred in the lives of those people requesting asylum, whom I have been trying to help for the past forty months. The other voice is the story

behind the story, the ghost in the mirror, the words that wander through the brain of a person who has been trying to move mountains, ever so slightly, in a direction they don't want to go in. Mountains are obstinate; so are entrenched ideas and obsolete laws. In displacing these mountains, she too is being transported, one grain of sand at a time, with regard to her head, and her heart.

This is a book about human beings, it is not about heroes or saints. But the heroism of the people I write about surely surpasses my own. I have tried not to romanticize those I write about, as they are a varied bunch. I have also tried not to romanticize my own decisions and actions. No one can fully explain why they do things in this world, why they make certain decisions. Perhaps it is the decisions themselves that grip those who make them.

Let us begin. My life was like that of many people in my area of Italy when the first group of refugees arrived fleeing Libya in the summer of two thousand and eleven, a few months after Gheddafi's fall. These first arrivals were lodged five kilometers up the hill from my village of Ponti di Pornassio, on the neighboring mountain top, in Nava, out of sight, in an ex-orphanage. At that moment, I spoke to my local doctor, a person involved in politics like myself, and said 'we should welcome them, they are fleeing death, we should invite them for dinner in our hamlet, bring them into our lives.'

But I was on my way to the States that Summer, where my closest childhood friend was dying of cancer. My finances had taken a swan dive into the economic swamp that the world crisis had produced. My romantic life was falling off the cliff, and as it crashed to the valley far below, so did my spirits. In this manner, I did nothing. I forgot that those people up the hill existed, as I tried to put my own life together. Like so many other people. In that manner four years passed.

In the Summer of two thousand and fifteen I woke up. The refugees needing asylum were camped out on the shores of the border between Italy and France, an hour and a half from my home. The television was interviewing them, therefore they existed. But it was not the attention of the media that motivated my decision. It was something much more personal. My sister-in-law was losing her mind. My next door neighbor has just killed himself. I felt it was incumbent upon me to act.

*2. Why? Why them?*

*When Mark and Susie came off the plane and passed through customs, in Malaga, I knew something was wrong. I saw them from a far. I had not seen them in three years. But from far across the room, I saw her gait. I saw her rigidity. I saw her lack of expression. I saw with horror what I had not wanted to see three years previously, as I had witnessed her decline. It took my brother two days in our vacation residence, before he could talk to me, of the unspeakable disease that had capsized his and her lives.*

*No one could deserve this. That week of luxury vacation, given the generosity of my brother, in the presence of my sister-in-law who was unable to address one sentence to me, who was unable to perform the most mundane chores of making lunch along with me, gave me a sense of mortality that I had not imagined before.*

*I returned to my home town among the olive groves of the Italian Riviera, with a leaden sadness in my veins. The following day, news came out that my next door neighbor, an unemployed jazz musician, had thrown himself into the nearby valley’s gorge. I did not know him well, but I had seen him on and off for nineteen years. He had been trying to rebuild the tiny house just below my own, the previous year. He had a dog who followed him like a shadow, whose sweet and sad face said everything that he did not say out loud. He left the dog at his parents’ home on the day he went to jump off the cliff into the ravine below. It took the police four days to find his body, after they found his abandoned car.*

*What will I do with the loneliness? What will I do, with my family coming apart? What will I do? What? The briefness of life on this planet, and the need to give meaning to one's own life leads in unexpected directions. I do not confuse trying to live a coherent life, with so called noble intentions or philanthropic generosity. I was trying to improve my own life, as much as anyone else’s.*

3. First Encounter

August, 2015.

I drove to Ventimiglia in the wind, in my featherweight car, a tunafish can with four wheels attached to it, or so it seemed, swishing along the freeway, on the overpasses, in the tourist traffic, in fear of my life, swerving and swaying with each gust, seized up by terror, but I made it to the border and even found a parking space, near where the sixty refugees were camped out.

Writers of satire, are not always understood by their readers, as not everyone understands what is satire; so be it I started writing and making films about the immigrants and refugees of our planet in 1966. As a repeat offender I have continued for the past forty nine years.

*As the world turns, so do its people:*

One thing is clear about the ‘Presidio Permanente: No Borders’: in keeping with their diligent attempts to integrate their initiative into the Italian territory, they too do *not* have a building permit. Simply sixty tents and a rudimentary plumbing and cooking system two hundred yards from the entrance to France. Like half the other constructions and habitats along the coast of the Bel Paese, they too are doing their part to keep what is known as 'edilizia abusiva'/unlicensed building, from becoming extinct. Of course they are novices, so it will take them a while to get up to the level of towns like Civezza and Loano; it takes great wealth to create unsanctioned construction on a grand scale: with limited means one cannot compete with the majestic villas whose existence has never grazed a building permit. But no one can accuse them of not attempting to do their part.

Not that they did not try to get a building permit. I'm sure they drew up detailed plans of where to put the tents, how to align them so as not to block anyone's view of the sea, what would be the best location for the plumbing system. But you know how it is in Italy, the bureaucrats have been stamping permits for a couple of millennia, since they invented them during the Roman empire, so just at the crucial moment they ran out of ink. They had also worn down their rubber stamps to the bone. So much for permits; the organizers of No Borders were forced to improvise.

However the Italian government has a bit less of an excuse. The first wave of migration arrived from Africa on this coast, just fifty meters down the road, at the caves of the Balzi Rossi, about thirty five thousand years ago. So the government should have had time to get their act together to receive these newest immigrants in a more elegant style. They could have chosen a better architect to build the border control structures. The original caves of the Balzi Rossi were duplexes and were large enough to house the original elephants and rhinoceri, as well as hominum erectus; (it was warmer in the Pleistocene era.)

But in the third millennium only an anorexic elephant would be able to slide through the border from Italy to France, and that's what they call progress. However quite thoughtfully the tropical vegetation that Italo Calvino's father imported from the Caribbean just after the First World War has had a whole century to grow to an adequate height to provide shade for the inhabitants. Take a look at the refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Sicily, Kenya, Chad, Pakistan and few other countries I may have forgotten to mention, that house the other four million refugees of this decade. Shade is important.

Writers are vultures, always trying to swoop down on other peoples' stories, and gobble them up. I don't pretend to be an exception. But my first visit to the Presidio, was what the Italians call 'a hole in the water.' I spent seven hours observing the territory, and looking at the faces of its sixty inhabitants and I froze up. Faces of people who have seen death, and terror and uncertainty and endless waiting, followed by terror and death and more uncertainty and endless waiting.

*Who am I to say to these people: 'tell me your life stories, and I will tell the world about you.' How can I tell these individuals ' I too have been a 'sans papiers' forty three years ago in France when my companion had to leave my country for political reasons....I too have woken up with terror for months on end, every time I saw a member of the CRS and was not sure if my near perfect French accent would allow us to pass. I too have seen my fellow students imprisoned and spent months writing articles to try to save my college friend from the twenty five years she spent in America's finest jails.’ I too...blah...blah... what can my experience mean to someone else, a half a century later? What on earth?*

4. A chance event

It was a Sunday in late October, like so many others. An acquaintance had invited me to lunch at the last moment, given that I spoke English and they were not so able to communicate with the guest requesting asylum, whom her husband had hired to help varnish the outdoor veranda. They knew that I wanted to meet some refugees in my own area; they were good people, had a wondrous library, in an isolated village over the hill from my own.

*As he looked up to greet me, I saw a perfect replica of the statues of West Africa, that I had only seen in museums, whose features sculptors dream of, and whose voice a theater director would die for. A hesitant British accent from the schools he attended in the Gambia. He looked straight at me, with eyes that would pierce iron. His name was Sulayman.*

It has been a long time since I had spoken to anyone in English. Over the thirty eight years I had spent in Italy it very rarely happened. I had become accustomed to living in isolation, in my bilingual bubble, apparently fully integrated into the territory where I earned my living, but psychologically completely detached from my surroundings. I had long ago given up any illusion of communicating with the people born in the country I had lived in for nearly four decades. I simply went through the required motions, the chattering commonplaces that pass for conversation.

This was the first actual dialogue I had had for quite a while, perhaps for Sulayman as well. I asked him how he came to have to flee his native land, and he told me a very complex story, about the Gambia, a country with perhaps the worst dictator in the world, in power for twenty two years, a tiny country about which I knew nothing. As I learned more over time, trying to help him through the legal labyrinth that requesting asylum consists of, I realized how much chance and tragedy are intertwined.

In the meantime, I made arrangements to meet the other ten people living in the emergency lodging set up for the refugees in a neighboring village facing the olive groves farther down the hill. He was the coordinator for the group, appointed by the organization, called a Cooperativa (one of many) that received large amounts of government money to feed and house the several hundred thousand people requesting asylum, who had made it out alive, across the desert, across the sea, and onto the Italian shores.

He had been here a year longer than the others who just arrived, was a natural leader, chosen by the Cooperative to work six and a half days a week, day and night to keep peace and organize the daily life of his protégées. He was paid for this by the cooperative a full seventy five euro a month. This is what the Italian bureaucracy classifies as ‘voluntary labor’ essentially an elegant form of indentured servitude. He did not complain. His first asylum request had been turned down for unfathomable reasons, he was focused on his up and coming appeal, to the exclusion of all other worries.

I explained to Sulayman that I wanted to write about the people in his group, their aspirations, what they faced to come to Europe, their hopes for their future. We arranged that I would drive to the village of Vessalico, and speak to them on the following Wednesday, late afternoon. He told me quietly not to say anything to the Italian employees of the Cooperative, of my plans. I did not know anything about these institutions that had sprung up like mushrooms to receive copious amounts of European Community cash, so I did not sense at that time how ominous his warning would prove to be.

*Now that twenty months have passed, now that it appears to be over, all of the dreams, the hopes the plans, all of the quest for a future that will not exist for you, or for me. I ask myself what have I done? Where was the blade of grass that bent in the wind to signal that all would go wrong? Where was the omen to warn me? And where will you go, now that it is over? How will you live? How will the others live? Five of them set adrift? Why could I not save them? I feel like the lady on the Titanic, sitting on her inner tube, watching the others drown, all around her, not knowing whether help will come for her, but knowing that the others going down will not rise from those chilled waters. Why do people always talk about saving oneself before trying to save others? What use is it to be saved, if the others are dead?*

5. The first meeting

The village where the ten refugees were housed was an add-on to the main ‘camp’ ten miles up the mountain, which was overflowing. Ten more refugees represented ten thousand more dollars a month flowing into the Cooperative’s coffers. It cost about three hundred and fifty dollars a month to keep a person requesting asylum housed, fed, and hooked up to the legal and bureaucratic machinery. The rest was profit for the cooperative. Vessalico was a dreary village in the valley, inhabited by unwilling hosts who had been there for centuries and did not want their routines interrupted by new arrivals. They had never moved, for generations. They did not see why anyone else should. The village also housed ‘the first wave’, a generation from varied and assorted countries who had blown in a decade or two previously. They too, did not want competition. Misery does not always like company. The school house had been built in a hurry forty years previously, during a short lasting population boom. It was vertical where it should be vertical, horizontal where it should be horizontal and no bombs had been dropped on it. It had all the charm of the inside of an empty refrigerator.

I sat down facing the ten people whom I did not yet know. Sulayman had not shown up to introduce me. He came by for ten seconds in the midst of this first encounter saying he had work to do, then disappeared again. I presumed he was not interested in what a writer might have to say, and turned my attention to the others. I realized so much later that he had foreseen how dangerous my visit would prove, to the Cooperative itself, and to him as well, as it came to be known that he was the original link between myself and the reality the refugees were facing.

I explained what my purpose was, to give them practical help to make their daily life better, and to tell their stories, and asked them to tell me what they most needed. My question astounded them into near silence.

After a moment the most courageous of the group spoke. His name was Prosper. He said simply: We have need of *everything.* He added that my visit and offer was a great surprise to them. They had been in the village for nearly three months. I was the first person who had come to visit them of my own initiative. After some very awkward conversation, we agreed that I would return in several days to start teaching them Italian, and try to get them an internet connection and a computer. As I got up to leave I did not feel that my visit had been a great success. I had barely managed to scratch the ice, let alone break it. But as I rose from my seat, a slightly older refugee who had not spoken a word looked at me and said: ‘God bless you.’

I believe it was those three words that gave me the courage to return. Three words from someone who barely spoke English but who wanted to make contact with the outside world, the world I represented.

I had no official position with regard to these people. I simply wished to do something useful to make them feel more welcome. I did not know what form my efforts would take. I did not foresee that they would unleash the wrath of the authorities upon me. I did not predict that my own life would be swept up and capsized in the wake of theirs, in the course of the following twenty months. I did not foresee that I would lose my home, my economic solvency, would be mired in debt, in court cases, would risk being arrested, would be hounded out of town, would lose nearly all of my friends and be judged as mad by the few remaining. Life is a great experiment. You never know how it will come out.

*Did I ever really know you? Did I only imagine you as I wished to see you? Did I reinvent you as I wished to see you? Did you ever really know me? Did we both need each other too much to know each other? Can a person ever become what you wish to believe him to be? Or do we each remain obstinately what we actually are?*

6.Who are these people?

The hardest concept for Europeans, (or any host nation) to grasp, it seems to me, is that those people who have landed on their shores, are actually *people*. Once they have been branded as Refugees, it is as if they have been ostracized from the human community. They have become the Other. Not us. Something else. Words are stones. Individuals from several dozen nations, three continents, a huge assortment of age, language, religion, level of instruction, station in life, and reason for being here have been corralled into one semantic container: Refugees. Also known as: people who have no business being here, because it disrupts the daily life of the pre-existing inhabitants. People who should evaporate and not interfere with the concerns of the preexisting inhabitants, who believe themselves to have seniority over the territory and the opportunities existing thereon. People who have no rights and should not claim any rights. People who should be grateful. Eternally grateful for the elegant and cosmopolitan ground they are walking on. People whose individuality and qualities have been stamped out with one word. Whose identity has been subsumed into seven letters. For whom those seven letters, r e f u g e e has become a curse.

That is why I began to conscientiously refer to those people I have come in contact with in the past three years as: individuals who are requesting asylum. Many more syllables, much harder and slower to pronounce. An expression that will not do much to restore dignity to the few million people I am talking about. But every bit counts. What is most apparent, to me, is their differences, their range, just as that is what is most obvious in the rest of the population: the non-refugees.

*7. The will of God: Kadish*

*If there is a God in the Heavens*

*Why was my request for asylum turned down?*

*If there is a God in the Heavens*

*did He guide the hand of the judge who wrote the deposition?*

*If there is a God in the Heavens*

*Why did the boat that took me to these shores spring a leak, less than an hour after it left Libya? Why did we have to cut open the twenty liter containers of drinking water and throw them into the sea, in order to spend the next seventeen hours bailing out the inflatable boat we were on, with those same containers to keep the boat from going to the bottom of the sea? Why did we spend those seventeen hours with no water to drink, in order not to drown?*

*If there is a God in the Heavens,*

*Did He see the eyes of my children when I had to leave the land where I was born? Did he look into the eyes of those four creatures?*

*If there is a God in the Heavens*

*Did He hear my wife crying in the still of the night before I left? Did He know that she would not see me for seven long years? Or was her anguish stifled by the clouds so that it did not reach that high?*

*If there is a God in the Heavens*

*Did He know what waiting does to a person? Waiting for a future that is not happening? Waiting in days of idleness for some form of dignity in a foreign land?*

*Waiting for the dignity of being paid for one’s labors?*

*Perhaps He was looking elsewhere when my mother died.*

*Perhaps He was looking elsewhere when my own father died.*

*Perhaps He was looking elsewhere when my half-brother died.*

*Perhaps when he gazed at the land where I grew up he did not actually see it,*

*Neither the land*

*Or its people*

*Or the desperation of their lives.*

*If the hand of a thief is cut off so that he will not be tempted to rob once more,*

*What could happen to the hand of a judge who has robbed me of my future?*

*Of course the thief could be taught not to rob:*

*That would be much better both for the thief and for the authorities who wear themselves out wiping up the blood from too many amputations.*

*But could the judge that has stolen my future be taught not to rob? Could the judge be taught the effect of the deposition he handed down, on my own life?*

*I do not ask if it is easier to teach a thief or a judge? I do not wish to take the place of the Almighty.*

8. time is a river

Time is a river. Time is a river that flows, as they wait. Time, in other parts of the world, has not been sliced thin as salami, into hours and minutes and seconds. Time has not been graphed and scheduled, and caged. Time, on the South side of the Mediterranean, simply flows, onward, from now, to when an event may possibly occur. While it flows, one can wait. No use being impatient. It will eventually get there. Time has not been planned into oblivion. It has rarely been measured. It moves with the sun, and the moon. And more suns, and more inexorable moons. Time is not rigidly encased in appointments. It sways with the events around it. Time has not been tamed by algorithms of productivity. Time does not produce hysteria, when one must wait. When one must wait, one waits. Time has not been ratcheted up to an inhuman velocity. Time has not been shot up with cheap speed. Time does not reign over those around it. It allows no one to reign over it. It moves at its own pace from the source to the sea. When it encounters obstacles it simply flows around them.

9. December 12. 2015

‘Dear friends, dearest relatives and above all dear long term friends from the seventies in San Francisco,

 I am writing you a group letter, something I do quite rarely, but the times being what they are...anyway I wanted to tell you about my recent activities. For the past three months I have been working with the refugees in my area of Italy.’

*I was so hopeful those first few months, so ignorant of how the political interests and the bureaucracy worked, so naively optimistic, it seems almost ludicrous in retrospect. But looking back at that distant past, it seems important to me to have set that spirit on paper, in my first international letter to my longtime friends. In that letter I described what was happening to the people I was trying to help:*

‘These are the people rescued from the boats off the coast of Sicily this summer: those who survived the crossing, those who did not drown, those who traversed the Sahara without dying of thirst, those who camped out in Libya for months without being knifed or beaten to death by the Libyans who are not too warm and cuddly these days to non-whites arriving from the far side of the Sahara, those who at times spent months, or even years to get from their countries of origin: Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Togo, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Guinea Bissau, Libya to the shores on our side (my side) of the Mediterranean, in search of a better life.

They are by and large escaping from di facto dictatorships, whose leaders are making war on their own population. Eleven of them are housed in emergency housing in a village neighboring my own, as they wait for their hearings and appeals to confirm or refute their refugee status. I have been teaching them Italian, writing legal depositions and trying to solve some of their logistical problems, about thirty hours a week.

      Here, predictably, the plot thickens. The fact is that Italy, (and by extension Europe as a whole) has not figured out what to do with these people. Because the Geneva Convention on refugees was drawn up, in 1951, as an answer to the tragedy of the Second World War, and the times have changed since then. Therefore, what is defined as a refugee, political or not, is a very narrow funnel through which only ten percent can pass, via the letter of the law.'

*How could I have known, how much the plot would thicken and congeal around all of my efforts. Just like quicksand.*

‘The other ninety percent are in the situation of the six million Jews upon whom Europe turned its back between 1935 and 1940, when they needed to leave Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union. Six years after they went up in smoke, the Geneva Convention was drawn up. In the meantime six more decades have passed, and those eight hundred thousand immigrants who have arrived in Europe in this Summer of two thousand and fifteen, are not welcome. So this generation of Europeans have turned their backs, just as the preceding one did on the eve of the Second World War. The result will be that the majority of those on these shores will be obliged to 'evaporate' if their requests are turned down, evaporate into the nearly slave labor under the arm of the mafia, the shadow labor market of indentured workers. They will become those who shore up the gross national product of Italian industry.’

*Why did I continue to see, what so many of the people around me, so obstinately refused to see? Why did I not see that the gears of indifference would grind my dreams and illusions to dust?*

‘ Anyway I have been trying to help these people create a future for themselves. It appears that my experience as a writer and my modest legal skills can serve some purpose. Finally after three months of essays, telephone calls, meetings with political authorities, bishops, friend and enemy lawyers, I finally will have the opportunity on Monday to negotiate directly with the Prefecture (the Ministry of the Interior) regarding the project I wrote up to create a base for economic self-sufficiency and wide range integration for my eleven protégées’.

*Why did I forget that I have always been well received by the authorities, because I am entertaining, as a writer, and their lives are relatively boring. Why did I imagine that being well received would lead to any sort of action on their part? How could I have been such an idiot?*

‘If the project goes forward and works out as planned it will give them training as alternative energy technicians, for Europe and for their own countries, if miraculously the situations in their native lands ever improves. It will give them training as specialized building artisans, in the tradition of the work I myself have carried out for the past five decades. If the project goes forward it will serve as a prototype, a model for the rest of Italy.

My colleagues from the film industry have offered to film the initiative, so it will have some national and international visibility. But as usual I need some working capital as seed money. A sort of modern day 'space bank' as those of us from Project ONE would call it. A gamble on the future self sufficiency of eleven people, given the proper linguistic and technical training. A tiny model for economic development that may be expanded on a larger scale. A fund for their legal defense in the courts.’

*The more one needs something to happen, the more one believes that something will make it happen.*

‘If any of you would consider contributing to this initiative, there is a bank account in the United States, (my own) whose coordinates are as follows:’

*Why didn’t I see that my priorities were not those of the people around me, that getting this project off the ground would be as likely as Shackleton getting to the North Pole.*

 ‘I will be contributing my own properties, (along with my time) to house and train these people, as they are at present housed in a situation of near apartheid, with almost no contact with the Italian population, in an abandoned school whose temperature is in the low fifties, with barely any hot water, no internet connection, and no viable plan for their future.  The public authorities have conveniently forgotten the existence of the refugees, as in the province of Imperia where I live, the organizations that are formally responsible for them, are at the moment sunk in the muck of major inquiries about graft, corruption, misappropriation of public funds to the tune of dozens of millions of Euros, bogged down in major inquiries regarding pedophilia, major inquiries about fraudulent bankruptcy of the provincial port....and so on and so forth.....on occasion they do remember that the refugees exist, when one of them gets knifed or beaten up by the local population, as Italians are by and large about as multi-cultural as the inhabitants of the deep South were in the thirties.’

*Perhaps in certain moments of moments of one’s life, one needs to act, even if the probability that one’s actions will bear fruit, is very low.*

‘And so you may inquire yourselves why I am putting out all of this effort for eleven lives. The answer is very simple. As a group, they are the most interesting group of human beings I have known, since those of you I met, worked with, lived with and loved, at Project One. They have the enthusiasm, the focus, the determination that I rarely see among the 'chattering classes.'  They have the energy to contribute to the renewal of the so called 'old world' where I have lived for these thirty eight years. Moreover they need help.’

*All it would have taken was a small amount of good will, a small amount of generosity*  *over and above my own bank account.*

‘I don't do well on soap boxes. Those dizzying heights from which most people pontificate give me vertigo. So I will climb down. Nine paragraphs are already too long to be up in the preachery stratosphere. But from the 'terra ferma' of my local cafe I ask you to help me carry out this project. If I can put together even a tiny amount of seed money I will be able to pay for materials, food, heat, and form a legal entity in January,--all legal registrations are on hold in Italy for the holidays until January 6th -- with the most rigorous accounting of every cent spent. With your help we can make a bit of change.

 The recent events in Paris have not only killed a hundred and forty people. They are wiping out the future for the eight hundred thousand refugees who have arrived in Europe in the past two years. I cannot give you an idea in an email of the backlash in Europe, against which even Donald Trump fades into insignificance. All I can say in a brief postscript is that one of the eleven refugees was threatened with a loaded pistol last month by a local villager, and I have been catapulted back into the sixties when I worked in Virginia in the civil rights movement.

The project which I have presented to the Ministry of the Interior for their ‘nulla osta’  is attached, below, for those of you who might like to practice your Italian.

         I will keep you updated.....happy holidays......Jane’

 10. Mamadou & Sainey

It was a cold winter’s night, in early December, when Sulayman asked me to take in his two friends for a few days. They were also from Gambia, and their appeal for asylum had been turned d lown. Gambia was not of interest to the authorities. A tiny country devoid of oil, but equipped with one of the craziest, most ruthless dictators of the African continent, Jammeh, who had been in power for twenty two years, enough to send a good part of the opposition to their deaths and fifteen percent of the population into exile. Of those of his enemies who remained in the country, once they were killed, their remains were fed to his pet crocodiles, who lived and feasted in a giant pond adjoining his country home in Kanilai. As the country was not formally at war, the fate of its citizens was of no interest to anyone.

The cooperatives who housed the refugees had no incentive to keep the refugees for more than twenty four hours after their sentence came out negative, as the Minister of the Interior no longer paid for their existence. The letter of the law indicated that they should leave the Italian territory. The fact that all of the borders were closed was a small detail. The fact that their own country would jail them or kill them if they returned, another detail. Sulayman told me that they were his friends, so I took them in. They were intending to try to go to Germany, to somehow slip through the border, a risky endeavor. So they stayed with me for three days to gather their strength for the voyage, which was to take them on a roundabout route, to Rome before they took off for the North. A ticket from Rome was a more strategic choice in order to appear to be a tourist, when they reached the border.

These were three wondrous days for me. For the first time in many seasons I had two people in my home whom I wanted to talk to. Mamadou was nearly bilingual in English and I realized after so many years how much I needed to speak my native language. I believe we talked non-stop for all of our waking hours. When I accompanied them to the train there was a lump in my throat. Quite miraculously they made it through to Stuttgart, where they have been for the past year and a half. Though Germany does not often give people actual residency, they don’t leave them out in the Winter’s cold without food or lodging, as Italy does. There are all kinds of limbos, and some are more bearable than others.

11. In the dead of winter

*Time was passing as you were waiting for the judgment that sealed your fate. Every day I saw you become more tense, more fragile, more frightened. Your case was messy. As most cases that involve the truth, it had been badly distorted in the first hearing. All of your worse, most paranoid suspicions were about to be played out.*

*In the department of false hope, I was a repeat offender. But perhaps it is important to bear witness to the ways in which false hope distorts one’s vision of what is happening on the ground, in the real world. And so I wrote a second optimistic letter to my friends scattered around the world:*

12. *January 15, 2016*

‘dear everyone,

Just writing to bring you up to date on the latest developments of my project with the refugees. My first meeting with the Prefect (Prefettura di Imperia) went well. I spoke to the Vice Prefect, the second in command, for about an hour and she asked me to write up my training project in greater operative detail, so that we could discuss it right after New Year’s and if all goes well she will send it down to Rome to the Minister of the Interior, in hopes that they will be able to pass it as an ‘experimental’ project so as to get it off the ground right away instead of having to wait until the Summer for the next call for tenders…isn’t bureaucracy wonderful….as they say. (For those of you who may not have received my first letter a week ago, I have copied it below, so you won’t miss out on the suspense….plot development is important in these complicated stories.)’

*When the plot thickens, stir harder, keep stirring, even if it congeals.*

‘Actually getting this far, is almost a small miracle, considering how hierarchical the Italian society is. It may all turn out to be polite- radical chic, blah blah, but given how hard it is to be received by these folks, and how hard it is to not be thrown out of their offices in one New York minute, I am starting to feel hopeful’.

*False hope is an addiction, worse than smack, worse than crack*.

‘So in the past few days I have written up the proposal in greater depth, and it will go out tomorrow morning to the Prefect, so their office will have time to digest it over their holiday dinner. I have also started doing practical work with my various teams of refugees, and last week we cast the mold for a large parabolic mirror for the future solar ovens, and began to build some extra furniture to accommodate what I hope will be sixteen inhabitants of my properties.

I have just managed to set up a Paypal account, so if any of you should at some time wish to make even a tiny contribution to the success of this initiative it should be simpler than via my endless bank numbers.  Finally after only an hour and a half of pressing enter in the right places and a couple of days wait for my bank confirmation, my Paypal account has been activated. When I think back to the year 1993 when my friend from Melbourne first showed me how the internet worked to connect with the university in Australia....it seems that a long time has passed since then, but maybe it's also just a New York minute on the evolutionary scale.

I do have one question for you: several people who wrote to me suggested that I should be nominated for ‘sainthood’, a suggestion that has confused me greatly. Saints don’t have much fun in life. They have a tendency to be burned at the stake on their way to sainthood. Not even on the dry straw that kills them almost instantly, but on piles of wet, moldy straw that stinks to high heaven and takes ages to burn. That way the plump angels already up in the clouds will know that the new arrivals have earned their place in the heavenly stratosphere. Now you wouldn’t want that, for your dear friend and relative….or would you? …quien sabes.

What I would really like is to nominated for one of the front rows in the fifth circle of Hell, the one reserved for heretics, where the best armchairs are and the rum and crab salad are superb. …anyway…

On a more serious note, I’m trying to describe in words that others can understand what motivated me to undertake this activity. About three years ago in February of 2012 my brother and sister-in-law and I went to visit Taliesin West, the architectural community that Frank Lloyd Wright built in the desert, outside of Phoenix, starting in 1939. For me it was a form of pilgrimage, as his work has so very strongly influenced my own vision of architecture, and of how it can change the lives of those who inhabit certain kinds of structures.

As it happened Wright made this choice in the darkest moment of the depression, on the eve of the Second World War, when there was just about no work to be found, certainly not for visionary architects. He took with him a group of his students, who previously lived in Wisconsin, and from the midst of this rather desolate landscape they set out on this great adventure. They did not quite know where it would lead them, but they persevered. Frank Lloyd Wright was seventy one at the time. He lived to be ninety one and built the Guggenheim museum when he was ninety. So as I have a few more months of being seventy one myself, I think I am just in time to do something of the same nature. The time is right, the circumstances are quite similar.

I wish you a merry, merry, happy, happy, with lots of good food to eat and wine to drink to the coming year. ………………….love, Jane’

*What false hope gives a person is the illusion that all others share the same values that she has deemed essential to human civilization. This is sometimes known as magical thinking. But this moment in time is still engraved in my memory. It hasn’t faded. Even the backlash, the threats against me and the court cases against me, have not bleached it out.*

13. names and faces: Hamza

Slowly the individual people in the group began to emerge from the background of the group, each with his own personality. They were so very different from each other, it was at times hard to recognize that they had each made it across the same desert alive.

Hamza was a Tuareg, from Ubari, near the Southern border of Libya, adjoining Niger. The dunes of the desert had been in his bloodstream from when he was born. People somewhat less so. He was a poster child of his origins: six foot three, long stride, large dark eyes, caramel skin, with the sweetest, shyest smile. He had driven SUV’s across the desert for thousands of miles since he was thirteen, as his ancestors had driven camels. He had learned to recognize in the dunes the nearly hidden tracks, the way the light changed, to navigate the route from Mali through Algeria, Niger and into Libya, back and forth with all kinds of merchandise. This route had become one of the great trade routes of the world. One did not ask what kind of merchandise he carried.

Neither did he ask, until the extremists tried to force him to carry arms. When he refused he knew he had only a few days in which to organize his escape, via other desert tracks, far from cities, that would lead him to Tripoli and across the sea. This was after his brother had been killed, by a bomb dropped on an army outpost in the middle of nowhere by NATO at the beginnings of the definitive push against Gheddafi. This was after his cousin had been killed by the enemy ethnic group, the Tebaui. This was after his parents and sister had left their native city to flee to the mountains across the way in Algeria, with their flocks of sheep and camels.

Ubari and its surroundings was the part of Libya that no one talked about. No one mentioned the oil wells, mostly all situated in Hamza’s province. They were at the heart of the conflicts. The newspapers talked about the coast: Tripoli, Benghazi, Misurata. But the coastal cities were at the bottom of the stream. The source was Hamza’s area: infinite sand dunes and a nearly infinite supply of oil, for whoever could get their hands on it. Many were trying, from many different nations. Gheddafi had enticed the Taureg to defend him when he realized that his hold on the country was being destabilized. He promised them education, healthcare, and many benefits they had been denied for decades. He treated them well when he was alive. They believed his promises. They were not prepared for the rest of the country to descend on them with fury as soon as Gheddafi was gone.

Hamza was one of the most naturally peace loving people I have known. He lived through his eyes, and through the music he listened to, played by the Taureg musician Bombino. He would have been incapable of defending himself. He had never learned to read or write. He understood a tiny bit of French, but mostly spoke the Taureg form of Arabic, and his native language: Hausa. He communicated with his smile, and slowly a few words at a time. We got along quite well from the beginning, as something in his shyness, his love of nature, his aversion to people moved me greatly. Predictably he was constitutionally unfit to be in Europe, and it was torture for him. He perfectly exemplified how difficult it is for a person to be dropped down in the middle of another culture with other values, from one day to the next. In addition he was ostracized by nearly all of the other ten people in the schoolhouse because he was from Libya, and although his existence and values were the opposite of his violent countrymen on the coast, the very name of the country sent chills down the spine of those who had transited there.

14. Absense

*Hamza is gone now, to somewhere in Germany where he cannot be found. I spoke to him when he first arrived. He sent me a note from his phone in fractured French: ‘I will never forget you’*

*I shivered as I read the message, as I realized how deeply I had felt for this person, who after the first phone call, had changed his cell phone and was no longer traceable by anyone who knew him. I remember him sitting by the wood stove and showing me pictures of the deserts of his homeland, images of his loss that he could not find words for.*

15. Libya: the tales they told

Here are people to whom terrible things have happened, and they are telling me about the events they lived through, in an even tone of voice, almost as if *they* were the journalists, not I, witnesses to a chronicle of events that happened to others. “We were waiting on the street corner where we used to wait for work as day laborers. About thirty of us, early in the morning. A large car drove up and at full speed the driver rammed into the crowd. He left four dead men on the pavement. He did this for sport. He backed up and drove away. In the space of less than a minute.” “I went out to the grocery store after work to buy something to eat. And there I saw a Libyan chop off the hand of a black man. For no reason. With one blow of an axe. He had not stolen anything. They did this for sport, when they were bored.”

“The transport bosses picked a young man at random to steer the boat that we pushed off on from Tripoli to Lampedusa. But he wasn’t steady or swift enough, as he had never seen the sea before. They would never waste one of their own on the boats. So they thought he was making fun of the transport bosses, so they just shot him, dragged him away and picked another. The second candidate was more attentive, as he was steering for his life.” “You never raised your eyes when a women walked by. It was too dangerous. The women look at *us*, it appears that they are turned on to Africans from below the Sahara. They look us up and down as they would do to thoroughbred horses. But we knew to never look up. If any Libyan saw one of us looking at a woman, our minutes on this earth would be numbered.” “ We slept on the top floors of the houses we were building. After work the young teenagers would aim at us with their Kalashnikovs. Also for sport. If they came up to our floor, they would rob up of everything we had earned, our money, cel phones everything. If any of us reacted they would shoot us. It was the risk we took to earn more money in less than a week than we could in a month in our own countries.” “ They would hang people by their ankles in the prisons. Like cattle. Then they would beat them on the soles of their feet until they could not walk.” “There was not enough air in the cells where they shoved us. They were so crowded, we had to sleep sitting up because we could not lie down. When someone fainted not being able to breathe we would lift them up to the one small window, to have some air. I remember the woman we held by the window for an hour so that she would not die… ”

There was no drama in their voices when they told me these things. The events themselves had cauterized their hearts, it was a luxury they could not afford, to show emotion as they remembered. Their comment was most often: “it’s not easy.” Three short words.

*Why did I go on believing that I could make a difference in this situation? Why did I not know that my efforts would fail, no matter how hard I tried? What you see is what there is, I used to say over and over again. Why did I not want to see?*

16. Libya, some background information

It took me a while to understand what was happening in Libya, and why; to understand that it had been happening for a long time, for hundreds of years. Libya made Alabama of the Jim Crow years look like nursery school. The slave trade had flourished up and down the Southern coast of the Mediterranean for a dozen centuries. When I asked friends who had travelled to a large variety of countries along that coast, why the Libyan population was acting in such a barbaric fashion toward the Sub-Saharan population of Africa, they continuously told me that this had been going on for many hundreds of years. They cited unspeakable expressions commonly used to describe the peoples of one half of Africa. Their testimony was chilling for me. So chilling that at first I strongly questioned it as a gross generalization. But then I thought about the years in which the Italians of the North said the same things of the Italians of the South of the peninsula. Things that they still say, though in voices of fewer decibels.

In recent years as Gheddafi’s grip on his country was weakening, he started to pay large groups of migrant workers from Sub-Saharan Africa to defend him. He did the same thing to the Tuareg, both those born in Libya, and those whose nomadic lifestyle brought them from across the neighboring borders of Chad, Sudan, Mali. He promised them citizenship, schooling, medical care in exchange for their valued services as the main repository of knowledge of the ancient trails through thousands of miles of deserts, which they knew by visual memory, without requiring GPS navigators. They had, for the most part exchanged their camels for powerful SUVS, but their precious knowledge of the transit routes stretching from Senegal to Saba was scarce and valuable for many business ventures, legitimate and not. As soon as Gheddafi fell, the opposition of all stripes descended on the entire black population, with unselective cruelty.

The first surge of this vengeance lasted for nearly a year and was filled with atrocities; after that the atrocities became ‘normalized,’ That is they continued without attracting notice in the newspapers. Blacks were routinely rounded up, dragged off the streets into Libya’s improvised prisons, by people in various unofficial uniforms. They were kept there for months, then ceded to whoever wished to select them and pull them out for use, as essentially slave labor. When I very naively asked Sulayman, initially why he had accepted such a degrading situation, he said in a very understated tone of voice: you know being in a Libyan prison wasn’t very enjoyable, so if any boss was willing to pull you out, it was better than being in jail. Later when I heard the more specific descriptions of the jails, I felt deeply ashamed of having asked him the original question.

The people I knew did not talk willingly about what happened to them in those prisons. My information was composed of fragments of sentences, in reference to the horror of seeing others beaten to death or nearly so, tales of near universal rape of men and women, though, not described to me in the first person. Not many people wish to evoke that kind of humiliation, and the inability to defend themselves against it, without losing their lives.

In the midst of all of this the entire non Libyan population from countless countries of the world was constructing all of the luxury villas, and hotels of the country. No one with a Libyan passport actually worked. They had been awash with oil for decades under Gheddafi, and as in Saudi Arabia. Work, as we know it, was beneath them. It was done by the ‘Blacks’ if it was back breaking or by those from Bangladesh if it was of the most menial type. By putting together all of the fragments of the references to Libya which I heard in the course of three years, it was clear that it was considered a waking nightmare, by all who had endured the passage through that country. Those who had good contacts with the gangs that ran the boat rackets, or even merely more reliable ones, were able to spend much less time in the country, generally hidden in out of the way camps near the coast until the day they ‘pushed off’, as the expression goes. Those who had no contacts or money, often spent many months or years, in or out of prison, and labored incessantly to put together the cash for the voyage which involved various middlemen.

A certain percentage of people did not pay for their voyage out of their own pocket, as it was ‘sponsored’ by their slave driving bosses. This seems to indicate that there was a mysterious trail of kickbacks between boat owners with overstuffed boats, the middlemen who coordinated filling them, and money that passed from the European Community funds, to the mega-Italian cooperatives that managed the fates of tens of thousands of people, to destinations unknown outside of the country, perhaps transiting alongside various political interests. I did not see my calling as that of an investigating journalist in the field of international graft and corruption. It was taking all of my energy just to house and feed and give legal help to the several dozen individuals for whom I was trying to create a semblance of a future, while being hounded, them and me by the Italian police. But as time passed I became more and more aware of the extent to which the several million people requesting asylum in the past six years represented an extraordinary business opportunity for all of the wrong people. In the meantime I was simply trying to help the tiniest group of them, have a more dignified existence, and a minimum of hope for their future.

*17. What can a person know, before the facts?*

*If I had known, my sweet friend, how much I would have to fight, and finally lose, would I have done all that I did for you? If I had known, that I would see your mind and your soul come apart out of despair, month after month of waiting. Of being turned down by the courts. If I had known the obscene, indifference of the courts, to the fate of the human beings they had jurisdiction over, would I have done things differently? You were fleeing from a ferocious dictatorship that had made a mockery of the rule of law. And I was witnessing a modern democracy, full of its promises of the rights of man, that was making an equal mockery of the rights of a man. Because as I came to see, once one was branded as a refugee, one’s rights were severely curtailed. With all of that time, and energy and money I could have done many things, that might have been more useful for you and for me. But how could I know? I wanted to believe that I could move a mountain of bigotry and prejudice, in the area I lived in, by my example. I did not recognize how deep rooted it was, how obstinately unmovable a population filled with ignorance and superstition can be. I simply did not imagine the forces I was up against.*

*I had this dream, that maybe only children and mad women cultivate, that I could make change. Now that this season is over, I should not waste my contempt on the people who destroyed me, whose machinations ruined me economically, destroyed my health and my own future. They do not merit my scorn. But I know now, why humans plot vengeance. I know how hard it is to renounce vengeance, although I wanted it to be beneath me to descend to their level. But it is not beneath me to dream that the valley I have lived in for twenty two years, should be flooded in a flood worse than Noah’s and all of its inhabitants drowned. With no Ark, not even a leaky rubber raft to save them.*

*In the meantime I kept trying to stay in contact with my small network of friends, spread out throughout the world:*

18. Update in the Dead of Winter

January 22, 2016

Dear Everyone,

             and in particular the seven samurai who have so generously contributed to the legal fund for the refugees. Your contribution is about to have an important use, as I have managed to find a specialized immigration lawyer to assist Sulayman Gassama in his second appeal.

  I am writing to you to update the situation a bit belatedly, after a very dense three weeks surrounding the turn of the year, including, but not limited to temperatures in the forties inside the school where the refugees are presently lodged, and as well, close encounters with the forces of order, the ‘carabinieri,’ one of whom, miraculously supported the refugees against the huge cooperative who wanted to move the whole group up to the head camp where it is even colder.

I am writing you  from my ‘bunker’ in the midst of my small war zone in the lovely Valle Arroscia. I’m writing in English as it is a bit quicker for me than writing in Italian, and in my native language I can describe ‘in-house-Bosnia’ with more humor than I can in Italian.

As the plot thickens and things are heating up, we have all started to look out of our foxholes to take stock of the enemy. It turns out the enemy is one of our own. The main opposition to my proposal/project comes from the Mayor of my delightful village of Ponti di Pornassio.

   I still have diplomatic relations with him even though we are on opposite sides of the firing line. We sit on opposite sides of his desk, sharpening our weapons: his arsenal consists of near absolute power over the fates of the inhabitants of my area, mine consists of my wit, which I continue to oil.

   He continues to tell me that though the proposal is a beeeoooouuuutifullll   project, (bellissimo), as the Mayor of Pornassio, he cannot support it, because he cannot allow one more refugee on his territory, other than those already housed in the neighboring village of Nava. He will only accept my project if the Prefettura *orders* him formally to accept it. But he is willing to receive the Priest Don Antonello Dani, who is the founder of the Cooperativa Goccia, the small, honest cooperative that wishes to adopt the project and has already negotiated an agreement with the Cooperative Il Faggio to ‘trade’ the group of refugees in Vessalico with the Cooperativa Goccia.

This all reads like a modern day version of the ‘slave trade’ and is disgusting to put on paper, but so be it. Listening to people discuss how much money they will rake in from the government off of the tragedy of the refugees, turns my stomach, and makes me wish that my hearing was failing as badly as my mother’s did at my age. At this point the Goccia, and its President Liliana Gladuli, have the not very enjoyable task of convincing the Prefettura, in the person of Dottoressa Lazzari to apply the law, over the head of the Sindaco Fossati of Pornassio. The Prefettura as well is dragging its feet as it does not want to take any responsibility for a decision, so it is saying paradoxically that the decision rests with the Mayor. A lovely situation, all told.

        In the midst of this, most sadly, the hearing at the Court of Torino for Sulayman Gassama came out negative, so his right to remain in Italy will be taken away from him in the next forty eight hours, unless he can find a loophole through which to appeal the decision. I have found him a private immigration lawyer in Genova, sent up all of the documentation, and we have an appointment next Wednesday....I think that about covers the territory of the past two weeks.....oh I forgot to add that my main computer seemed to be having a heart attack the other day, but I saved it in the nick of time.

Also the cap to fill my car with gasoline got frozen stuck last night and it took a half hour to pry it loose so I could fill the car. This morning I just discovered that a mouse has taken up lodgings in the guest room area that is supposed to house my film maker colleague Ciro Abdel when he comes down from Genova to film the situation. I hope to lure him, (the mouse that is, not the film maker) into a trap filled with the best Italian gorgonzola ....never a dull moment.....so if any of you feel like making a contribution to the unraveling of this plot in the making, the address through Paypal is still the same.

                    un grande abbraccio, Jane

*A few of my friends have been more generous than I might have expected. I hate Paypal. It is humiliating to beg. That is what fundraising had become. A refined form of begging and pontificating. If only I had learned how to rob banks, or railway cars.*

19. Fallou

The most un-common people have the commonest names, those most in use in their own country. There are many people called Fallou in Senegal. It is like being called David in the English speaking world. But Fallou has been a most unusual person for me to know. He is the person who demonstrated that the heart is more powerful than the brain.

He is the person who said to me, ‘God does not see whether you are white or black, whether you are Muslim or Christian. He only sees if you need His help.’ He is the person who said to me one day, ‘give some work to other people who haven’t had as much (paid) work as I have had’. He is a person of extraordinary loyalty and honesty. After months that he had been in Italy, and everyone was worn down from the Winter and the waiting, I asked him once if he was discouraged, and he answered, ‘How could I be discouraged, I walked through the desert to get here, I nearly died in the Libyan prisons, I travelled so many months to come to Italy, and now I’m here; there’s nothing to be discouraged about’.

But as time passed he too had a nervous system that was fraying at the seams from the desolation of not having work and not having money to send to his family at home. This was the main preoccupation of everyone, without exception. The whatsapp messages from their home country, the pleading over the internet, the relatives’ predictable incomprehension of the fact that their son or brother had reached the promised land months before, but he was not allowed to work. How could a person not be allowed to work, they asked. How could a person be kept in a corral like animals doing nothing but eating and sleeping. They had no way of understanding the European bureaucracy. Fallou had no way of explaining it to them, because it was surreal and absurd to him as well as anyone else who had witnessed it.

Fallou had an enormous amount of physical energy and he wanted to use it productively. He was stronger than almost any tool he was given to use, so many rake and axe handles snapped under his exuberant strength. Unlike others, he was not afraid of making mistakes. So in the gardens surrounding my house he did what he thought best, even if it meant chopping down a lovely rose bush because the thorns got in his way. Antique roses are not part of a country where half the population are suffering from lack of water. In the end I was quite grateful that Fallou was not afraid of doing something wrong. It was a big improvement over those whose fear often paralyzed them from acting.

But as time passed he began to develop serious neurological reactions to stress. He could no longer sleep as he felt that animals were crawling under his skin, from his head to his toes. He knew they were not actual animals, but that was what it felt like. After so many doctors, so many tests, so many months of waiting for results, it finally became apparent that above a certain level, the neurological short circuit of this nature was the body’s reaction to stress and anxiety that it couldn’t control.

No amount of medicine or psychotherapy could remedy this. Nothing could take the place of a work permit, so that he could actually find work. It is more than two years, that he has been waiting for the third appointment with the territorial Commission. He is now working in the South of Italy, where the agroindustry needs so many strong backs and arms, to harvest grapes and tomatoes, that they do not ask for documents. Fallou has become one of the hundred thousand invisible people whose shadow labor keeps that industry solvent.

*20. The fifth horseman is fear*

*The courts are closing in on me. The police called the other day for me to come to the sixth floor of an anonymous building to present my documents and name my lawyer for the criminal case hanging over my head. As I look down from my fifth floor window when I hang out the wash I too often wonder if such a drop would lead to instant death. I try not to go near the windows of my apartment at other moments of the day. In the morning I no longer wish to open my eyes. I wrap a scarf around my forehead to keep the darkness in for several hours more. I believe my own nervous system is cracking apart like a coconut under a blow of the ax. It seems a century ago, last year when I was full of hope for the future, my own and that of those around me.*

21. Acting Lessons

        ‘Make believe’, is the art of making (inducing) the judges to believe what you are trying to tell them. That is the first thing I tell my protégés. This is not an easy concept to convey to those people who come to visit me for help and training to face the Italian Territorial Commission, in the first instance, or the Court of Appeals the second time around. The average rejection rate for the territorial commission is nearly ninety percent, for the appeals court is almost eighty percent. Therefore only one quarter of those people who have risked death crossing the Sahara, enduring atrocities in Libya, and braving the Mediterranean, are ever accredited to remain in Europe. Of the twelve men I have helped this year, ten have received asylum. With a batting average that is nearly four times the national average, I am apparently doing, as an expatriate writer, what the lawyers of the country I have lived in for four decades, have difficulty accomplishing.

       My work with each person takes many hours, of explaining, training him to answer the questions that will be thrown at him, rehearsing with them, and completing my understanding all of the details of what has happened to each of them, writing their autobiographical statements in a style that the Italians can understand and relate to, and essentially preparing them bear up under the pressure of what is an interrogation. Those I have worked with have waited in the refugee shelters, often for more than a year and a half for their first hearing. A year and a half of what amounts practically to house arrest, without the permit to work, without any attempt at their effective integration into the society of the country they have been living in. They come to me with great anxiety, trying to fathom what the authorities want from them, and why they have been considered almost on a par with criminals, for the offense of wishing to provide a better life for themselves and their families. They are often nearly mute with fear….

What do I do for them, to ease their fear? I sculpt their stories, one word at a time, one event at a time, without ever asking any one of them, what is the relationship between what they are telling me out loud, and what actually has happened to them in the season before they left their native land. I don’t have to ask. I already know. It is a tenuous relationship based on each person’s, capacity for fantasy, invention, intertwined with extreme fear and the actual facts. It is normal for the fear and the facts to collide. If the judges turn them down, they will become non-persons, invisible to all. Only with small rectangular pieces of plastic decorated with barcodes, do they start to exist. Such pieces of plastic are known generically as ‘documents.’ They have the value of diamonds, and the evanescent character of dreams.

If I cannot figure out how to weave formal political oppression into their need for a better life, their need to support their aging parents and hungry younger siblings, to save them from diseases that only money and medicines can cure, they will be expelled, from the land of the *chosen*, after one additional appeal--- into the no man’s land of the *other Europe*: the land of indentured migrant labor in Southern Italy, living in shacks without plumbing or electricity, picking tomatoes and melons, and only paid on the occasion, that the ‘caporali’, i.e. the labor brokers, have drunk their fill, laying waste to often more than half of the salaries that should trickle down to the actual laborers.

And so, as a theater director, I teach them how to act. I train them to recite their stories, as if they were on stage. I train them to imagine they are in a movie, as the photography director, and as such they have to take note of each tiny detail, to make it convincing to the judges. They have to describe every instant of an event, play by play, like a ball game, otherwise, the judges will write down the generic phrase I have seen a dozen times on legal papers: ‘the account is vague, lacking in specifics and therefore not credible.’ Word for word, this sentence is repeated on the refusals I have read. The judges are overworked: once they have hit upon a useful sentence, they only need to copy and paste it, and then they can move on to the next request.

22. Abdulai

Abdulai was sitting quietly on the bridge of Vessalico when the stranger approached him with a gun in his hand. He pointed the gun at Abdulai and said that if he saw him in the area again stealing from his house he would shoot him. Abdulai had never seen the man before, had no idea where he might live, and had enough problems on his mind already, trying to metabolize his memories of seeing a friend in Lybia having his arm chopped off one day when he went out to buy rice at the store in the neighborhood after work. He had been in Italy for a little more than a month, in Vessalico for two weeks, and the event of being threatened by an unknown stranger was not the welcome he had expected.

He returned, nearly in shock, to the schoolhouse where the other ten refugees were lodged, and informed Sulayman, who immediately called the mayor, who immediately called the Carabinieri/the local police. The latter went to the house of the man who had threatened Abdulai, discovered that the gun he kept in his home was in fact a real gun, not a toy gun, as he had tried to convince the police. They annotated the details of the threat, informed the owner of the gun that his case would be passed on to the courts and that he should not, on the future, imagine that those requesting asylum were thieves. If his house had been robbed it was clearly the work of professionals, not that of a traumatized twenty four year old, just off the boat from Libya.

Unfortunately the attitude of the villagers did not improve after this incident, despite a few 'I'm so sorrys' from well meaning neighbors. The general sense was that they cared more about the reputation of their village than the effect of the death threat on their guest. Abdulai never quite recovered from this event. He drifted into the music on his cellphone, as his only defense against the reality surrounding him. His cell phone appeared to be his only and constant companion, his impenetrable bulwark against the outside world. At one point in my Italian lessons for the group after asking him four times to put down his cell phone instead of hiding inside its wall of sound, I lost patience with him. I raised my voice, something I have almost never done in my life. As I spewed forth a couple of ferocious sentences, to establish the fact that I should be listened to, even before they were rolling off my tongue, I knew that I was making a serious mistake. I was right. My relationship with Abdulai would never be the same after that. He did not fight back, but he dissolved into an impenetrable silence for many months.

A year and a half later he started talking to me again, rather surprisingly, because he needed my advice for legal help with his permit, as the Territorial Commission and the Appeals Court had turned him down, and Prosper had managed to convince him that I wasn’t such a bad person, even if I had yelled at him once. He called me long distance from Hamburg, and then from Naples several times. I did what I could to translate for him on the phone for his lawyer. It did not appear that he would come out on the winning side, but there was something very vulnerable and fragile about his manner, that worried me. Prosper told me that when they worked together plastering a house for an English client, whom I had miraculously induced to hire them, Abdulai was at times talking about suicide.

I remember the hearing with the justice of the peace in which the authorities tried to convince him to drop the charges against the man who had threatened him with the gun. I remember him refusing to drop the charges and saying that he was still afraid of the guy. It wasn't easy for him to say this out loud. He was practically shaking as he did. The judge was pressuring him, to shake hands and forget about the incident, so that the courts could be freed up of yet one more annoying case. I had been allowed to sit in on the pretrial hearing, but as my expression changed visibly listening to this travesty of justice, the judge noticed that I might have been trying to telegraph an answer to Abdulai and ordered me to leave. I did not protest. I left silently and sadly, reflecting on the fact that for the overworked Italian legal system, it was of scant importance that an individual had threatened another individual with a deadly weapon. Only if the threat had been carried out to its logical consequences, would it have merited the courts' attention. After the fact. After the funeral. It was considered normal in the area where I lived, for a white person to wish to kill a non-white person. It was the way things were and not worthy of attention.

I thought often about Prospers' description of Abdulai, sitting alone by the riverside after work, not wishing to talk to anyone, protected from reality only by the rhythms emanating from his cel-phone. In these three years since Sergio's suicide, the critical event that had catapulted me in the direction of the refugees, I had become increasingly vulnerable, and worried, that those I was trying to help would not make it through the night. That one of them might give up and collapse and succumb to a definitive gesture from which there was no return. Was I projecting my own fears upon them? Perhaps. In the moments over these seasons when I have had to tell myself to not go near the window of my own apartment, and continually remind myself that at five floors above the ground, it would not guarantee an instant death, not even the bridge over the icy river gorge in my village could do that, I often thought of Abdulai. I could do no more than hope that he was safe from harm.

23. More news from the first winter’s front:

*And so you came to live in the small apartment adjoining my larger home. It was a welcome change for you to have a place of your own after more than two years of group living. But it came with the inconvenience of having to be effectively invisible to the population at large. Italians have their own two versions of the laws of the land. There are those that are applied, and those that are applied selectively. The law indicates that if a person has been turned down in his first appeal in the courts, he can appeal once more, but he must leave the country while the appeal winds its way once again through the legal system.*

*The law was designed for people who had a place to go. It was designed long before all of the borders leading out of Italy to other countries, were closed. It was designed for people with bank accounts stashed away somewhere, who could afford hotel bills. It was certainly not designed for those requesting asylum. How can you leave, if no one else will let you out or in. If you don’t have a yacht, outside of territorial waters. The law was half a century behind the times. So Sulayman stayed, lying low, in my home for a year and a half. The local authorities knew he was in the area, but thankfully their computers did not cross check on his status. They were used to seeing him around. Their records were not yet cross referenced automatically to the court decisions.*

*But he could not travel in my car to the coast on the main road. He could rarely risk taking a train anywhere. He could only go occasionally to the neighboring town. He was on his way to becoming an invisible person living in the shadows. At this point the group remaining in Vessalico who had been under his charge, started to come to visit, to relieve the solitude and to sit down at my dinner table and see a reality that was different from their own. The Winter was cold, but I tried to believe that it would soon be over. His second appeal was due to be filed in a month and heard in June, in five months. I sent out my Winter’s update to my support group spread out around the world, to keep my own spirits up and not succumb to the isolation that was facing Sulayman.*

24. Aerial View of the Holding Pattern

February, 2016 hello everyone,

           Now that we are wading through the quicksand of the dead of Winter, I just wanted to keep you updated on my activities with the refugees. We are at present in a holding pattern with the authorities. Actually, to be precise, the authorities, which include the prefect, the two mayors, the two cooperatives  etc. have decided to stay in a holding pattern for the next century, that is the best they can come up with to shoot down my project, after so, so so, many compliments and discussions and good wishes and expressions of their sincere desire to help the project take off etc.etc. blah blah.....essentially they have thrown me under the bus, as they say.

This  is not the best of news from a practical point of view, as it means that the whole project of providing housing and specialized training for a dozen refugees, rests on my own financial resources, which are not excessive. But it also means that I am doing the right thing, otherwise these fine people would not have gone so far out of their way to throw me under the bus. And so I have decided that I am going to throw all of them under the herd of three hundred cattle that Sulayman's family used to own in Gambia, plus the herd of a hundred and fifty camels that Hamza's family used to own in Libya. And these great herds will trample the fine, well-meaning authorities into the ground, figuratively speaking.

I have so far found work for several members of the group for a few days at a time, and broken down a bit of my villagers reticence in their regard, as they witness the near magic of overgrown former gardens beings cleared, after decades of neglect, and prepared for new planting. On Sunday we should be starting to build the first solar panel. Yesterday we cut down a huge tree which will provide firewood for the four wood stoves in the various houses. Last night I spoke to a specialized artisan who has a small company that may be able to act as distributor for what we can produce. And so life goes on.

take care, alla prossima, Jane

*As often happens, between the great plan outlined on the screen, and feasible reality, there is a large chasm. A number of my friends and neighbors, had already stopped talking to me. January passed, and February was passing. It was a cold Winter. Still I was determined to get news out to those people I was in contact with around the world.*

25. Hearts and broken hearts

        On this lovely Valentine's day, it had been snowing in my valley, turning the entire landscape into a Chinese scroll painting, complete with magical fog and mist that made some of the mountains disappear, and others turn into glistening crystal trinkets, quite beautiful to look at. But the side effect was that the dilapidated schoolhouse where my group of refugees was housed now had a temperature in the high forties, and at most about fifty two degrees, when the pellet stove was working. There were only pellets for eight hours a day, as the cooperative which was supposed to take care of the refugees was going bankrupt, and was being taken to court, for its four million dollars of accumulated debts.

Therefore I started moving, somewhat surreptitiously a few refugees at a time, for a few days at a time, to stay in my own properties, albeit the fact that the authorities had not approved my proposal and would not enact it. Actually the  reason that the authorities refused to enact my project is that it would have meant admitting that the corrupt cooperative had failed and had defrauded the central government of a large sum of money, and it would embarrassing for the regional prefect to admit this. So be it.

        Anyway, to facilitate my group's ability to move back and forth between my home and the neighboring village of Vessalico where they live. I started to look for bicycles for them and acquired the first used one for forty dollars. But we needed ten more. The stronger members of the group had been walking the five and a half miles from Vessalico to my house, and I had been chauffering them as much as I could. But with bicycles it would have been much easier.

 Sulayman, who was staying in one of my houses full time, started to tell me the other day about his former life in Gambia. Before he had to leave the country, it was he who feed half of his village, as he came from a family of significant means. Before his life flipped over. From one day to the next. This is when I started to try to write up the events into a book, in the still of the night when I had a bit of time to write, generally between four and six in the morning.

*26. A Story, play by play*

*Sulayman, I remember the morning when we were sitting at the breakfast table, and you started to talk about your life in Gambia, your wife and your three daughters growing up without you for the past seven years, and your son, six years old, born a few months after you had to flee, your son whom you had never seen. Suddenly, you started to break down as you were telling of your family. You said ‘had I not been targeted by the dictator Jammeh, had I not been defamed by my uncle, for questions of inheritance, I would be home with my family’. Your face was contorted with anguish and your eyes filled with tears. You got up quickly and ran outside, so that I would not see you crying.*

*Like many refugees stories, your story was messy. The truth is always messy and hard to tell. It does not follow a clean plot line like fiction. Consequently it is much harder for the Territorial Commission to fathom. Especially in Gambia under Jammeh, most of the truth sounds like the most extreme science fiction: simply unbelievable. Your mother died from illness, when you were a young teenager. Your father remarried. Your father died unexpectedly ten years later in an automobile accident. At that point, as was the custom, your step mother married your father’s brother. They had a son, your stepbrother, who took ill when he was about four. This was about the same time, in 2009 that the dictator Jammeh’s aunt had taken ill, and had died. As it happened Jammeh believed in witchcraft. He started to accuse as yet unknown would be witches of the responsibility for his aunt’s death. He imported a group of would be witchdoctors, from Guinea to scout out the witches, round them up and torture them. He and the scouts and his armed strongmen, the ‘green boys’ toured the country, arrested about a thousand people from various villages, carted them off to his country residence in Kanilai, forced them to drink various poisonous herbs, and many of them never returned from the trip.*

*These events offered many opportunities for individuals who wished to settle personal grudges. As the scouts passed through the suburb of Essau, Sulayman’s uncle who was a official in the party apparatus of Jammeh’s regime, denounced his nephew, accusing him of being a witch. Sulayman was at work at the port when they came to search for him. But his choice was clear. That night he left the area he was born in and escaped through the border to Senegal, which was not far away, leaving behind his children, his pregnant wife and his inheritance of the very large herd of three hundred cattle, which his father had left to him.*

*Had his uncle’s son lived they would have shared the inheritance. But without that, his uncle had to think of another way to assure his own share. He decided that ‘witch hunting’ could offer him a very profitable opportunity. Such an account reads like a nightmarish fairytale, described on paper in this century. How is it possible that anyone, much less a ruler could believe in witches? It is possible. Especially if the ruler needs to instill extreme fear into his electorate. Especially if he senses that his iron grip on the population is beginning to slip. To be accused as a sorcerer in a country lacking in any pretense of due process, was a simple and effective death sentence. It was an accusation that anyone could make, of his neighbor, his rival, his relative. Its effect was nearly instantaneous. Despite the extensive documentation by Amnesty International, and many other international organizations, such events, as they impacted the lives of actual people were considered preposterous when recounted to the Territorial Commission in Italy, one by one, by the refugees who had experienced such events. They sounded incredible, too crazy to be believed. Because they were true. And the truth is messy.*

*Sulayman lived very close to his emotions. He did not hide them, like some others among the asylum seekers. This was what was disarming about him. It was what was tearing him apart. As the weeks passed he became quieter and quieter living in the apartment I had lent him. I became accustomed to spending time, working or having meals beside him, in which few words would pass between us. He was deep inside his own thoughts and feelings. I began to learn, how much, in fact, does pass between two people, without the need for words. The personality and the character of an individual becomes apparent in small gestures, day by day, in the accumulation of tiny acts that build up a connection between them.*

27. Construction Madness

It was about eleven in the morning when Adil tried to ram the jackhammer into Sulayman's stomach. These things happen on construction sites. I was not present when it happened, as I had to chauffeur Hamza to an appointment. I had been gone for twenty minutes, and when I returned, Kader gave me a diluted and euphemistic account of the events. The work consisted in creating an archway in an ancient stone wall nearly three feet thick, on the ground floor of my house, so that the entrance way would have an elegant spacious feel to it. Kader, the master craftsman from Algeria, who had worked in Italy for several decades was supervising the work, and training my group of refugees, in this rather exhausting task. Adil, another master craftsman from Morocco, also in Italy for nearly twenty years, was working with the group He owned the jackhammer, that was being used to drill through the reinforced concrete that covered one side of the wall, and loosen the stones on the other side.

In order to carry out this task, it was necessary to pound the wall with a massive sledge hammer, that I could barely lift, and that only Sulayman and Joseph could manage for any length of time. After Sulayman had used it for twenty minutes he took a break to smoke a cigarette. Adil, as the assistant foreman on the job, wanted Sulayman to go back to work. Adil did not abound in diplomacy. He treated those requesting asylum like children. It appears that to induce Sulayman to pick up the sledge hammer, he shoved him. Sulayman was thirty eight years old and did not allow himself to be shoved. By anyone. So he did what was predictable in those circumstances. He shoved Adil back with such a swift and strong blow that Adil found himself lying on the ground. Then he began to insult him in Arabic. He made references to Adil's failed relationship with his wife. In this altercation, each of them had managed to touch the weakest point of the other. For Adil it was the fact that his wife had thrown him out, after she herself had put up with too much violence from him. For Sulayman it was the fact that people did not consider him an adult, because he had made the mistake of 'reducing' his age on his documents, by nine years, when he first arrived in Italy, like many thousands of others in shock just off the boat, who had been told through the grapevine that it would be easier for them to find work if they were younger.

So the next thing that happened according to the witnesses, was that when Adil got up off the ground in a split second he picked up the jackhammer, turned it on and headed for Sulayman's stomach. By a miracle, Opoku was standing near the wall plug and pulled the plug on the jack hammer before, Adil could actually carry out his intent. There followed a shouting match, in which Adil threatened to report Sulayman to the police, forgetting that five witnesses could have equally reported Adil to the police. Kader was finally able to calm everyone down enough for them to go back to work. All of this happened in the space of twenty minutes while I was gone. It took me days of talking to Kader, to Opoku, to Sulayman and to Adil to understand what had happened in each of their views. At first glance it comes off that Adil is a madman. But that is a simplification of the situation.

Adil was a very intelligent guy who had studied mathematics at the university of Rabat for two years before coming to Italy to seek his fortune. Like so many others he had a very hard time of it, twenty years back before he finally became a skilled craftsman, with a reasonably steady income. But Adil was born angry with the world. He was the kind of person who got out of bed at six o'clock, and by quarter of seven he had already smoked three cigarettes drank two cups of espresso and was ready to get even. After work he finished out his days with wine, and beer and more wine. Lots of it. While he was working he was tremendously capable and precise and had done work for me that I was very happy with. But he was never at peace with the world. I sensed when he told me his side of the story, that Sulayman must have said something that cut him to the bone, with regard to his wife. When I spoke to Sulayman I sensed that Sulayman had had enough of being treated in a condescending manner, as if he was a teenager. Sulayman was generally very polite and of a peaceful nature, but he was extremely stubborn, and he was in fact stronger than anyone around. So it was not surprising that with one blow he could knock Adil to the ground.

Opoku told me that in his own culture in Ghana, if there is a fight between two people, everyone else around has the responsibility to decrease the conflict and the ensuing violence. I have never been so grateful for Opoku's quick reflexes. Kader justifiably saw both the protagonists as equally at fault. Kader was patience and reasonableness incarnate. But he could not change the personality of someone else. Adil and Sulauman never made peace. They stopped speaking to each other from then on. The work on the archway was finished, in a sadder spirit than it had begun. Every time I walk through the entrance I think of how easy it is for violence to explode.

28. Clearing the Air of Defamation

In the meanwhile, life in my village was going on, in its predictable manner:

February 23, 2016, dear everyone,

      I am forwarding to you an excerpt from an email I sent recently to a very generous contributor to the legal and bicycle fund for the refugees. I hope not to be misunderstood, as I do not wish to complain about my own situation, as it is certainly more privileged than the greater part of this world. But as I have discovered in the past week, the work I am doing with the refugees has produced certain results, which it is logical to inform you of, as follows:

‘As it turns out, most predictably the good citizens of my area have started to defame me, in the most predictable manner that women have been defamed for millennia. I should be flattered that still, at my venerable age, the men of my village have started circulating their opinion that I am a whore, because as we know, anyone who hangs around with people of another race/religion/place of national origin etc. etc. must automatically be a whore. You would think that they might have a bit more imagination, but evidently they are going for the tried and true. It would be fairly amusing were it not for the fact that this has happened to me on various occasions for the entire thirty eight years I have spent in Italy, and I am a bit tired of it.

But much more importantly it has come to my attention that one person in particular, in this case a woman, has been insinuating that I am economically on the skids and that I am using the refugees as an excuse to ask for money that I use for my own needs, just like the corrupt cooperative that is being indicted. This is a much more shocking calumny, and a disappointment that someone should want that badly to damage me. Human nature seems to offer not much to write home about these days. So be it.

So I wish to explain as clearly as possible that every cent that has been offered so far is sitting in my Paypal account and has not been touched, as it will serve to continue to pay the capable private lawyers in Genoa, to represent the entire group of twelve refugees I am dealing with. I wish to explain that I am not broke, that I have to date spent seven thousand dollars from my own bank account for initial lawyers' fees, computer installations and a series of expenses that I undertook, in the expectation that the refugees would actually be allowed to move to my properties with the approval of the Minister of the interior. This hypothesis appears to have been 'postponed,’ due to the fact that the whole region is being indicted in every area, from the port to the ecclesiastical authorities for a series of fraudulent activities on a grand scale, and this is keeping the hands of the Prefect quite full.

But as you can imagine, I am a bit ill at ease this morning, and much grateful for your moral as well as practical support.  On the positive side my filmmaker colleagues should be coming from Genoa to start to film the situation next Monday, if all goes well.

There is much to do between now and Monday. keep the faith, Jane’

*29. Going Postal, Italian style*

*Had I not been writing to all of you scattered around the world, I would not have stayed sane in that period. It is always the transition between believing in one’s fellow men, and learning what dough they are actually made of, that is the most difficult. I was going through that transition to realign my expectations. I was moving slowly from belonging, to no longer belonging to the village in which I had lived for twenty years. I could not believe it was happening to me, until it was too late.*

*One might ask, why was I so dumb as to delude myself into thinking that my efforts could change the beliefs and values of the people around me. I had already worked in the deep South of my own country, five decades previously; I should have known. How could I have been so naïve? These are things that happen to the living, as the Italians are wont to say, meaning essentially that no aspect of human behavior is too strange or discouraging to be discounted. They also mean that if you are still alive to tell about it, that signifies that the absolute worst has not yet happened to you, and you should be grateful.*

*Two people I knew in the United States had been killed, in that bygone era, for helping people of another race. It was clear to me that the only thing which intolerant white people hate more than non-white people, was those other white people who try to improve the lot of the non-white people. I was learning to live with being silently but definitively ostracized by the inhabitants of my area. I was learning that I would have to continually defend my activities against people I knew well, who sincerely believed that the only responsibility of the Italian government was to ensure the welfare of other Italians, like themselves. They viewed the Res Pubblica as a zero sum game, in which any effort to help the refugees would take away benefits for those born on the shores of the peninsula. It never occurred to them, and despite all my reasoning with them, I was never able to convince them that the two concerns of the government could go hand in hand.*

*Often I wondered whether the ‘us vs. them’ mentality was lodged in some obscure genetic inheritance that was supposed to lead to the survival of the species. Had evolution taken a wrong turn, in trying to protect any one species or its sub-species from extinction? As time passed and this attitude was seeping through the population like lead based chemicals into the water supply, this appeared to me to be not a mere abstract academic question, but central to the concept of how a person knows who he is. If ever there was a secular corollary to the idea of original sin, it was the focus on who gets ejected from the Garden of Eden, and why whomever unbalances the established order does not get to stay.*

*As the months went by, I was less and less inclined to talk to people. Hearing the same worn out opinions over and over again, demoralized me. Knowing that what I had to say would make no difference what-so-ever to those I spoke to was making me very depressed. I started thinking about the war in ex-Jugoslavia, when in the nineties journalists asked how the Serbs and the Bosnians, living side by side by centuries could suddenly turn on and massacre each other. I was seeing all around me, that proximity was often only geographical, but involved no exchange or human interaction. It was Europe’s well behaved answer to living in an over-crowded continent where one could not imagine to get out his rifle and then move on, as was apt to happen in the States. Italy was not a society that encouraged mobility of any sort. There was no endless frontier as there was in the collective imagination of America.*

*The building of these invisible walls was the Italian answer to ‘going postal’. A well-ordered society was cast in stone and would resist change by any means possible. The season was warming but with the onset of Spring, I had lost faith in my friends and neighbors. I knew that I was on my own in my endeavors with those requesting asylum. There was much to be taken care of to occupy my days.*

30. What is Skype used for

February 25, 2016 ........from the train back to Imperia,

      Here we are in the 'life goes on' department. Except when it does not. Joseph's son died today. Joseph is from Ghana. His son was seven years old. The child had been taken to the local hospital near Oda several weeks ago. He was sent home after a few days. There was no money for his wife to buy medicine. The Cooperativa Faggio was supposed to give the refugees their seventy five euro pocket money, at the beginning of the month, of which Joseph sends back fifty to his family. The money has not yet arrived. It is now the twenty fourth of the month. His wife brought the boy back to the hospital three days ago. They gave him two blood transfusions. But it was too late and he passed away this morning. Sulayman and I drove down to Vessalico this afternoon, and we sat in its freezing squalid living room, while Joseph tried for an hour and a half to call his wife, from skype on my ipad. He finally got the line for a minute and a half, before it dropped. We tried again and again to get the line back. Never had the dreary surroundings of the central room of the school house seemed more claustrophobic and cut off from the outside world. There is nothing sadder that I could imagine happening to a person than to be sitting far from your own family and to be informed that your son has died. So be it. This is the kind of stuff that fills the refugees' minds.

What struck me often, was the extent to which those requesting asylum kept their grief private, nearly silent, so that it would not intrude onto the lives of those around them. Everyone had their own tragedies, and they were self-contained within each person’s existence. They were not dramatized or acted out. There was a stoical quality of their words, as they told me of deaths and illness of those dearest to them, that was in great contrast to what I was used to witnessing in Europe or the States. A sense of the inexorability of tragedy in their lives. The way of the world. Listening to people say over and over again: La vie c’est comme ça—life is like that.

*31. an evening in the desert*

*Hamza, I think of you often, of your feet wearing a trail across nine kilometers in the coldest part of Winter to walk from Vessalico to my hamlet of Ponti, simply in order to spend a day, or on occasion overnight in a house with space to be alone with decent heat and light, with a sense of being welcome. You set out in the early morning, as if nine kilometers was nothing at all. You were our most constant visitor in that first Winter. You needed space, and open air, to take you back to the desert landscapes of your homeland. In the evening you used to show me pictures on your cel-phone of the region of the South of Libya where you grew up. The pictures of the endless dunes, that you had actually driven through for years, were startling, in contrast to the dense woods and mountains of the Ligurian hill towns. I finally had the flash, that real people actually had lived in those mythical spaces, which I had only seen in films or on the pages of the National Geographic. And one of them was sitting next to me by the wood stove, in my own home, trying to tell me of his life. You had me listen to Omara ‘Bombino’ Moktar, the Taureg musician from Agadez, who was the musical voice of your people. As I listened to the riffs that blended funky rythms and blues with those of North Africa and the middle East, with their hypnotic energy, I thought of how it was a privilege for me to be sitting in my kitchen with you, absorbing another culture a thousand miles away.*

*Of all of those who were my guests, you were the one who most was connected with the natural world, of plants, and light and space and color, the one who lived through your eyes. You had told Sulayman that you would have loved to settle down in my area, in the house next door, that at the time was empty, if you could find a woman to marry. You did not like the cities, you needed wide open spaces. It was not a new age pose: you really needed them. We did not talk much, given the quality of your French, and my Hausa, both lousy. But I learned a couple of useful words in Hausa, which have stayed with me. Zango, which means Oasis, and Gaban which means Ahead. Oasis ahead, oasis on the horizon. Those two words became the name of my company Zango Gaban that I formed to help those requesting asylum. Those two words are about all I have left of your passing, along with the message in my cel-phone that you sent me last year, after you had transitted safely to Germany: Je ne t’oublierai jamais—I will never forget you.*

*I too will never forget what it means to bridge the gap of experience, of language, of so-called heritage or culture, to know another person, because we could both relate to the rythms on Bombino’s guitar. You did not stay in touch with anyone after you left Italy. Not even with Kader, who had become a big brother father figure for you, who spoke your dialect of Arabic, and helped you through the hearings with the Territorial Commission to get your permit to stay in Europe, not even with Sulayman who went to Germany with you. None of us knew why. It was as if you had vanished into the dunes of the desert.*

32. Sunshine and vitamins

April 3, 20, Dear everyone,

          I have been meaning as usual to write the Spring update for many days and nights now, but too many events have filled up too many hours of the recent days. My long time guest, Sulayman, contracted intestinal flu of which it seemed he was nearly dying. As it turns out the people who live in equatorial climates, have not had many decades of the flu. Therefore their bodies have not developed the antibodies that those of us in the Northern hemisphere have conjured up. Not a good situation to witness. He finally came around, just in time for an abscessed tooth. Easter brought emergency dental appointments. Waiting out the four day holiday on painkillers, waiting for the appointment. My wonderful dentist and long term friend took care of him on Tuesday. He is finally coming around.

      I have been learning a lot about sunshine recently. Absorbing sunshine  promotes the production of vitamin D. Vitamin D promotes mood enhancement. At the end of Winter most everyone has run out of Vitamin D, because they have not had much exposure to the sun for five months. Pale white folks, (most of us that is) have pale skin to absorb as much sunshine possible in our Northern sun-forsaken hemisphere. In other equatorial continents, people have darker skin because the sun is much stronger and over the millennia of evolution they have needed to be protected against too much sun.

What this means in practice is that if a person who has lived elsewhere, comes up to my side of the Mediterranean he is not getting nearly enough sunshine to produce sufficient vitamin D to be in a good mood. So this is a tiny part of the explanation of why the morale of the refugees is generally terrible at the end of Winter. It is hard to measure these things, but I would say that it is about at twenty thousand leagues under the sea, as Jules Verne would say. It is not so easy to bear witness to this level of depression, detachment, apathy and outright despair. Particularly when one cannot change the objective facts that have led to the situation.

       In the meantime I have embarked on several projects with some of the refugees. We have rebuilt a garden for an English client. Endless mountains of jungle were cut down and burned to clear the land. Endless tons of stone were moved to create and rebuild stone retaining walls. It worked out rather well and hopefully in the course of the summer the client will have more funds with which to continue the project. In my own house I finished opening up an archway in a three foot thick stone wall, to vastly enlarge the ground floor apartment of the largest house. It was a complex structural project that gave work to another few people, briefly. It is now in its final stage and the floor is being tiled.

     And last but not least a new agricultural irrigation line was put in for the village. More back breaking labor but small amounts of money for those who desperately need funds to send back to their respective families. I have also negotiated for a group of  buildings in my village in moderate to very ruinous shape that can be used for the home base of our future efforts. I hope to do the closing in May. The buildings should serve as a laboratory, to familiarize individuals with the Italian building techniques. Actually more than half of the refugees I deal with already have quite extraordinary building skills that they developed, in their native lands or in Libya. All they would need is documents and work permits to lift their mood.

*How could I know that all of my hopes and building plans would be dashed to the ground, ripped apart and used by the racists of my village to sink me- How could I have foreseen this? Why didn’t I have x-ray vision into my future? Why didn’t I recognize that they would never accept that non-white people could work productively in their village? Why was I so blind to the reality surrounding me? The need to believe in one’s dreams, is an addiction worse than heroin.*

*33. Fear of dying*

*I was so frightened, at the end of that first Winter, Sulayman, that you might not get well. As each hour passed, and you looked more and more as if you were fading, I did not know what to do. One cannot treat a thirty nine year old man like a child, it is an offence to the dignity of that person to do so. But you looked so fragile, and unresponsive, that I was terrified you might have meningitis. I had no way to comfort you. Finally, after four very long days, when I saw that you were barely able to walk up the flight of stairs leading from your apartment to my larger house, I asked my local doctor to come over to do a house call. I had never asked him for that courtesy for myself in the twenty years I had lived in the area. When he arrived, you were just starting to come around, and I believe his visit gave you the encouragement to seriously combat the microbes. A while later, a friend of mine who had worked as doctor, in emergency situations around the world for several decades, gave me some useful feedback. He said that while we so-called ‘Westerners’ are ill with various diseases, we have the mindset, by and large, that we will get better. That is what Western medicine is known for: curing people, with complicated surgeries, and even more complicated combination of pharmaceuticals.*

*We live in a culture that believes that medicine should be up to the task, in the majority of cases. Illness is a roadblock, but not the ultimate one. But for a person who comes from many other parts of the world, my friend said, illness is a tombstone, philosophically speaking. This explains what I saw in your eyes as you lay in bed motionless for hours on end, the terror of believing that the end was near. How many things do we take for granted, if the geography of chance has us born on a continent where antibiotics are not hard to find, where blood transfusions are doable, where the doctor himself is findable. Regardless of all the present failings of our own health systems, they are an order of magnitude more functional than elsewhere, by the mere fact that they exist. Therefore with regard to medicine we actually believe in progress, a luxury that many millions of people cannot indulge in.*

*When, the following week, you were in the dentist’s chair, to have a tooth extracted, I saw the terror in your eyes. Afterwards you told me that in the Gambia there are no local anesthetics for dental problems. They are saved for really serious problems, bullet wounds and such. There was no way I could comfort you beforehand, about the intentions of my wonderfully kind dentist, until you had been through the experience. When you got back on your feet by the end of the month, I began to sense that something in our relationship was on the verge of change, that you had become something other than a guest living in an apartment of my properties.*

34. This is just the beginning

April 25, 2016, dear everyone

Now we have real Spring, tulips in glorious bloom, dozens of fruit trees flowering away, some of the vegetable garden planted with peppers, squash and lettuce, along with the police who swooped down upon me a few days ago to interrogate me, after our local neighborhood fascist reported me as a possible criminal who is ‘possibly’ giving illegal work to people who are not white. This is par for the course. I do not use the word fascist lightly. As it happens, the historic role of my town during the second World War, has been amply documented. The most powerful family of the town was the ‘Podestà’ for the area under Mussolini. Enough said.

After three long and dreary phone calls and one endless interview at the local police station complete with my twenty three pages of documentation on my teaching and research project on alternative energy, I finally managed to convince the Maresciallo of the local Carabinieri that teaching refugees is not actually a crime. As happens more often than not, the individual who reported me did not make a formal report, as he had NO actual criminal evidence to report, except that I have guests at my house who are not white, but he made a semi anonymous phone call to the local police hierarchy to complain about my activities.

Predictably, as he bragged extensively about his heroic action, it was extensively referred to me by my own secret agents, who haunt the village square in search of gossip. But it is disconcerting that the police now act upon any informal accusation, whether it is calumny or not. Never a dull moment.

It is not easy to carry on a project with this kind of harassment, but it is no different from when I was teaching in 1966 at Hampton Institute in Southern Virginia. I don’t know if being catapulted back in time keeps people young…quien sabes. History repeats itself. There are times when one senses that one must continue doing what one has been doing no matter what, even if there seems to be small progress, but one must go on, just to show that people like my villagers cannot presume to intimidate me.

Anyway my lawyer came down last week to speak to the three additional refugees who wish for him to represent them when they go to their hearing at the Territorial Commission, so I have been writing their biographies and researching their countries of origin, Senegal, Bangladesh, the Gambia, Nigeria and the Tuareg area of Libya. Not to mention hoping against hope that one of my houses will sell this season so that I can cover their legal fees.

The news about these places is not good. The terrible paradox is that the worse the news, the more likely it is that they might get a humanitarian permit. If one reads about a fourteen year old girl who is raped in a village of Bangladesh, then accused of adultery to cover up the rape, then lashed to death by the villagers, in the town where the refugee from Bangladesh lived, this helps his cause, though it certainly does not help the girl who was killed. So goes the world.

I’ll keep you posted, alla prossima, Jane

*35. the miracle: Sulayman*

*You don’t ask questions of miracles. They are not like other events in life. They cannot be explained or analyzed. There is no point in seeking to know how long a miracle will last. Miracles do not have a past or a future. They have the present moment. They are either happening or they are not. There is nothing more to know about a miracle.*

*Your existence in my life is a miracle. There is no why or wherefore of such an event. Thirty two years is a long time to be alone. Not in the physical sense of the word, but as a person. So I do not probe further than the line of the tide along the shore. The sand is wet. Your body is warm. Your soul is affectionate. Your mind is attuned to my own. That is more than enough.*

*Everyone makes his own pact with the Devil. Mine had a lot of fine print. It wasn’t an ordinary pact like Faust, or the Portrait of Dorian Gray. It did not promise me worldly glory in exchange for a long season in Hell in the afterlife. What it said at the bottom of the page, was that I would have seventy two years of Hell on earth, followed by a miracle. Seventy two years of illness, madness, anguish, aloneness, falling into the void. Falling and reeling and still falling some more. Never reaching the bottom, reeling and falling. Then a miracle.*

*It said that I could take back thirty two years. If I had the courage to do so. For it takes courage to be deliriously happy. It is like touching very delicate crystal. How can you not be afraid that it will shatter without warning? It takes courage to move back in time. A long ways back. And not ask if I deserve such good fortune. Not ask for reassurance.*

*And not tell. Anyone. No one wishes for a miracle to happen to someone else. If such an event should occur, anyone who knows about it will try to destroy it. Trusted friends are not exempt. Not because they cannot be trusted. But the miracle should have happened to them. Not to oneself. That is the way of the world.*

*Your gaze looked through me. That was what I first saw when we met. You did not look at me. Your eyes went through me, to see what there was inside. Or maybe I imagined it. After the fact. But I do not believe I imagined it.*

36. The Tradeoff

If a person gets into a 'storia' which is the name the Italians give to all of those activities that lead to the non-extinction of our species, it is bound to make waves. A 'storia' can be based on passion, true love, or opportunism, but there is always a deprecatory tone that is used to talk about someone elses' 'storia'.

If a person gets into a 'storia' with someone of the same background, income level, education, race, religion and age as oneself, the friends and neighbors will say, 'when are they going to get married...who knows how long it will last'...but there is a minimum of solidarity and well wishing in those kind of situations. But when a person gets into a 'storia' in which all of these criteria are violated, the reaction is not benevolent. The principal reaction is: ‘she must be crazy.’

This is a relatively mild reaction, compared to that which occurs when the most greatest taboo is broken, the last in the list. When the variation in age is thirty four years, the question is most often 'who is buying and who is selling?' It is a question that I was well prepared for. I knew that if I wanted for the 'storia' and its two participants to survive, no one should know about it. Ever.

Except when it was over, and given its dignified funeral on the printed page. But is a 'storia' ever really over? I doubt it. It remains engraved in some part of the anatomy, no matter how much effort one makes to plane and sand the memory and the heart. And so it was with you.

I did not plan for it to happen. But after eight months had passed since we met, something was changing. Neither of us ever spoke about romance. We knew it was a subject matter full of land mines. Finally one night I said something about relationships, and how it had taken me many seasons to get beyond the long shadow of my past, in order to try to live in the present. I knew something was about to happen. That evening I slipped and fell, landing badly on my hip on the hard stone path leading up to my house. For moment I was afraid it might be broken. Fortunately it was not. Just terrible unrelenting pain. I knew I had fallen due to stress, not out of lack of physical equilibrium.

In fact that night you asked me quite formally, as in olden times, if I would have a relationship with you. It was as close as I had ever come to receiving a marriage proposal. On bended knee. I took my time to answer. I asked for twenty four hours to give you my answer. I said good night and we each went up to our respective houses to sleep. I knew you were disappointed that I had not answered you right away, one way or another. But I had to prepare, something more than my body for what I was about to do. I had to prepare myself for the eventuality, the certainty that it all could end at any moment, and when it did, I knew that I would need to accept it without anger, without bitterness, without illusions. I had to keep my eyes wide open to the fact that you were in fact married to a person you still loved, even though you had not seen her for seven years, and you were both the parents of four children. No amount of passion could eclipse these facts. I knew that I was about to live in two worlds simultaneously: the world of what we could have together, in this moment, and the world of the facts on the ground.

37. Motives

Dear everyone, July 12, 2016

No one who helps other people, should delude himself into claiming that he is doing this out of generosity. Or humanitarian principles. He is helping other people in order to help himself/herself. To help himself believe that human effort has some effect on the world, that he can make change, one grain of sand at a time, to move mountains. To keep himself from falling into the pit of despair, at the unfairness of the world, to believe that he has a tiny bit of control over destiny. The less he has control over his own destiny, the more he needs to believe that he can affect the destiny of others. This does not mean that he is in bad faith. It just means that we are not heroes. None of us. We are no different from the people we try to help, in order to believe ourselves to be not entirely powerless. It is not a ‘calling’ to try to help other people to better their lot in life. It is our only revenge against injustice.

It is when we have ceased to place bets on our own future, that we begin to place wagers on the futures of others. I was always clear about this from the beginning. That was why I was always ill at ease when my friends said I should be nominated for sainthood, for all I was doing for others. I said out loud, as clearly as I could that these ‘others’ were giving me, as much or more than I was giving them. They were giving me the opportunity to know another culture, another history, another part of the world. They were giving me dialogue, and at times humor. They were giving me their own example of stoicism in the face of the events that had stonewalled their future. And they were giving me the kind of joy they expressed, when occasionally something went well for them, when my efforts led to a residency or a refugee permit, after a year and a half, or two years or more of waiting.

This was the kind of spontaneous joy that I had stopped feeling years ago, in the country where I had lived for four decades, the country that would continue to treat me as a ‘foreigner’ until my dying day. The country I would never belong to. I had accepted that the adjective ‘foreigner’ would be automatically attached to my name as long as I was alive here. But I wanted for it to be different for the next generation. I wanted revenge. It was my desire for revenge that gave me the energy to continue to do what I could for the refugees I was housing and feeding and trying to teach, so that they could build a future for themselves. It was only revenge that induced me not to give up. I have never been a hypocrite, about my motives. It would be a disservice to those whom I may have helped to place them as recipients of my virtuous acts. They were acting upon me, as much as I was acting upon them.

38. Staying afloat

Dear everyone, July 12, 2016

Eleven weeks of May, June and part of July have galloped by since I last wrote you. As sometimes happens, the roller coaster of daily, practical life got the better of me, specifically the still to be concluded sale of my next to last house, in order to recapitalize and move forward, economically speaking. (The houses I have built over the years are essentially my pension fund, but the crash of 2008 has punched quite a hole in my hopes and aspirations in that area…enough said.)

Anyway after two and a half months of bureaucracy, five thousand dollars of fines, permits, administrative expenses, etc.etc, it appeared that I would do the closing tomorrow with the predictable buyer-from-hell. But as fate would have it the bank transfer from his bank in France is done by the descendants of Hannibal’s elephants, who have a hard time crossing the alps in hot weather. So everything will be postponed until the end of the month. So be it. It takes much patience to live in this world.

To get back to the actual subject matter of this letter, my devoted lawyer for the refugees has been working diligently to give them counseling as to how to talk to the Territorial Commission. We have been travelling back and forth to Genova to see him, which gives people the happy occasion to be in a big cosmopolitan city for a day or two. After too much isolation in the country. I, and Sulayman have been training the others to not panic at being interrogated, in our various languages. Three have already had their first hearings. Unfortunately none of their hearings have gone too well, as the eye of the needle through which a person has to pass these days to get refugee status is getting smaller and smaller, and most likely everyone will need to go into the first or second appeal.

On top of which, Sulayman’s second appeal was postponed at the last moment for another three months, as the judges have to go for two days of ‘professional training’, (read vacation, according to my lawyer.) This is a devastating setback for a person who has been in Italy, in limbo for more than two years, and away from his country, Gambia, for seven years. It is terrible to see the kind of melt down that overtakes people in these circumstances, when their future is being churned into gravel. All of my energy, imagination, humor and practical assistance can do little to relieve the objectively grim situation they are in in these moments.

However, on the positive side, the garden we have planted together is flourishing, we are eating cabbages, squash strawberries, luscious lettuce, the corn is three feet high and promises a big harvest. I have taught several of the refugees to lay tile, and we are finishing tiling the reservoir for irrigating the gardens which will be expanded in the Fall. I’ve also taught them to install fiber glass insulation and lay tongue and groove roofing planks for the double insulation of my roof, (of the largest house on my property which I have moved back down to.)

Paying them through the bureaucracy of the vouchers is finally working out as it should, and they are happy to be earning some cash, which they mainly send back to their families in their various countries of origin. When Fallou tells me that he has sent money to his brother who is studying in Dakar to become a teacher, and Opoku tells me that he has sent money to his sister in Ghana so that she can attend computer school, and Sulayman tells me that he has paid the fees for his four children to go to the better private school in Essau, I feel that what little I have accomplished is doing some good in a wider circle than just here in the local territory.

I will keep you posted more often than this last time on how things proceed, and I wish to thank, from the very bottom of my heart, those of you who have helped me with the legal fees for the refugees. I just paid another thousand dollar installment to my lawyer last week.

keep the faith, stay cool, (warm in Australia), Jane

39. August: baby you can drive my car….yes I’m gonna be a star…

I have found something positive to so with our time, at the end of the day. Hamza is teaching Sulayman how to drive. The small open clearing off the road that serves as a parking space for the trucks that take the firewood down from the mountain, is our training ground. It’s no match for the desert sands that Hamza drove thousands of miles across, back and forth in his twentyfour valve Toyota, but it is serving fine as our improvised driving school. Hamza is delighted to be able to impart something he knows how to do perfectly, to Sulayman who is fifteen years his senior. Sulayman is delighted to move up from his knowledge of motorcyles to mastering four wheels. I am delighted to see two people happy for a short part of the day. They go round and round the clearing in the woods in a figure eight pattern that Hamza has carefully marked out, with stakes, so that Sulayman will learn to steer precisely, changing gears as they go. In the near future we will try going out on the actual road. It is a relief for me to see Hamza teaching another person to do something he has a complete mastery of, Hamza, who does not hardly read or write, but who has the entire Sahara and all of its dunes etched into his memory, who has a grace and coordination whenever he pick up a tool, that art academies spend seasons teaching their students. It makes you wonder what education is all about. It makes me remember that knowledge was passed on orally in Homer’s time.

40. August: the last gasp of optimism

The summer of the year two thousand and sixteen was the last moment of hope, not yet contaminated by extreme fear. For me and for everyone else. The image stays in my mind of Sulayman watering the garden picking fruit and roasting corn. Of me making many jars of jam. Of Fallou hoeing with all his might, and breaking every tool handle as his strength surpassed that of the oakwood the hoes and rakes were made out of. Of Hamza weeding diligently the vegetable and flower patches. Of Opoku and Joseph measuring and hammering and nailing in the double roof. Of Sulayman teaching Hamza to do the same for the livingroom roof. Of Prosper executing the more complicated carpentry to build artistic doors for the ‘ruins’ I was buying at the foot of the village, to discourage the animals from entering its many openings. Of the solar collector we built for hot water, and the second one for hot air to keep the ground floor dry. I remember looking over the valley at dusk and feeling that maybe I was accomplishing something. Not a lot but something of use to the others and myself. That was before everything came apart.

The unraveling of one’s imaginary future is a slow operation. But it had already started to happen. Sulayman was becoming vaguer and vaguer. More and more distant. Not in body but in spirit. He spent hours lying on his bed under the covers even in the heat, with his eyes glazed over. He got up only to do something specific if I asked him, or to water the garden at dusk. For the rest he was elsewhere. I thought he was debilitated. Ill with some sort of wasting anemia. I worried about him more and more. It took me more than a month to figure it all out. That was after he banged his hand badly as he was hammering in a stone for a wall he was repairing for the ruin. At that point it all came together. I looked at his eyes much too red, with the pupils dilated but not from crying. I saw how the whole rhythm of his movements had slowed down. I realized that the cloud that was surrounding him was produced by the most banal of all reasons and causes, hashish. Smoking to forget. To not think about his future. To keep the stress at bay. To keep missing his family at bay, a lack that my presence in his life could not compensate for. Smoking too much so that he could be mercifully absent from the life he was leading, over the seven years since he had fled the Gambia.

Hash, and all other substances on the nearly infinite list of botanical enhancements to human existence, is of no particular interest to me, either from a positive or negative point of view. Everyone does what they need to do, to get themselves through the night, and one ‘enhancement’/vice is no worse or no better than another. I have no philosophical or legal thoughts about any of this stuff. But I did have rather stringent thoughts about the body’s metabolism and about knowing what one’s own body can handle, given that after getting through the night one also has to get through the following day.

It was a terrible moment for me when I had to call Sulayman out, in front of everyone else on the worksite, and then alone in his apartment and give him an ultimatum. To no longer smoke or to leave my house forever, from that day. He was devastated. I was feeling as bad as him, though I tried not to show it. But I knew that if I let him continue, he would go farther down the great slide into oblivion. Here was this fragile despairing person that I was screaming at, and he was starting to break down in anguish, and I only knew that I would have to put him in a position in which he had no choice but to snap out of the stupor that the hash was leaving him in, and come back to the stress provoking realities of functional daily life. Fortunately for me, and for him, he decided to do so. But what we had between us was not the same after that. For I had become the person who observed him from the outside of our relationship, as well as the person who was inside of it. I did not wish to become the person who passed judgment upon him. I needed to depend on him as much as he needed to depend upon me. But the slide was tilted in one direction.

40. Winter’s Coming, October 2016

Dear Everyone,

Let's begin with something optimistic: our garden has produced a large number of huge pumpkins, most of which will probably be carved and decorated for Halloween, as my protegées don't much like pumpkins, food wise.

We have two new members of the community, both from Gambia. One of them, Bai, repaired printers and installed IT networks before he had to leave the country. He most fortunately was able to get documents and refugee status after various appeals. I don't know if the others will be so fortunate. Bai, and another Gambian will be my additional guests.

I am still wending my way through the Italian bureaucracy to form my non-profit association, and sign the closing for the properties I am acquiring. (The Italian bureaucracy is still honoring the reknown proverb that Rome was not built in a day, so everything one has to accomplish in this country takes an exasperating amount of time, patience, endurance and diplomacy....so be it.)

.....what else is new?.....four days ago Hamza showed me on his cel phone two pictures he had just received from his relatives. They were close ups of his best childhood friend. The first was of the bullet hole that entered his skull. The second was of the back of his skull, the exit path of the bullet and part of his brain. Twenty years old. He was one of the hundreds of very young desert drivers among the Tuaregs, assaulted by one of the rival gangs, the Ghedadafi, pulled out of his car, and killed in twenty seconds. It is after events like this, that the newspapers write that they are making progress stopping the flow of migrants. ....by killing in one week eighty of the weakest links in the chain....eighty nearly illiterate young men who know how to use the steering wheel on the desert sand....but the newspapers don't mention that they are not touching the top of the command chain, the so called contact men who make the actual money out of the migrant flow. I am learning a lot about current events in the course of writing legal pro-memorias for my protegées’ appeals. One needs a strong stomach to digest a lot of what I am learning, from direct testimony, particularly when they show me the pictures.

Often my friends and acquaintances ask me why I am doing what I am doing. They say 'why are you wearing yourself out trying to solve other peoples' problems? ' It is at that time that I think about the pictures Hamza showed me. Then I know why I am going to bed at one thirty and getting up at seven, to look after needs other than my own. I think about what Fallou said to me the other day, when we were talking about tolerance, he said ' God does not see whether a person is a Christian or Muslim or Jew, whether he is white or black. God only sees whether a person is in need.' He said it with a conviction and simplicity that makes one realize that we have a lot to learn from people who arrive in Europe from other continents.

In case any of you are wandering in the vicinity of Paypal and your hand slips over my email, my legal fund for the refugees would much appreciate it.

until, next time, Jane

*41. Driving blind*

*Why didn’t I see that the clouds were gathering? Why didn’t I see the risk I was taking when I started to renovate the ruinous neighborhood I had bought? Why didn’t I see the envy I would generate, rebuilding for the second time, an entire neighborhood of the village? Why didn’t I recognize how much the racist snake at the bottom of the hill was just waiting for a chance to destroy me, by any means necessary? Why didn’t I see what was in store for me by hiring Kader to take on the structural emergency work to shore up the twelfth century walls of the five structures? Why didn’t I see that six people on a construction site would be visible to the whole village? Why didn’t I see that no one would defend me against the defamation of the worst inhabitant of the village, even tho everyone in the town hated him as much as I did. Why didn’t I see that they would not defend me, because they were afraid of him, because they knew that he would do to them what he did to me, out of spite, and without restraint? What made me blind to the fact that I was living and working in a moral vacuum, that my ethical values were of my own making, entirely at odds with all those around me. I did not want to see, so I chose to be blind to the difficulty, to the actual state of things in Ponti di Pornassio in the Fall of the year two thousand and sixteen. I drove on day by day into the fog of the storm bearing down upon me.*

42. Metamorphasis: stones and alchemy

It is not easy to move six thousand square feet of twelfth century stones forward by seven centuries, from the twelve hundreds in which the original archways and vaulted ceilings were built, up to our times. To add to the difficulties, there had been serious storms in the area, actually denominated a regional calamity, which had caused massive landslides in the neighboring hills, cracking several hamlets in two, destroying dozens of ancient homes up the mountain in our valley, filling roads with unmovable boulders. In the midst of this I had asked for a permit to do some light weight emergency work, and had ‘extended’ the permit informally to undertake an actual season of structural repair to the worst house of the ‘Ruins’ as we were given to calling the neighborhood which I was hoping to turn into a cross cultural center for training and hospitality for people from various continents and walks of life. This would give my small group a chance to learn from Kader, a master mason who could execute everything anyone could need to know about construction in my region of Italy. It was a great plan. But like most battle plans it did not take into account the beliefs and intent of the enemy.

43. November 29, 2016

dear everyone,

so what do I have to be thankful about, other than the fact that I am not a turkey?....well.....I'm alive to tell the tale; as follows: a week ago my racist villager/neighbor carried out his threat to denounce me to the authorities, for giving work to non-white people, a threat he had made publicly to several people over the last six months. As a result the labor inspectors descended upon our worksite a week ago, terrorized four of my refugees, interrogated me for several hours, summoned me to their offices where they bequeathed me fines that may range from fourteen thousand to thirty eight thousand dollars. I don't know yet how this scenario will play out, on Wednesday I will see my two lawyers in Genoa, ...as it happens the fine print of the letter of the law is on their side, although one might say that the spirit of the law is on my side. From their point of view teaching a group of refugees how to use a cement mixer is equivalent to teaching them how to use a kalashnikof.

If I were to explain all of this to you in detail, it would fill up your hard disks so I will spare you the particulars. From the point of view of most people, who hear about the misfortunes of their friends and relatives, the response is often, 'she stuck her neck out, in the direction of the chopping block; had she not done that her neck would still be intact'. That's what most Europeans said about their friends and relatives of the resistance, who returned from the concentration camps after the war.

I have spent the past week seriously thinking about how to proceed with my project. The options are plentiful: 1.throw myself off of one of the lovely bridges of Ponti, as my next door neighbor did last summer, the fifth person in my valley to commit suicide in a moment of economic and social despair. 2. pour fifty gallons of gasoline on to the properties I have just bought, light a match and get on a plane to?....an as yet undiscovered continent? 3.Stay here, dig in and continue to fight the inequity of a corrupt system under the sway of a bunch of slimy worms. I have chosen the third course, for the moment, as it best represents my principles, As I have eight people who depend on me it would be illogical to abandon them simply because I am running on empty at this moment.

Today I went down to my bank and asked for a loan to proceed with the rebuilding of the five properties I have bought, and I will know in a week or so if it will be approved. Three of them will have a commercial resale value, which will more than cover the building costs, one will be used as a laboratory for the refugees, and one will become my abode, after I hopefully sell the two thousand five hundred square foot double house which I am presently living in with my four refugee guests, in order to recapitalize. These are not simple times we are living in. It is not easy to live a coherent life if, as I am trying to do, if one is living on and offering hospitality to four other people on two thousand dollars a month. (In the interests of transparency a cappuccino costs less here than in the US, and I may be one of the few people, my age who does not have to spend money to dye her hair, but still....) anyway you get the picture. Hopefully the properties I have started to rebuild will serve as a model for sustainable energy savings...just spent the afternoon with my energy technician...as well as being lovely to look at.

So if any of you know someone who would like to own an unusual vacation home, in this part of the world, or would like to become a tiny or larger co-investor in this project, let me know. Thanksgiving comes but once a year, but when I read about Gambia, the country that half of my guests come from, where the dictator Jammeh has just sacrificed 70 children: abducted and killed and burned and their ashes given to feed the idols he worships, in order, as he believes, to win the December first elections, I realise that Trump is still in nursery school compared to the unspeakable horrors of this planet.

keep the faith, Jane

*The absolute impossibility to actualize any of these plans had not yet sunk in. It took me two years to realize that I was at a dead end, and no bank would give me a loan, no ability to write would stave off the courts, no compliments from helpful friends would have any practical effect on my situation.*

44. *Foreboding*

*I should have known that day that something ominous would happen. I had allowed my team of refugees to become too visible. I had delivered too many truckloads of materials to the ruins. The cement mixer made too much noise. Fallou had gotten into an argument with Kader that morning; no one saw that the two unknown men who had said hello to him, as they walked up the hill, would return ten minutes later dressed in their uniforms and accompanied by the police. I was at the bank when they arrived, buying vouchers to pay them with. Fallou called me to return home. When I arrived I saw that the inspectors were standing in front of my own home, checking the documents of the refugees who lived there. Bai was crying. Fallou was shaking. Hamza had retreated into his self-protective mutism, Amara was equally absent. Yveline was trying to be diplomatic to the inspectors. I was the opposite. Kader and Sulayman were nowhere to be seen. They had escaped the inspectors by climbing over the roofs with quick reflexes, and were hiding under the stairs of a neighboring house for three hours until the danger passed. The inspectors, after various exchanges of insults and sarcasm lasting nearly an hour, finally ascertained that no one was in the country illegally, and that I was guilty of the infraction of having failed to buy vouchers for one day of work for the refugees, the day I was in bed with bronchitis, and for a slew of imaginary safely violations, that all told would net me thirty thousand dollars of fines, one criminal trial, one civil trial, the swords of Damocles still hanging over my head, no sign of any sort of bank loan, three lawyers to defend me.*

45. Taking Stock January 10, 2017

Dear everyone,

Predictably my New Year's resolution to write the New Year's update on New Year's day, has been delayed by the usual complications of daily life. Punctuality is a virtue, but as I have been learning from my refugee guests, patience is an even greater virtue. This is the moment of the year when I reflect on what I have tried to accomplish in the past twelve months, and what has actually been accomplished, with much effort on this side of the ocean, and with your practical help and moral encouragement, which is vital to me, so that what I am trying to do here can have some echoes in the wider world.

In the course of the past year, sixteen people requesting asylum have passed through here, (some for a few days, some for many months) and have been given a combination of hospitality, meals, legal help, medical help, training in construction skills, training in the Italian language--and in English and French for those who have had less practice in translating from their native Wolof or Hausa--and last but not least: paid work, in building the solar prototypes, creating the extended vegetable garden, rebuilding stone retaining walls, double insulating two large roofs, which is saving much on heating costs in our living spaces, and preparing my new 'neighborhood' of four houses for their in depth reconstruction.

More importantly the group is consolidating and is on its way to becoming a 'team' of the present six people who get along with each other and work well together. Three of them are living full time in my two houses, and two who have been here about half of each week for the past ten months, will probably move in full time in about a month's time, when they get out from under the claws of the Italian bureaucracy. I have hired a specialized friend to teach the group Italian three intensive lessons a week, and she, Yveline, is full of energy and enthusiasm. My role is clearly to speak to my protegés in the languages that they already understand, in order to give them the legal, logistic and medical help that they need to survive in Europe.

All told I have spent roughly twenty thousand dollars on this adventure, divided equally in three parts between legal fees, paid work and hospitality/ medical fees. It has been worth every cent, in terms of my quality of life, and I wish I had more. Having acquired the four houses of my 'new neighborhood' for a Lillipution sum--separate from the twenty thousand spent for the refugees-- compared to their eventual renovated value. I would welcome co-investors in this project. As my most recently sold house, the third of my five original houses, was sold this summer at twice the price per square metre as the average properties in the area, I believe I have made an investment that will eventually bear fruit, from a practical point of view. It is an incentive to live a long life.

The visit from the labor inspectors is still winding its way through a legal labyrinth that would make Kafka feel proud, and it will be a while before I know what the outcome will be. I now have a labor consultant, a work safety consultant, my long time technician who signs my architectural plans for me for the past two decades, and two lawyers, all working as a team to try to contain the damage. Understandably the stress of all of this waking nightmare takes a toll on the health of the protagonist, (myself.) Four days after the labor inspectors bequeathed me my mega fine in their sliding scale of between fourteen to thirty eight thousand dollars I had a minor stroke. Tomorrow, after a six weeks' wait I will finally have a magnetic resonance test to access the damage. If I was already underground in a coffin they might have gotten me an appointment in three weeks instead of six, but as I am still alive to tell the tale, they figure what's the hurry.

Being able to still vaguely remember when the brain was an instrument used to think with and store up new information, it is disconcerting for me to sense that it has been reduced to a mere platform to hold up my voluminous red hair. But having had to rebuild it in the past, after two serious concussions, I suppose that is what I will have to do this time around. The distressing thing about strokes/ischemic attacks, even the transitory kind, is that their effects are not always visible on the outside to the public at large. This fact, though it may paradoxically, superficially preserve the dignity of the person in question, makes one wish for an old fashioned broken leg with a cast on it, that friends could sign. Then one would not have to explain to them why one's psyche is at half mast, while staring into the great void that used to be one's own reasoning powers. 'Life is not easy' as my refugees often say, with deadpan stoicism.

keep the faith....alla prossima, Jane

*46.the truth finally sinks in*

*There was in fact no way forward, nothing to dig in to, the project had been successfully decapitated by the racists of the village. The father of one of the wealthy families in my village had been the chief Fascist dignitary during the second world war, his elderly son was still spouting praises of Mussolini for all to hear, his beliefs and actions had seeped into the blood stream of most of the village’s inhabitants.*

*It took me three months to realize that I had nowhere to go but away from where I had lived for twenty years. A dreary morning of the month of March, when I had made the mistake of trying at least to paint a cellar room with the compressor, whose noise aroused the racist at the bottom of the hill again, and predictably the police who for the third time showed up at my door. They wanted me to order those inside the buildings to come out to have their identities inspected. I refused. I told them that as I was the owner of the properties they could arrest me instead if they felt I had committed an ulterior crime. After some deliberation they decided that that was not such a good idea and left after a half hour of threats and insults. At that point I knew that the racists had definitively won that round, and my only option was to leave Ponti and go somewhere else.*

February, 2017

First we’ll start with the good news.  Alagie, from the Gambia, who has been living in my home since November, was given refugee status after his appeal last month.  I did the follow up research on his case and wrote his statement, along with finding the key articles, that indicate that the regime in that unfortunate country has changed, but many of the laws have not yet changed, (including those regarding homosexuality, in his case,)  along with translating for him during the hearing in court. This is the third home run in a row, and I feel  great relief, and joy for him. He, and his family and friends were jubilant when they heard the news.

Now we have the situation on the ground:  my racist villager down the street sent  the police to visit me for the third time, nearly getting me arrested, for  transporting materials to the properties I just bought, with the help of my protégées,  without having the proper documentation. Even standing outside a building site with a tool in hand seems to be a criminal offense, if the local authorities have it in for you….shades of the deep South in the sixties.  This would not be so bad, had it not been followed, by the same person. along with a group of his friends discussing on Whatsapp how much they would like to see me arrested,  including his comment, ‘let’s burn’ (not sure if it refers to me or my properties or both. Anyway the rest of the details are too discouraging to relate,  though fortunately there was one courageous person in the village who stood up to them , (she was the one who informed me of the ‘chat’ of which I took screen shots.  Maybe they’ll come in useful in court…we shall see. )

In this context I am having to make some hard decisions. Very hard. The first one is to look for an apartment to rent in Genova, in hopes of recreating a base in a more congenial  city, where I will not have to live in fear for my own safety; and my five protégés will not have to live in defacto apartheid. I should know whether we will be able to move, in a couple of weeks—everything takes longer in Italy, including checking on a potential tenants' financial solvency.  I have put my own large double home on the market, on an international portal, it may take many, many, many months, before it is sold, and probably at a great loss but I cannot, after twenty two years,  continue in this area, given the antagonism of the local residents, and the cowardly passivity of those few who purport to be ‘on my side.’  The properties which I have just bought will also be put on the market, as soon as I have paid the first section of the fines to the town and the renovation taxes and done the absolutely minimum amount of work to make them saleable.

 No one wants to admit that they have not achieved the critical mass with which to move mountains. No one wants to admit that mountains can be moved, but often by an amount of about three millimeters, generally in the opposite direction of where one wishes them to go to. No one wants to admit that the racists have won this round.  But after the second transient ischemic attack, which occurred to me two weeks ago,  I recognize that if I do not make some changes, I may not be long for this earth.  Extreme stress seems not to be good for human beings.  To add to the stress the labor inspectors have now officially and formally bequeathed me twenty three thousand dollars of fines, for informally employing four non-white individuals for one and a half days of work. I will have to appeal  in court and hang out with my three lawyers for quite a few seasons.  Not much fun.  I am trying to recount all of this in the measured tone, which New York Times reporters are famous for…journalistic impartiality.  I will leave it to you, the reader, to imagine what my state of mind actually is at this moment.  Something like the famous Peanuts’ cartoons, when he loses it completely and goes: aaaaaaarrrrrrrrggggghhhhhhh!!!!!    Enough said.

I have started, in order to prepare for the coming season, to put together a crowd funding request, which I hope to ‘launch’ by the end of this month.  It takes many hours of preparation to do these things well, and there is no guarantee that they will bring any result, unless one has a coterie of Facebook acquaintances that stretches from here to the planet of Jupiter.  But I will have to locate some additional funds in order to keep what I am doing afloat, about twenty thousand dollars, in order to not go under, if it takes a year or more for my property to sell.

Twenty thousand dollars is a phenomenal sum of money for my refugees, who come from countries where their average earnings range from two to six dollars a day. It is enough, in our present life style in Italy to keep the bills and expenses paid for the six of us for six months.  It is a lesser fraction for those more affluent than myself.  Every time I do the math…forty generous people times five hundred dollars, twenty people times a thousand dollars, four hundred people times fifty dollars, etc. etc. etc.   I feel  nauseous, as the whole concept of money is the best demonstration of Einstein’s theory of relativity.  Back in the old days, when all a human had to do to determine his financial assets, was to move the rock in front of the hole in the cave and count the mammoth and dinosaur bones in his possession,  it was much simpler.

In view of a future move to Genova, I have started to make  contact with some encouraging people I knew from the past, who can help me set up an actual, official non-profit  there and  reestablish my activities to train refugees in the principles and applications of solar energy, and give them the legal, logistic  and linguistic help they need.  I still believe just as strongly that this kind of economic model can work, to promote a future for those who have arrived here from elsewhere. Slowly. As most things in this world. But I want to continue to try.      keep the faith,     Jane

*47. Uprooted*

*Leaving is never easy. Anywhere. Anytime. As my own spirits flagged, so did those of the people I was trying to help. Sulayman was going crazy with anguish. His paranoia overcame him. Our life together was reaching a dead end. I knew what I did not want to know. That I was going to Genova to be alone. That I would not be inviting those who lived in my home in Ponti to accompany me. No one wants to know that they are not omnipotent, that they do not have the magic wand to improve the destiny of others. No one wants to know that they have used up all of their strength, mental, moral and physical. No one wants to know the obvious. I rented a large dilapidated apartment, in the slum part of the historic center of Genova. I started to clean and paint it with Sulayman and Fallou. It did not work. All communication had broken down. It took me nearly a month to recognize that I would be making the move alone. I could not face myself or anyone else but my money had run out. Their time had run out. There were no more funds. None of my efforts at crowd funding and the like had born any fruit. My savings were nearing the end of the road. In these moments one often keeps oneself alive via magical thinking. I was no exception.*

*When I finally made the decision it was the hardest one of my life. I gave Yveline a hundred and fifty euro a piece for each of the refugees, and instructions to tell them that they would be on their own at the end of the month, and would have to leave my house and find their way in the world on their own. I could not face them. I could not look the black hole that was their future in the face. I could not face myself as well. By the beginning of July I was in Genova, The house in Ponti was empty, I was hysterical with shame and fear and grief for the following months. The shadow of Sergio’s suicide hung over me. The shadow of Franco’s suicide hung over me. The shadow of Alfonso’s suicide hung over me. The shadow of four other recent suicides hung over me. They haunted my dreams most nights of the Summer.*

48. The Summer Hiatus, June 23, 2017

dear Everyone,

There are ragdolls on the street corners of the major cities of Italy these days: limp, with large vacant button eyes, their swollen feet turned outward, immobile, but breathing. They do not move much, for even begging in ninety degree weather is an energy consuming exercise. These are the times we are living in.

After a very long and eventful seven weeks, I am finally trying to write a coherent update. It is not easy for me to find words for this month and a half of my existence. Europe in general, Italy and my area in particular seems to have become a war zone of intolerance and grim, mean spirited reactions towards whoever can serve as a scapegoat. Public opinion, egged on by the mass media, is swinging dangerously towards a level of generalized ostracism of anyone who was not born in Italy. This includes lots of people's parents and grandparents.

The practical results of this is that I am now living in a very modest apartment I have found to rent in the multicultural, immigrant, historic center of Genova. After twenty one years, it is no longer possible for me to stay in my area and deal with the pressure and hostility. I have put the property on the market, and have to hope that it will sell for not too great a loss, before my savings run out.

In the meantime my filmmaker colleague Ciro, has had time to shoot the short video of my activities. We started editing it today and will finish it and add a bilingual version hopefully next week. The video has lovely images thanks to Ciro, and a concise text. A few folks I know from the past in my neighborhood in Genova have expressed some interest in learning English, and in my teaching them building skills, so I may try to set up a carpentry workshop for women, and some English classes in hopes of bringing in a bit of income for myself. There seems to be hardly any employment to be seen on the horizon, either with a Hubble telescope or an electronic microscope. The one exception are the tran-sexual prostitutes on the street corners surrounding my apartment who are still doing a brisk trade. The head of the group is a militant lady in her sixties, who has run a literary salon for decades when she is not practicing her profession. She was delighted to know that I lived in San Francisco, during its Golden Age. These are also the times we are living in.

My five former refugee guests are scattering to the winds, as the landlords of my building threatened to evict me if I bring them to live with me. I can no longer afford to support them in the country, where they have been living for too long under a state of siege. You don't want to hear the details of this horrific story, and I don't have the heart to write them, except to say that racism has won this round.

Fallou. has gone to the agricultural South of Italy to look for work. Sulayman and Hamza have miraculously managed to slide into Germany two days ago, but I don't yet know if they will be sent back. Alagie is waiting next week for his last dentist appointment for his absessed tooth with my kind and competent dentist, then he and Amara will look for other pastures. Prosper has gone down to Rome, fortunately equipped with legitimate refugee status which I helped him obtain, so if he is lucky, as he is the most capable of the group, maybe he will find some paid work.

My feeling of having done everything possible to try to save a small group of people and not being able to, is not a feeling one would wish even on one's worst enemy. Parenthetically it does not improve my own physical health, but that is a detail in the larger picture. There is much else to say, but I am trying to put all of that in the book I have started to write about these two years. I just hope my strength will hold out.

*49. the passage of time*

*The resilience of human beings in the face of emergencies saw them through. I say this with a certain uneasiness, as there are no happy endings to these kind of stories. There is simply the ability to resist. For one more day. Fallou, Alagie and Amara went to Foggia, to work for the summer in the fields, under the ‘caporalato’ the informal mafia of the intermediaries in the South of Italy. Gruesome work, horrific living conditions, abysmal pay. They are alive. After respectively nine and eleven months Fallou and Alagie were able to receive their humanitarian permits to stay in Europe for the moment, though the offices of the questura of Imperia did everything to put roadblocks in their way. Alagie is now in Milan working in the wholesale markets, living in an actual apartment. He is perhaps the only one who may eventually have a future. Fallou has gone back and forth from Italy to Spain to Italy to Spain in search of work. All of his enormous strength and good will has not netted him anything stable. He is living day by day with the stoicism and dignity that would make anyone humble. Each of them stayed in my apartment in Genova in the course of the year for a month and a half, while waiting for their documents to come through. It was not the right moment for any of us. I was at my worst as I needed to be alone, they were at their most insecure. But we made it through that season.*

*In the meantime Prosper came to stay on occasion and do some work for me on the apartment. Of the whole group of refugees he was the only stable person whom I’ve encountered, the only one who was not too psychologically damaged by his experiences to function. I had known him from the beginning. He was the first person I met in Vessalico after Sulayman. From that moment there was something in the way he looked at me that foretold the future between us, that slowly unrolled over two years.*

September 12,2017

Dear Everyone,

After a torrid Summer in Italy, where most everything goes on hold, and the month of August appears to last for fourteen weeks; finally the wheels of activity have started to turn again. Despite the unpleasant practical aspects of my own situation, I am continuing and reactivating the work I have done up until now in my country properties. I hope that this large city of a million inhabitants will be more propitious to my efforts.

After settling in to my apartment in Genova, I have managed to ‘relocate’ most of the nineteen people whom I helped in the course of these two years. They are geographically spread out from Hamburg in Northern Germany to Foggia in Southern Italy, but fortunately they are all alive and one step up from starving.

Six of them have slid into Germany, where their situation is, momentarily better than Italy, as they are given serious language training, and decent housing, and the general population in the larger cities is less intolerant than in the Bel Paese. Those dozen who are here are eking out a precarious existence, even those with permits to stay, as work is so scarce, (thirty four percent unemployment among Italians under thirty five.)

In the meantime various friends of friends whom I’ve helped in the past with their permits are starting to contact me. So in the past month I have been training people from Nigeria and Senegal, s to deal with the interrogations of the Territorial Commission and the appeals in the Courts, doing more legal research to write their biographies.

I have also designed the prototypes for my line of multi-layered cardboard furniture for which I hope to set up a production laboratory and sell to stores, as a sort of ecological version of Ikea. I’ll have pictures next week. I have finally prepared the launch of a crowd funding initiative. It will be launched in three days on September 15th. It is accompanied by a lovely video that my colleague Ciro Abdel shot and edited for me, which can be viewed on youtube under ZANGO GABAN (in English) or ZANGO GABAN ITAL (in Italian.)

In the midst or all of this instant communication, which chirps and tweets and barks and chimes and miaows and moans, on my various electronic devices. Setting up a crowd funding adventure, in the midst of all of my legal and economic hassles, has not been a simple task. It is not easy to write PR that is not self-aggrandizing, self-involved, self, self, self as we have all been funneled into the selfie generation, even if I am too old to be born into it. I can imagine that times are in equal upheaval in the USA England,  Ireland, Australia, as  here. Actually I don't have to use my imagination, I have the New York Times on line that feeds me all of the dismal international  details every day. I suspect that this is what courage is all about: slogging through the mud without giving up when everyone else is about to do so.

All of this will take off for a month, in three days from now, but I need help, to reach the eight thousand euro goal, a modest amount considering that I have spent about twenty five thousand euro of my savings to support the nineteen refugees I have been in contact with since the Fall of 2015. So I hope that perhaps you can forward, post and share this letter far and wide, along with the website I have set up: [www.zangogaban.org](http://www.zangogaban.org) that documents these efforts in depth.

I will be immensely grateful for all the help you can give me.

Keep the faith, Jane

*50. how could I have been so dumb*

*How could I have been so dumb as to keep false hope alive for so long? To imagine that any of my fundraising activities would bear fruit? To entertain illusions that other would share my concerns? The more one needs something, the more one is inclined to believe one’s own fantasies, that help will come from some unknown corner of the world. How could I have not realized that my own priorities are at a one hundred and eighty degree angle from those around me?*

*As the country I lived in and the planet as a whole was turning away from those less fortunate, I did not want to see what was actually happening. I still refuse to see it, at my own risk and peril. Perhaps because I do not want to definitively lose faith in my fellow humans. I do not want to believe that the only things that animates their thinking is ‘mors tua, vita mia.’ I do not want to believe that evolution was designed so badly, Darwin not with standing. If only the most resourceful, the most ruthless, the most aggressive, the most adaptable, the most selfish, are those who survive, then we are going in that direction. The tiger’s claws will outlast the brontosaurus’ vegetarian eating habits. The lion will outlast the elephant, the cobra will outlast the antelope, the wolves will outlast the lambs. The greedy will outlast the generous. The stingy will outlast the compassionate. And those whose money has been ‘wisely’ invested in diversified funds, will certainly outlast myself.*

*But the need to live a coherent life, does not wish to abandon me. Maybe I have read too much Tolstoy, too much Gandhi. Maybe my eyes will never be opened to what the world is all about. Life is all about choice, as Prosper was given to say.*

51. Eleven lives October 2, 2017

It turns out that some of the African refugees I have been in contact with recently have been gay. They come from countries with horrific laws such as Nigeria and the Gambia, that allot them life imprisonment, stoning to death or if they are ‘lucky’ a mere fourteen years in jail  The gory part of it all, is if they have escaped with the skin of their teeth from their native lands, and have barely avoided being beaten to death in Libya, when they finally arrive in Italy, the judges on the Territorial Commissions have been instructed by the Minister of the Interior to assume that every one of them is lying, and making it up. They have been instructed to give them the third degree to dismantle their accounts.  I spent a whole day last week listening to what happened to him, training him on how to answer the judges who try to humiliate him and pry into the intimate details of his life, and writing up an affidavit for him in Italian that the judges hopefully can relate to. I just hope for the best for him. So this is how I fill my days when I am not sitting in front of the keyboard.

A piece of good news: the refugee from Nigeria that I just worked with,--the sweetest, saddest young man I have worked with so far--whom I trained for his appeal and wrote a biographic pro-memoria for the courts, called me the other day to say that his request was accepted and he received a full five year permit. He was ecstatic over the phone, and as he continued to thank me, I felt, as I do occasionally, that what I do is actually benefitting a few people.

I have another three young men from Nigeria, whom I’ve been training for up and coming appeals, and one from Algeria, just arrived a few  days ago with a broken shoulder from the tortures in Libya. This most recent arrival is a goldmine of information about the collusion and kickbacks between the Libyan ‘sharks’ and the European community money that in theory goes to their government to keep the refugees corralled like cattle, on their side of the Mediterranean.

 This afternoon I’ll take him to see my lawyer, who hopefully can defend him in an appeal against the ‘accusation’ of being a ‘migrante economico.’ In modern times it seems that to be poor and wish to better one’s lot in life is considered more and more of a crime, particularly if one is not a white person of the Northern hemisphere, in which case it is considered a virtue, for which, if one is aggressive and greedy, enough, and willing to step on the throats of those on the ground, the Almighty will reward you….enough said. I have seen such an enormous amount of despair in these two years, despair that could be avoided if the laws were more humane. It leads to cynicism.

Most of everyone’s pockets are nearly empty, with a lot of fresh air blowing through them. But in the developed world we are living a life that is infinitely superior in quantity and quality to that of  a person whose family of four subsists on a hundred and fifty dollars a month, as does the wife and three children of a family in Gambia, whose father, one of my protégées, had to escape and leave them behind seven years ago. Those million and a half refugees in Europe are in a desolate limbo, dealing with the courts, with the increasing racism, with unemployment, with terrible living conditions, a waking nightmare that is hard for people to fathom if they haven’t seen it with their own eyes. The stoicism with which these people, deal with their situations, should make all those listening to them humble.

*52. false hope again*

*The crowd funding did not go through. It netted less than ten percent of what was required. After this third try I should be cured of imagining that I can motivate those around me to share my concerns. Maybe I will eventually learn to not indulge in such illusions. It’s an incentive to live a long life.*

*53. Make Believe*

*‘Make believe’, is the art of making (inducing) the judges to believe what you are trying to tell them. That is the first thing I tell my protégés. This is not an easy concept to convey to those people who come to visit me for help and training to face the Italian Territorial Commission, in the first instance, or the Court of Appeals the second time around. The average rejection rate for the territorial commission is nearly ninety percent, for the appeals court is almost eighty percent. Therefore only one quarter of those people who have risked death to cross the Sahara, endured the atrocities in Libya, and braved the Mediterranean, are ever accredited to remain in Europe. Of the twelve men I have helped this year, ten have received asylum. With a batting average that is four times the national average, I am apparently doing as an expatriate writer what the lawyers of the country I have lived in for four decades, have difficulty accomplishing.*

*My work with each person takes many hours, of explaining, training him to answer the questions that will be thrown at him, rehearsing, understanding all of the details of their lives, writing their autobiographical statements in a style that the Italians might relate to, and essentially preparing them bear up under the pressure of what is an interrogation. Those I have worked with have waited in the refugee shelters, often for more than two years for their first hearing in a situation that amounts practically to house arrest, without the permit to work, without any attempt at their effective integration into the society of the country they have been living in. They come to me with great anxiety, trying to fathom what the authorities wish to hear from them, and why they have been considered nearlyt on a par with criminals, for the offense of wishing to provide a better life for themselves and their families. They are often mute with fear…. I am also ill at ease, having to teach them to lie, to recite untruths, as their only path to salvation.*

54. Rivals

Prosper was Sulayman’s chief rival. They were the two most intelligent of the group, nearly head and shoulders above the others. There was a ten year age difference between them. In this case they were nearly of two different generations. They were also of two different countries and two different religions. They could not have been more different, despite having arrived from the same continent, just as Boston and San Francisco are significantly different though belonging to the same country. The main difference was in their reasons for arriving on this side of the Mediterranean. Sulayman’s life had been pulled out from under him, unexpectedly, by the horrific dictatorship of Jammeh. Before he left Jammeh had been in power for a dozen years, so he had already lived through a long season of fear, arbitrary arrests of people around him, reoccurring stories of torture and death of people whose corpses were fed to Jammeh’s crocodiles. Both his father and mother had passed away. When he had to flee he left behind a pregnant wife and three daughters. His son, who was now six, he had never seen.

Like many from the Gambia, he was devout, prayed daily, believed in charity, solidarity and the power of the Almighty to assist him in bearing his misfortunes. His life had been on track, before his uncle, for a question of inheritance, set Jammeh’s henchmen upon him. He had studied, emerged at the very top of his class from the technical high school he attended, had a good job at the Port of Banjul and a happy marriage. All of this had been swept out from under him six years previously. Six years is a long time to be on a life raft of sorts, between Senegal, Mali, Niger, Libya and Italy, and never reach the shore. If does not promote optimism. He lived close to his emotions. It was his charm but it led to his fragility. In the long run knowing him made me realize how a person becomes traumatized by his past, and despite all appearances, despite Sulayman’s elegant manners and worldly smile he had never recovered, nor would he, from the events which had cut his life in two.

Prosper was nearly the opposite. He was born into disorder. His mother, a powerhouse of a woman, from his telling, had brought up he and his twin sister alone, since they were one year old. His father had gone off from Benin City to Lagos with another woman and only reappeared on the scene when Prosper was a young adult. From his mother, who sold meat in the market, he learned survival at a young age. He went on to high school, finished the course and began working as a teenager. He learned various trades, became a mason and an automotive electrician. He moved to Lagos for several years before he arrived in Italy. Unlike Sulayman he had arrived in Italy by design, and by conscious choice.

He was helped by the fact that his area was at the center of the unspeakable violence of the cult gangs, who had left a gruesome machete scar on his left arm. The cruelty of these gangs, whose relentless, horrific recruitment practices would provide the background for any person’s legitimate desire to leave the area, in his case fortunately provided the confirmation of his position as a refugee. With one fundamental difference. He had decided to leave, so he had planned his travel carefully. He had good connection men, so he had not been jailed for months or tortured in Libya. He passed through that Hellish country in a mere three weeks, with only two threats to his life, which he recounted in detached and measured tones. He arrived in Italy as a whole person. He was the great exception compared to those who were psychologically traumatized. His strategic sense, and his sense of his own self worth and his rights were still intact. He was skeptical but not cynical, and he was not living in fear. He was, all told, a member of a tiny, fortunate minority of those requesting asylum. That was what made him attractive to those around him, and a rival to Sulayman.

Sulayman had a position in the cooperative as the coordinator for Vessalico. For his six and a half days of twenty four hour responsibility for the practical problems of the lives of the ten newer arrivals he was given and extra seventy five euro. This was called ‘voluntary labor.’ The cooperative had essentially tricked those who offered their services nearly for free, into thinking that their efforts would net them a more favorable assessment by the Comissione Territoriale, something that in reality did not ever materialize. But Sulayman and others from the Gambia had fallen for this devious ploy. To their chagrin when they were turned down on their interviews and appeal they realized that they were the recipients of a terrible deception, but it was too late to change that.

Prosper had no illusions as to the motives of the cooperative. He was not taken in by them. He knew they owed him a better deal than he was getting. He was not afraid to go to the local police station with a sample of the inedible food they were being given. He was not afraid to face the authorities with his complaints. But he knew he had to remain evenhanded and polite. He was a born diplomat. It served him well. He believed in his own survival more than he believed in the Christian religion. He did not allow for his emotions to overcome his rationality. In this case he was quite unusual. When he came to work for me on various occasions he focused on the work, the problem solving, which he was quite good at, probably the best in the group.

So when he finally acquired his documents and five year permit, I had great hopes that his future was waiting for him. It was not. He went from Rieti, to Napoli, to Genova to Rieti to Genova, in the course of a year. There was no steady work that an Italian would hire a non-Italian for. He left for Malta for three months but the construction industry was stationary. He flew to Germany for two months, but the bureaucracy was dragging its feet. Finally he came back to Italy to an isolated corner of the country to work in the fields for the last half of the summer, with dubious pay. What was happening to him was happening to ninety percent of those who tried to make their way in Italy. There was no place for them.

I had hired him to help me with several of my projects for a few months. It gave him the money to pay to get his half-brother out of jail where he was dying in Libya, and onto a boat for Italy. It gave him the money for his father’s cataract operation. It took care of the hospital bills when his mother barely escaped with her life in a deadly bus accident in which eight other people perished. After these expenses there was not a cent left for himself. His loyalty to his family was moving. But it took a toll on his own resistance. When he left Italy and my own home, he was hollowed out with despair. He had stopped believing that anything was possible for him. He had stopped using the word patience. He had retreated into himself, less dramatically than Sulayman but non-the-less, he had slowly become absent to the world. To see this gradually happen to the best of them all, to see this wear away at the relationship that had developed between us, was starting to break my heart.

*55. The unspeakable*

*Of course you cannot talk about these things. There is a forty four year age difference. If anyone knew, all of the value of what I had actually done for those requesting asylum would be swept away, because of one fact of my own personal life. For the second time in a row a person requesting asylum had fallen in love with me. I never would have expected it. I did not plan for it. When I received the news I thought I must have imagined it. I could not believe what I was reading, or hearing. But slowly the relationship had glided from friendship to something else. Something that again could never be spoken of. Never even alluded to in public. Never made visible or audible.*

*But it kept me sane, for five months. Neither of us imagined that it would be a long time relationship. It was just what was happening at the moment. A few months of borrowed time, to be at peace with another person who cared about me, as I cared about him. Knowing he would in time, move on to another place, to other women his age, to another world, but at the moment, we kept good company. And the kind of trust that I have had from very few others in my life, that still exists between us, though it may be months before I see him again, if ever. Prosper was the kind of person who was wise, way beyond his years. I would have sold my soul to the devil to make me twenty years younger and him twenty years older.*

56. Ruth

Ruth arrived at my house on Friday morning, three days before New Year’s. After ten days with the flu I had gotten out of bed for the first time, twenty minutes before she arrived. I was vertical but still unsteady on my feet. Fallou and Prosper were living in the guest room at that time. Ruth had been brought to me by two of Prosper’s friends from Nigeria. They found her on the street the night before, near the railroad station. She had been travelling for three days, having just escaped from a prostitution ring that had held her prisoner for four months, along with eight other women. She looked at me with terrified eyes, and seemed barely able to talk. Very slowly I was able to piece together her story. Like so many impoverished young women in the Edo State of Nigeria, in her case with three younger sisters and a crippled mother, she had been tricked by an apparent ‘benefactor’ into going to Libya where she had been promised an actual job. When she arrived, predictably the job was in a brothel, where she spent about five months before she could escape. Despite the fact that this has been going on for several decades, there is an ample supply of desperate young women who continue to fall for this ploy. Extreme desperation clouds one’s reasoning powers.

There in Nigeria she was ‘befriended’ by another Nigerian woman, a second would be benefactor, who put her on a boat to Italy, with the recommendation to call her when she arrived in the Bel Paese. About a week after Ruth arrived, and had been sent to a refugee center near Ancona, she telephoned the woman in Nigeria, in gratitude, for her would be salvation. The woman nicely asked her where she was living and receiving the answer, she said she would send a friend of hers to say hello to her. A few days later the ‘friend’ showed up and invited Ruth to go for a ride with her in her car. Ruth got in the car, and after about an hour when she realized that something was amiss, the woman refused to drive her back to her refugee center, and deposited her in a house in an unknown city, (for her.) A large house with the windows covered and barred shut and the doors all locked. A house with eight beds. There she spent another four months, having been tricked for the second time.

In the course of that time among other things her left eye had been damaged by a strong punch by the Madam of the brothel, when she refused to be fucked up the ass by one of the clients. A day before Christmas, by pure chance the front door was unlocked for a few minutes, so she slipped out with only the clothes she had on, and ran as fast as she could though she had no idea where she was or where she should go to. Finally another Nigerian on the street pointed her in the direction of the railway station and told her to get on the first train in any direction, just to get away from there. She travelled on three different trains, not really knowing where she was headed for, having no idea of Italian geography, but fortunately the train was heading North toward Milan. And the third train was heading Southwest to Genova. After nearly three days of travel she got off the third train, and the two young country men who ran into her took pity on her. They brought her to a friend of theirs, who happened to be a friend of Prosper’s. He hid her in his room for the night, without trying to put the make on her. It was illegal for him to have a guest, and he risked being thrown out of the cooperative that was housing him, if he was found out. He contacted Prosper who was returning from Rome that night and due to arrive in Genova at five in the morning. It had seeped through the grapevine, that if anyone needed help Prosper was a friend of an American writer who knew how to help people.

I fought down the dizziness from the fever as I listened to Ruth’s story. Very slowly she was becoming more coherent, though she was clearly still in shock. Then what followed for me, was an afternoon of a dozen phone calls trying to find an emergency shelter for her. There was none. The emergency networks for women escaping prostitution were as dysfunctional as all other entities in Italy. Finally I managed to schedule an appointment for her, and myself for the following morning with the Caritas, the only group that dealt with women escaping the Nigerian prostitution rings.

Ruth bedded down on my sofa, and I looked at her sad and frightened face. I tried to fathom what she had been through in the past year. It was beyond me, what she had had to endure. No amount of my imagination could encompass the cruelty that human being inflict on other human beings, for their own gain.

When we arrived at the offices of the Caritas, the following morning, the situation was quite unlike what I had been expecting. The two ladies who ran the office, one Italian and one Nigerian, started to give Ruth the third degree, as if she had been lying about all that had happened to her. They said they had no room for her, and would not be able to make any decision until after New Year’s, five days away. They treated her with a level of indifference that was shocking. I could make no sense out of it. Finally after all of my attempts to shame them into action proved to be of no avail, I said I would put her up until the second of January and bring her back to the appointment on the following Tuesday.

She stayed with me for those days and slowly started to come back to life. I taught her to use my sewing machine, so she would have something to do. We sat down with the Google maps satellite view, and after many hours of looking over streets and railroad stations we determined that she had arrived from the city of Ancona itself. I wanted to help her localize the brothel for the law enforcement authorities, though this did not seem to be a priority for them. Very slowly Ruth began to talk more fluently and it was clear that her command of English was far superior to other Nigerians I had met.

The second appointment with the Caritas, was not much friendlier than the first, however they said they had finally located a room for her. But when they took her away under their wing, they told me that I should have nothing to do with her from that time on. They insinuated that the two young men who had essentially saved her by bringing her to me, could be imposters from yet another prostitution ring. The situation was both surreal and absurd. The Nigerian woman who was grilling Rugh looked and acted as if she herself had been a Madam up to ten minutes previously. It took Ruth quite a few weeks to settle into the safe house. The rules and and the paranoia of those who ran it, made every action suspect. The women living there were fighting among themselves, and ganging up on one of the other women, who had to be moved after she was seriously injured. In the middle of this Ruth used to come and visit me and tell me of the events in the house. Finally things seemed to settle down, though I had had several very unpleasant phone calls with those running the establishment, while trying to stand up for Ruth’s version of the facts.

It took me a while to piece together the motivations for the way the authorities ran the safe houses. Through other friends, I learned that apparently the prostitution rings operating in Italy are so well organized that they send in girls to infiltrate the safe houses, under the guise of being escaped prostitutes, so as to inform their pimps as to where these apartments are located, and re-abduct the inhabitants. I don’t know how often this happens, but evidently it has triggered extreme paranoia on the part of the authorities. The sadder long term fact is that there is so little opportunity for any work, that these women can be trained to do. They are far less prepared than the men who come to Europe, even the best of them and Ruth was among the best.

The events surrounding New Years’ had stunned me, and stayed with me, far longer than I had expected. They haunted me for months after I no longer had any contact with Ruth. The young man who had housed her the first night, appeared to have seriously fallen in love with her. They came to my place occasionally, and I started to see her smile again. I could do little to help her directly as the authorities had prohibited anyone but themselves from having anything to do with those escaping prostitution. My own strength was starting to wear out from having tried to aid too many people, in too many situations, too often, while the economics of my own life was falling apart. It is not easy to recognize that not all mountains can be moved, by one person alone. I was just a tiny grain of sand on Ruth’s road out of the Hell she had been through. It was a sobering recognition for me.

57. Winter and realism

The flow of need was never ending. Twenty minutes after Ruth went to live in the safe house, a whole family showed up at my door. Husband, wife, six year old son, and one year old in a stroller. They had been thrown out of Austria after a year, had arrived in Italy, travelled to Genoa, and slept in the station the night before. It was getting dark on this day of the beginning of January. I made another half a dozen phone calls to various disgruntled offices, who finally realized that they were legally obliged to find emergency lodging for a one year old on the street. After an hour and a half of phone calls I finally found an office to send them to. At that point it was seven o’clock at night. The questura gave them a temporary apartment in the outskirts of the city. They said it was too far away. At that point I could not do anything for them.

The effort to try to be of use to people in the face of laws that were completely against them, and bureaucrats who were categorically unreachable, was starting to wear on me. Winter produces a slow erosion of hope; it effected everyone.

Two refugees came to my door to tell me that they had each been separated from their wives and new born sons. The questura would do nothing to reunite them. There was no way to interact with those who made these decisions. Those requesting asylum were being turned into numbers and files, no longer actual people, simply a source of income for the Cooperatives that were housing them. Beds to be filled. Profits to be cashed in, if the costs could be contained.

Prosper had finally gotten his passport. He had spent days in Rome waiting on line, until he bribed the lackey to put him at the head of the line. It was not his idea, it was the lackey himself who worked for the Nigerian consulate, who approached him with what could be called ‘soft extortion.’ The laminated cardboard furniture that I had spent all Fall designing and constructing with Prosper was not selling. It did not meet with the Italian taste for everything smooth, shiny and plastic. We had spent months improving the pieces. Many people said they were lovely, inspired, the idea of a genius. But like anything made by hand they were too expensive, compared to a piece of merchandise made in China, where the labor cost was a tenth of what it was in Europe. I took a long time to recognize that the project would not fly. The realization was devastating for me. What use was the evolution of hands, in the human species, if the population was now divided into two halves: those who used their hands and were paid slave wages, and those who used the mouse and were paid ten times more? Only the large magnetic force at the center of the earth’s core held these two halves of the planet together.

There was no way I could continue to support Prosper, after five months of this experiment, and he knew it. A friend had told him that there was work in the construction industry in Malta, building many new luxury condos for millionaires who need a place to stash their tax free money. I bought him a plane ticket and gave him some cash for the first month’s rent. It was not easy to be graceful and dignified in the face of our separation, but I had seen him fade before my eyes in the course of the Winter, into extreme discouragement. There was no point in prolonging the situation. I did not expect to see him for a long time, if ever. I knew I was a small oasis, on many people’s trek across the desert of their uncertain future, his included, no matter how gentlemanly he acted. Everything about survival, as a refugee, is about seizing the moment, and not having too many expectations past each moment.

Like many others, I devoured the local and international news. It could be considered an act of masochism, but it was necessary, to find a needle in the haystack, of a tiny positive event each week. It was necessary to not give up. From the winter of two thousand and eighteen, I was seeing the deja vue of Europe in the late thirties, a carbon copy thereof. Europe, country after country was washing their hands of the existence and the fate of those requesting asylum, exactly as they had done, eighty years previously with six million of my ancestors. No one who had studied fifteen minutes of history could fail to see this. But very few of the people I spoke to were looking at what there was to be seen. The surreal horror of how history was repeating itself started to sink in. What could be done with eighty thousand people whose requests were turned down in Italy? Who were now invisible people, who could not return to where they came from and could not officially exist on the Italian soil? Nobody had the answer to this, nor wished to find it. The sunken eyes of those begging on the streets had become anormalized, part of the landscape.

I did not say goodbye to Prosper when he left for Malta. He had found an excuse to not return to the house just before the final moment, so that we would not be standing facing each other, mouthing commonplaces. It was just as well. Neither of us liked hypocrisy.

*58. Unanswered questions*

*Why is my energy running out? Months ago, for so many seasons I was happy and indeed grateful when there were people from four different countries sitting at my dinner table. I was happy to hear all different languages on people’s cell phones. I felt privileged that the world had entered my dining room, although it had not spilled out to the surrounding neighborhood. I never felt like a hero or a martyr, even when I knew I would lose all of my properties because of the racism in my area and the debts and fines I had incurred from the authorities. I never expected gratitude, though I was occasionally moved when people thanked me. Gratitude was against nature for those in real need. It implied needless humiliation. I wanted to have nothing to do with gratitude. It had been imposed upon myself, too often in the past. I did not wish to condescend to others, as I had been condescended to. That was, for me the psychological aspect of poverty, that was far worse than the physical deprivations.*

*But I was losing faith that anything I did could actually be of help to those I was trying to assist. I was not able to solve their problems, only to nudge them a little farther into the future. The permits which they had dreamed of, for months and years, did not lead to work. The fact that I had obtained permits for ten out of twelve people, was of no use to them individually. It kept their terror of the authorities momentarily at bay. But it did not change the bedrock of European racism. It did not make a dent in the lava of how the Italians looked at the ‘others,’ the ‘not one of us’. It had not made a dent in how they regarded me, as a foreigner, even after forty years of living and working in their country. It would be unrealistic of me to assume that the power of my example could move the needle of their suspicions and distrust. I too was falling into the great black hole of contempt for the citizens of the country I lived in.*

*My rage was sweeping over me like a tidal wave. I had come about face from the original season in which I had arrived in Italy, and had positive things to say about the Mediterranean culture. All I could see of citizens I interacted with filled me with disgust at their provinciality, their narrow minded ignorance, their total lack of accountability, the fact that their word was worth nothing. By the Spring I had essentially given up on the population with whom I had shared four decades of my life. I no longer had any desire to communicate with them in any fashion. I simply went through the motions of unavoidable verbal exchanges, necessary for daily life. Beyond that I wished to have nothing to do with them. I knew that I had become as racist toward them as they had been toward me and all those requesting asylum, I did not know how to change what I was feeling. All of my own rage, which had been on hold for too many seasons, of being looked at as an exotic second class citizen, a piece of attractive foreign cunt, was welling up inside of me. As often happens, it was at this point that someone even more desperate than myself, showed up at my door.*

59. Ay-kay

Igho had called me about his friend Ik, pronounced as above, who needed help. He had been turned down by the Territorial Commission, needed to find a lawyer for his appeal, and thrown out of the Cooperative that was housing him for a minor infraction of their rules. He had been living on the street or in lodgings of fortune for the past three months. I said he could come by the following Monday. He called then in the middle of a rainstorm, asking if he could come on the following day as it was raining too hard to travel. I was annoyed and impatient. I told him to arrive before four as I had an appointment and would not be home after that.

In the middle of my appointment I received a phone call from a person working for a Cooperative in my building, telling me that a fairly desperate acting person was looking for me. I answered that he would just have to wait, as he had not shown up on time. I returned home, and a few hours later, shortly before ten at night, I heard knocking at my door. The knocking continued, subdued but constant. I had no intention of answering the door, but the sound got the better of me.

When I opened the door, I was faced by a young man who was, in my estimation clearly going crazy from desperation. I let him in, made him dinner, listened to his story, of being out on the streets for the past months. I let him stay in my home for five days waiting for the lawyer’s appointment. I found for him an auto mechanic that allowed him to come to the shop for two weeks for a trial. All this while he proved to be one of the most motivated, most capable and most fragile, of all of those I had come in contact with. His need to have a place to be in this world, had consumed him. Both his parents had died. They had actually died, as opposed to those who added this detail as an accessory to their stories, in hopes of moving the authorities. As an only child he actually had no relatives. A person that cut off from his past, is either completely cauterized, or completely in the prey of his emotions. Ik was the later. When I tried to tell him that the mechanic could not actually hire him, he started to flip. For all of my previous experience with people going crazy, I was not prepared for the intensity of Ik’s reaction. I simply could not look that level of desperation in the face. He was screaming that it was not for the money, the mechanic had not paid him more than a symbolic allowance, but that he needed to do something in his own craft that he had been trained for, as opposed to the two and a half years of being idle like an animal in a cage, by the Cooperative. It was a perfectly reasonable request. One that I could barely satisfy.

I took him out to the country, where I had an emergency job to do on my own property to rebuild the stone retaining walls. He worked as hard as a person being pursued by Satan, with a level of skill that few others had demonstrated. He was clearly gifted, both mentally and in terms of physical resistance. But he made me increasingly uneasy, as his overbearing need to ‘adopt’ me, as a substitute parent, was consuming me. His habit of needing to demonstrate that he was always right, was equally consuming me. After I lost patience with him a few times in a row, he finally toned down his style of interaction. But I felt deeply ashamed of myself, as I had only once yelled at someone in the three year I had worked with the refugees. I sensed I was losing my grip on the situation, either from sheer exhaustion or my own problems. I paid him for the work on the walls, enough for him to start again to make his way in the world. But he refused to do so. I tried to convince him that he could not come back to the city to stay in my apartment, as I had too many problems of my own, and desperately needed to be alone to try to solve them. But it was of no use.

On the night of the second day back in the city, he knocked on the door of my bedroom, and I found him on his knees, hysterically crying and begging me to let him stay, to not put him out on the street. I cannot describe his gestures or the look in his eyes or the sound of his voice. It would be easy to say that he was acting out or over dramatizing his situation. But there is no way to reason with a person in that situation. I do not have any illusion or pretense that I was either compassionate or generous or moved by him. I was simply overwhelmed by his desperation. He had encompassed all of the fear and anguish that I had seen in others, who had tried not show it. I was watching Greek tragedy made incarnate. I told him to go to bed and that he could stay, but that I had not one cent to support him with, so he would have to be on his own for his food and all other needs. I had already told him this at various times: this time I believe it finally sank in.

For the next few days I was drained of all emotion. We each drifted through the apartment as ghosts, trying not to encounter each other. I knew that the logistics of the situation were not in my favor. It was nearly impossible for a person to find a way to rent a room of share an apartment in Genova if he was not white. There was in fact nowhere for Ik to go, if I refused to offer him hospitality.

He had simply used up all of his nervous system, in the months he was jailed in Libya, and confined in Italy. His emotional resources had come apart. To add to that he had been evicted from the Cooperative, who was lodging him, and was facing a trial, after the authorities discovered two joints of marijuana in his possession. Considering the vast numbers of Italians who smoke the stuff, in the millions, and the fact that they would never be arrested as they were native born, Ik’s situation was a caricature of unfairness.

Slowly I diminished my anger at the fact that I no longer had the privacy of my own apartment, and that I had no idea of how long this situation was due to last. There was no point in having emotion about the fact. It was a holding pattern, similar to the tens of thousands of refugees, circling their future with no permission to land. I reflected on how many of these men were quite young, and missing their own parents, and needed me as a surrogate parent, as much as they needed me as a magic wand for their legal situations. Possibly they felt they needed me in the first role, even more than the second. It went against all of my own experience with family, but I could not change their view, no matter how many times I said that I was not anyone’s mother.

*60. As if, in a dream*

*The past is swirling around me, wondering what has become of you. There are times when it seems that maybe it did not really happen. Did I imagine, Sulayman, the intensity of your presence in my life? Did I imagine the depth of what we shared? Did neither of us try hard enough? I was back in the country the other day and looked at the field where you had planted the corn. I remember when you broiled the ripe ears outside on the grill, and it brought both of us back to our childhoods, though in very different parts of the world. The memory of that instant cut through me. No amount of purple prose can convey the intensity of the short circuit that catapults a person back into their past.*

*Maybe you have another lover, in Germany. Maybe it is better that way. She would be closer to your age, and less aware of your wife and children. It would be easier for you to live in two worlds with that kind of lady than with me. She would probably not be allergic to cigarette smoke. She would probably be more accepting of smoking hashish. She would probably not be an intellectual. I hope you would be happy with that sort of person. I have never fought so hard for the future of another person as I did for yours. I have never shared so much of another person’s grief and anguish. I have never been so frightened that another person might not make it through the night. No matter what went wrong for us in the past, I want things to go well for you. I want to believe that a person can actually make a future for themselves in this dreary and inhospitable continent.*

*The transitory nature of our existence has reduced us all to a tiny screen, and a few long and well guarded numbers as life rafts. Nobody has a place, anymore. A stable spot on the planet. The place of a person’s existence seems not to extend beyond the screen. If the magic number is waylaid, the person ceases to exist. Perhaps many years from now you will remember me, as a lady who wished you well.*

*People are as planets in orbit, their trajectories cross, and then diverge. But it is not easy to accept that the magnetic force of another person’s orbit will not ever bring him back to the point of intersection. I am a way station on your route my dear Sulayman. A post house for the changing of the horses that carry you forward. A small oasis on your trek through the desert toward your future. My function is that for others as well, but more so for you, as it was the first time I had to confront the ephemeral quality of my actions and existence in another person’s life.*

*So many moments come back to me, in flashes, witnessing the sunset, sitting in the café at dusk, wishing to hold hands in public and knowing we could not, without risking danger from the local population, sitting on the terrace, watching you water the plants in the garden, the tiniest instants in time, the molecules that memory is made of. I tried to do for you, what I had never had anyone to do for myself in this desolate country, to make you feel welcome, to help you feel as if you belonged. I did not succeed. But I want to believe that you are capable of making your own future, of fashioning it out of the uncertainty that surrounds us all. I want to believe in your quiet strength and your beautiful smile, that it will serve you well.*

61. Darkening Times

It is terrible to see another person’s energy be drained away by the visible and non-visible walls between themselves and any meaningful integration into the economic life and the human relations of the countries of Europe that they are living in. It is terrible to witness people exchanging day for night; staying up nearly all night and sleeping during most of the day, in order not to be fully aware that they are facing battles that they have little chance of winning. It is discouraging to see people sink into their cel phones, as their only contact with the outside world. There are those who are more stoic about their situation: Fallou who was continually saying: La vie c’est comme ca,--Life is like that, when any misfortune hit him, or Prosper saying continually, You have to have patience, …many people saying God is great…the expression that serves for the worst form of uncertainties. I just pray that, people of all religions, who are gripping the tradition they were brought up in, their only life raft, when all of their own energy can do nothing to move the mountains facing them, can find the strength to go on.

The hardest effort for me, was to give people encouragement without giving them false hope. There is nothing worse than to say to a person: ‘it will all work out’, when they are facing insurmountable obstacles. My memory takes me back to how my own ancestors had to try to survive in the thirties, when they were deprived of citizenship in Europe, and they could go nowhere else. What does it mean to tell someone, that they have to go into hiding, or either invisible or unnoticed. What good does it do to tell a person that hundreds of thousands of my own people had to do that on the very same soil on which they are presently standing? There is the sense that it could not be happening for a second time, in almost identical fashion. But it is.

*62. ‘Words are like Stones’*

*Primo Levi’s famous sentences weighs heavily on me. What can I tell a person when it falls to me to convey the bad news. Of a request for asylum that has been refused. A person who will have to leave where he has been housed and fed for upwards of two years at times, and go out into the unwelcoming world with no funds, insufficient knowledge of the language, and half the time no relatives in the country to help him. What can I say that does not convey the most hypocritical trappings of false hope? What can I say when I have to translate the judges sentence, the endless paragraphs sheathed in lexical mystification that actually mean that the judge does not give a damn about the fate of the person he or she is passing judgment on. How can I smooth out the sarcasm that seeps between the lines? How can I demolish the indifference, the judge’s clear wish to be done with the case and pass on to another?*

*What do these judges feel when they go home at night? Perhaps ‘feel’ is the wrong verb. Perhaps it no longer enters their conscience to feel anything. They are so far removed from those on the other side, those who are perhaps exaggerating or fabricating imperfect stories to save their lives. Every time I read one of the repetitions of the judges standard language, about how the refugee’s account was ‘vague and unsubstantiated’ ‘lacking in sufficient detail’ I cringe. The judges have received their orders from the Minister of the Interior, regarding how they are supposed to interpret the law. These orders have become more and more stringent as these three years have passed. All of the structures of the government and the courts would like to ‘move on’ to another period of history in which they would not be bothered with problems that they have no idea how to solve.*

*In the meantime I hear the voice of the person I have to give the bad news to, crack over the phone, or as he is facing me and trying not to cry in front of me in despair. How can I tell a person that he will get through the night, when I don’t know how I will get through this never ending night?*

63. Our ways in the world

The complicated part about spending much time with people whose lives have unraveled, is that one begins to think about how much we, in the world of lives more neatly sewn together, are holding the responsibility for the unraveling. Did we do the wrong thing getting into the international conflict in that country; or that other country over there? Or the one south of it or on the neighboring continent? It doesn’t take much knowledge of geography to know what places I am referring to. All of those places in which the Michelin guide or the Lonely Planet is not of much use. Every month there is new candidate for the most desperate country on the planet.

I think of the way Hamza used to talk about NATO. I used to believe that NATO did good things in the world. That its decisions were well-informed. But NATO dropped the bomb from above, which killed Hamza’s brother in the middle of the desert, one fine, blazing sunny morning, when they were standing at a roadblock in their uniforms, in the employ of Gheddafi. What is well informed about killing unlettered twenty year old young men, drafted into service without knowing what is in store for them?

Peanuts were supposed to be good thing in Senegal. Just after the Second World War, it was discovered that peanut butter, just invented, was the quickest way to get nutrition into a population facing famine. But it was not envisaged that a monoculture of only peanuts would destroy the soil of a whole country and leave it unfit for other harvests.

I read about the cult wars in Nigeria: one brutalizing horrific account after another, and think of all of the oil that flowed into the country, specifically *that* area of the country, Edo State, the Delta States, Cross River State, starting about thirty years ago. Resources are supposed to be good for a country, valuable raw materials, leading to economic development. But with the sticky oily liquid, corruption and violence oozed in at an much faster pace. The wealth was not divided. It rarely is. What goes around eventually tends to come around to the initial owners of the original capital invested to get the proclaimed industrial development rolling. What is left over is invested in mobile phones for all, with which they can look at other people’s riches. I believe it is the images, that had much to do with luring unknowing and trusting people to the other side of the Mediterranean. Over and over again I saw the guests in my home photograph their surroundings, or the lavishly adorned store windows, and luxury cars parked on the streets of Italy, with themselves standing beside them. They were saying ‘I am here!’ ‘in the midst of all of this elegance.’ No one speaks about how precarious their situation actually is. Their relatives need to believe that their own sons will make it. No one will admit that they want to renounce this dream that is out of reach, and go back to the familiar poverty of the past, for which they feel there is no way out.

The remittances of underpaid, overworked immigrants from Africa, Asia, South America and Eastern Europe have kept their other half of the world afloat. These remittances have probably had more effect to keep what little peace is left in the world, more than all of the international aid put together. For the remittances go straight to their own relatives. And with the remittances comes the illusion: be patient, there will be more; don’t rebel, better times are coming. I believe it is this false hope that is keeping the cover on the pressure cooker. Without it the entire populations of dozens of countries would rise up as one man, against their own leaders. But the remittances lead to the passive acceptance of the status quo. One hundred and sixty dollars keeps a family of four in food for a month in the Gambia.

When I one read about the unspeakable atrocities in certain parts of the world, somewhat far away from the newspaper in my hand, I often think of what used to be called Yugoslavia. Less than a day’s drive from where I live. No one wished or tried to explain the massacre of five thousand young Moslem men of Sbrenica, by the Serbian Christians just across the border, twenty three years ago. It was written off as an aberration, and the field where they died was witness to many noble speeches. How thin is the veneer of civilized behavior in our own world? What happens when you scratch its surface?

*64. Time passing, loneliness remaining*

*Ik has to keep busy, otherwise he will go crazy. Every minute he is trying to make a home in my apartment, with every gesture, every nail he pounds into wood to build a piece of furniture, every sweep of the broom and swish of the mop. The way he goes at it is at times moving, and at times deeply troubling to me. No one else had adopted my physical home, the way he has done. The others lived there both in the country and here in Genoa, but they thought of it as a place, not as a symbol of home. Ik wants to make my apartment more beautiful, with every gesture, with every bit of energy he has.*

*He is the one who is living in closest proximity to his feelings of abandonment. There are moments when I look at his expression and I see a need to belong to this world that tears through me. Predictably he is the one who will have the hardest time getting documents, as the courts are clamping down on all Nigerians, and the events causing his flight are not convincing enough, for his appeal. It is eight months off, but the date in April is looming over him and myself. Today he added to the graphic design I had painted on the floor of the laboratory of the apartment. Not a perfect job, but when I saw it I sensed the emotion he had put into the endeavor. He keeps his room in an order that would do honor to the Hilton, if only my apartment was the Hilton.*

*In fact the whole apartment has been polished and swept like a yacht, since he came to stay. He just gets up and does these things, without my asking. It appears that his mother was related to the Oba, (the chief ruling family) of Benin City, whose dynasty goes back a few hundred years. His own family was not poor. Had his parents not died prematurely, his life would have been quite different than it is now. I just hope that his nervous system will not give out, while he stays in this holding pattern for the coming months. I just hope that my own nervous system will not give out, while I try to solve problems that the present laws do not allow to be solved.*

65. Chance events

I picked up the phone. It rang just before noon. In the other hand I held the trowel I was using to tile a four hundred square foot terrace for a client in the Piedmont. It was my twelfth day of back breaking work. I was incoherent with fatigue. On the other end of the line there was shrieking. Continual without a second of interruption. The kind a person makes when he is being killed or about to be killed. After two minutes of my own yelling into the phone, ‘what is happening to you Ik? Tell me what is happening’, I turned off the phone. The noises in the background gave me no sense of what was actually happening, but I figured I would know soon enough. I had only once heard that kind of uncontrolled shrieking for one’s life. I was thirteen, when my mother had been frozen to the refrigerator and the stove by the short circuit of the former appliance and was within a hair’s breath of being electrocuted, had my father not pulled her off. The sounds would stay with me for the rest of my life. I did not ever expect to hear them repeated.

An hour later his lawyers called. He had been arrested and was in custody. The judge would set bail the next day at the confirmation hearing. I signed the agreement to host him at my house under house arrest, if the judge would be so kind as to let him out of jail. I did not sleep that night. House arrest is simply the State’s way of signing off their responsibility to me, a willing, albeit unpaid jailer. I wasn’t looking forward to it.

The next day the lawyers called back with apparently good news: the judge had let him go without asking for bail or house arrest, while awaiting the actual hearing the following week. I spoke to Ik on the phone that afternoon. Just long enough to know that he had been accosted by two plainclothes policemen who did not identify themselves, and tried to tackle him to handcuff him. It took four police to subdue him as he had fought back. When they had squashed his neck to the ground to try to hold him still and were closing in on his windpipe, he bit the hand the hand of the policeman who had seized his throat. Two of the police were given hospital certificates, Ik was given a citation of resisting arrest. They had found nothing on him. The blood test indicated that he was perfectly clean. Of anything they were looking for. But the police report indicated a contorted scenario including a surveillance camera of something that could be interpreted as something passing from hand to hand. In a small square in the ghetto behind my apartment that was Italy’s version of the South Bronx, for that sort of transaction.

Ik’s account of what had happened, and the police report were at the opposite ends of the excel sheet. There was no way for me to know what had actually happened. A week later the judge gave him five months with a suspended sentence. I tried to understand from the lawyers what was in store for him. They said they would appeal the case, but if he ever was arrested again the boom would come down on him seriously. My mind could not enclose the idea that he might have risked arrest, for a trivial amount of smoke, after having already had one run in with the authorities. It simply was not possible that he could have taken that kind of risk. After coming through the desert alive. After coming through the Libyan jails alive. After coming across the Mediterranean alive. He had come to Italy to drown on dry land. Or so it seemed. I could not make any sense out of the police report. It read like bad science fiction. There was no way of knowing if a package of smoke worth less than ten dollars had been ‘planted’ on the floor of the police station. There was no way of knowing whether the plain clothes men showed their badges before or after they started beating him.

But the letter of the law indicated that he had injured two of them more than they had injured him. There was no way of knowing anything in these cases. In the meantime, Ik could barely turn his neck without pain for a couple of weeks. His knee was swollen out of proportion, his watch and cel phone had been smashed, and his wrists were still aching from being too tightly handcuffed behind his back for several hours. But the x-rays I ordered for him did not reveal permanent damage. Maybe it was just as well. The last big case in the city, where the police had beat a reporter into permanent paralysis from the waist down, had taken fourteen years to wend it way through the courts in the reporter’s favor.

Now, in the aftermath of all of this, he will have one chance in a million to get a document to stay in Italy when his request for asylum on appeal comes up. Previously it was only one chance in ten thousand, so now it is a hundred times worse. I cannot tell him this, as it would destroy him. I try not to think, every time he goes out of the house, of what might happen to him on the streets of Genova in my neighborhood, which the authorities are so concerned about ‘cleaning up’ so that the precious tourists will not be disturbed by the social realities a few hundred meters from the whales in the world’s best liked aquarium.

*66. Law and order*

*The new laws are being approved with regard to the treatment of those requesting asylum. It is anyone’s guess how selectively they will be applied. The politicians in power have had their way and they are delighted. The list of the changes have made me sick to my stomach for most of today. All that I had predicted more than two years ago is coming to pass. It is not my paranoia, nor my imposition of yesterday’s history of the thirties on today’s reality. It is happening. Now. Here. The noose is tightening around the future of a few hundred thousand individuals in Italy who will be consigned to further invisibility and abandonment. All of my past work to secure permits for a dozen individuals is likely to come to an abrupt end, as the legal window has narrowed to such a tiny slit that even my best efforts at writing and training future candidates to recite their stories will be of no help to them. Every time the phone rings I look at the number with mounting anxiety as I answer the phone. If it is a number that starts with 351, it is from a refugee who needs help. To whom I will have to say that I can do very little to help him. Sometimes it takes all of my courage to answer the phone. And listen to the voice on the other side thanking me, even though I have dashed their hopes to the ground in the name of honesty. I cannot traffic in false hope. But false hope is perhaps less cruel than true reality.*

67. the noose tightens around my houseguest’s future

The present is grinding me down. The present of living in the same apartment as my despairing, oversensitive guest, Ik. His despair has permeated the entire apartment. There’s no point in trying to cheer him up. It would be too cruel. He is wrapped these days in his own haze, staying up nights, sleeping through too much of the days. If I ask him to do something useful, he does it without complaining, but afterwards he is absent. Occasionally he does something that I don’t like and I berate him. At that point he collapses into the kind of soulful look that make me feel monstrously guilty. His sense of abandonment glows in the dark. It frightens me that someone depends on my opinion of him. I don’t want that kind of power over another person’s life.

Everything I have tried to do to help him has failed. He has no work. I have no money to support him. There is so little possibility that he will find work, even if he learns ten times more Italian. He is reduced to begging for his food money. I keep telling him to study, but I can’t bring myself to talk to him day and night in Italian rather than English. The pit of his despair seems to echo and amplify my own.

If I could solve his economic problems, he would be passionate about what he does. He has done everything possible to make a tiny universe for himself in his room, finding furniture on the street, painting and repairing it, drawing pictures for the walls, sweeping the whole apartment a few times and week until it is immaculate. All that he does is radiating his need for a home and a family to replace the parents he lost. And all of what I do is radiating my need to be alone, and not have to mask my own terror of my own future.

We have reached a sort of truce, more like an impasse. I try to treat him kindly. He tries to be as responsible as possible, though he seems lost in a fog. I have no idea how I will get through the winter in this kind of situation. The laws enacted to try to make employers pay taxes, have made it virtually impossible for an employer to hire anyone informally. And as a refugee without papers, awaiting an appeal that he has so small a possibility of winning, he will not be hired formally. So he has another eight months wait before him, for a train that will never arrive. And I have a wait of equal time, watching his psyche unravel. It is not a happy sight.

68. Odiakosa

Another phone call, another person asking for help with his appeal. I finally untwine the first name from the last name, note the phone number, look up the face on the usual social network, and wait for him to arrive one Friday morning at my apartment. I will not be in Italy on the day of his hearing, but I feel I have to help him to prepare for it, even if he will have to find someone else to translate for him in front of the judge. His English is much more flowing them most, his politeness on the phone makes me ashamed that someone feels obliged to treat me with such deference because he needs help.

I read over the documents he sent me, the transcript of the first hearing that he was rejected from. The transcript indicates that the judge was trying hard to push him into a corner to get him to contradict himself. And in her mind she succeeded. When a judge has decided that someone is not believable, there is no way, no amount of facts that can change her mind.

When he arrives I listen to the account, from his own mouth; heartbreaking as it is. It is clear that he is telling the truth, and not copying somebody else’s biography. His sister was killed. By the cult gangs. In their first year of university. To frighten him into joining the cults. He has the death certificate. It arrived a week after the date of the first hearing so the territorial commission would not accept it. His other relatives are deceased, father, mother, the uncle who brought up him and his sister, from when he was two. He tells me this in a sad and even voice. A voice that says ‘this is the way of the world.’ He wanted to study engineering at the private university that accepted him. But the fees were too high so he started to attend the public college in economics, where his sister came to join him six months later, to begin her studies. He is the second person I have tried to help who had started higher education. His way of being is as European as mine.

The southern half of Nigeria is not in the crosshairs of Boko Haram; therefore it is considered peaceful. I have a huge pile of ghastly newspaper reports of indiscriminate violence, but it has been carried out in Benin and Delta state by ‘Christians’ upon other ‘Christians’ so it is of scarce interest to the Italian court system. The South Eastern region of Nigeria has been in a daily civil war of attrition for fifty years, but it is not talked about, as that might affect the investments in the oil rigs off nearby shores, that bring in the welcome petro-dollars.

After six hours of writing up an affidavit of his story for the courts, I feel drained by the sadness of it all. I have given him a small amount of hope, as I think he may have a better chance than most, for his appeal, but I dare not give him too much encouragement. The more hope one has, the greater height one falls from, if things go wrong. He was such a sweet, kind person, and there was so little I could do to actually change his fate. I could not even find a substitute translator for him, as no one I know has the technical ability to do simultaneous translation and the street smarts to think on their feet, other than myself. It is something of a calling to do this kind of work, not the sort of vocation that one can turn on and off with a switch. All I seem to wish to do these days, when I think of each of these people, is cry. But I can’t even cry, not for the dissolving of my own life and not for theirs.

69. The day the grant was rejected

*‘Dear members of the consortium:*

*I received the notification this afternoon that our request for funding from the EU for the SCO-RES project was rejected.*

*I learned long ago that if one reaches for the stars, one has to foresee how to react when one’s wings are singed by the heat and come unglued, and their feathers start to drift off into the wind steam, as one crashes to earth. There are two things I say to myself at these times:*

*---as long ago, I was in boarding school, in Switzerland, at age eleven, a school chock full of  the ex-royalty of three continents, daughters and sons of Indian Maharajas, the entire middle-Eastern heirs from Persia to Saudi Arabia, the three daughters of the Egypt’s ex-king Farouk, and a large coterie of ex-aristocracy from Italy and Spain, all dumped off there by indifferent relatives, to weather their way unattended into adulthood with vague and distant memories of former glories. I learned something very useful from my roommate of that time, King Farouk’s youngest daughter Fadia. She said,--with the conviction that one can rarely demonstrate past age eleven—“Princesses do not cry.”  The other things I repeat to myself, from a much more recent moment in history is: “How would Barack Obama act in these circumstances?”*

*It is not easy to continue to pursue one’s dreams in these uncertain times, to ‘keep on keepin’ on’ despite it all. I know now, that I will be able to keep my apartment in Genova; I will have to give up the company I set up this Spring. I don’t know if I will have the same  energy that I had previously,  to put together other requests; I simply don’t know at this instant.  There are times when one has to make some difficult evaluations of the extent to which one’s goals are tangential to the reality on the ground. It appears to me that there is no amount of talent or imagination or industry that can compensate for a lack of insider connections.   In the meantime I’ll start to sweep up the stray feather’s that have made it through the stratosphere without carbonizing, and try to figure out the next step. Thanking all of  you for your support over these past months.   Jane’*

And so I wrote, to the partners of the consortium. Even then I was not able to cry. An emptiness opened up within me, and widened within my gut to include the great plains and the Russian steppe. All around me the economic canyon of my future loomed, its cliff’s edge drawing toward me. How much longer could I continue to bluff, after having lost eighteen pounds, in the past months, and not from vanity?

70. The Italians have an expression…

They say, there is no two without three. Meaning that bad luck does not befall a person in a singular fashion. So it was no surprise to me that two days after the grant was turned down, the project I had worked on for six months, trying to keep my hopes up, I received the injunction to pay to court for my violations noted by the labor inspectors: nine thousand dollars. That was only the first half. The other part was waiting in the wings. I am being weighted down by the revenge of the Italian bureaucracy, worse than Kafka’s Trial. Slowly my options are dwindling, to the strong possibility of having to escape from this country, leaving everything behind.

## The New York Times wrote to me, on the 25th of October, that one of my comments to an article they published had been approved and printed, as follows

*Most sadly, 'what you see is what there is'...unfortunately, in my forty plus years of living and working In the 'Bel Paese' I have been astonished and repelled by the ignorance of too many of its inhabitants, with regard to people from origins dissimilar to their own whether it be race, religion or place of national origin. After four decades, I have been obliged to 'tune out' to comments that in earlier years I would have responded to with anger, or simply gotten up and walked out on. In the past three years in which I have spent working day and night to improve the lot of people from sub-Saharan Africa requesting asylum in Italy, I believe that I have been thrust back fifty years to when I was working for civil rights in Virginia, in the sixties. I frankly do not know how many generations it will take to improve this situation....In this moment of demagogues sloshing through the airwaves in Italy as well as the States, stirring up fear and animosity, I simply no longer have the answer to what may help make change, although I know one must keep trying....*

But though my comment to an article was printed in the New York Times, it is of small comfort to me to know that a few people may be reading it.

71. Can a country where these things happen actually have a name?

It does have a name. It is called Libya. Georges arrived in Italy two years ago from the Cameroun. He was the most eloquent and articulate of those I have spoken to. I hope I have done justice to the events to which he bore witness:

‘The gun was burning our skin. It was pressed against our temples. The Libyan had just fired it, at the ceiling of the prison cell and the bullet had heated the metal all too well. It was his way of telling us wordlessly, that if we dared to lower our eyes, we would not be long for this world. And so in this manner we were forced to stare at the horror that was being consumed in front of our eyes. They were gang raping her in front of us. Five of them took turns. On the floor of the prison cell. For their amusement. They lined up all of us, the male prisoners and forced us to watch. If we dared to close our eyes, the muzzle of their guns would sear our skulls. She arrived in Italy along with me, but I have not been able to locate her. *I* was forced at gun point to watch. But *she* was the one who lived through the experience….’

‘….Usually the male prisoners were separated from the women. In the evening, the Libyan guards would come in and pick the women and girls and drag them off into the night. Even the female children were selected. A girl about six years old was picked one night, for her first rape. She had been separated from her mother, who had been put in a different jail cell. Another woman, eight months pregnant, tried to hold on to her, to keep her safe, until the guard wrenched her away from the other woman’s arms. The woman fought and screamed as she clutched the child. She knew what was in store for the child. Just after the guard left with his prize, the woman’s water’s broke. She gave birth on the cement floor of the jail. Another woman found the cover of an empty tuna-fish can, to use as a razor blade, to cut the umbilical cord…This was the world that the new born was born into….’

‘…Libya is divided into zones, each one under the control of rival gangs. There is no neutral territory in the land. Each gang controls the profits from the turnover of its merchandise. The merchandise is stacked in their trucks, side by side, for the long rides under heavy tarps, roped tightly over the truck beds, so that it will not be visible. And so we sat, immobile, for up to twelve hours on ends, as the trucks raced over the desert tracks, not the main highways, but in round-about zig-zags, to evade the rival gangs, while crossing from Saba to Tripoli. If the circulation stopped in person’s hand or leg, and took hours or weeks to return, leaving him unable to walk, that was the price to pay for the desert crossing. The merchandise was told to unload itself when the drivers and trucks were changed.’

‘Sometimes we were given a half hour to drink water between pit stops. Then the trucks were on their way at top speed; if they slowed down, their tires would sink into the sand. It was not easy to sit on the sides of the truck and not fall off, but better than being under the tarp, where a person could easily suffocate. We had sticks to hold vertically between our legs to keep us from sliding off of the sides and back of the truck beds. In this manner a truck could hold about thirty people. If a person lost his grip, the truck did not stop. Money and other merchandise was waiting to change hands.’

‘There were on occasion other trucks that followed the main transports, to glean those who had not died from exposure in the desert sands and carry them on for the next transaction. Every time the merchandise changed hands, more money was extracted from it for the next leg of the journey. If a person did not have the money to pay, he was stuck in an informal Libyan jail cell, and told that if his relatives did not cough up a large sum he would be left to starve or be beaten to death. I believe that was how my brother was killed. He had stayed behind when his wife and daughter and myself left for Libya. It was important for him to stay back to guarantee our release, if we needed to call him in an emergency to put together a thousand dollars, so that we could proceed on our journey. Those who had no relatives left behind to contact, were left to rot in Libya. Without money to pay off the drivers and handlers, at each leg of the journey, a person could not proceed. So my brother insisted that we go forward to Libya, and that he would wait for our safe crossing and then try to proceed to join us in Europe. Eight months after we arrived in Italy he set out. He did not make it. He was not even able to call us from the jail. A month after his death his friends finally were able to make contact with me, to let me know that he had been beaten to a pulp. His wife, my sister-in law, who was pregnant when they set out, gave birth in Germany. In this manner, his young widow was given documents to stay on the continent.’

‘…Sometimes the next driver was not available immediately. So the handler would keep us at his property, and send us off for slave labor for a few days while waiting for the next driver to show up. In exchange for our labor, at the end of the day we would be given bread and water, and some sugar if we were lucky. If we were not lucky, the next truck would arrive before we could even grab our piece of bread after a day’s work, and we would be packed into it once again, the precious living merchandise, that shored up the economy of the desert sands…’

‘…If a piece of merchandise was waylaid, or killed, children in front of their parents, or parents in front of their children, they were dumped in the sand, in a shallow grave of about ten inches . The vultures could easily find them from the smell. For every person who died at sea, at least three more died on land trying to reach the sea.’

‘…When I arrived in Italy I was very thin. And weak. But not too weak to notice that here too, we were not being fed any better than in Libya. Here too, in Sicily, at the first camp, we were once again sent out to the surrounding area for slave labor, in the orange groves, otherwise known as voluntary labor. Actually there was a contract and a salary, but it was collected by the cooperative and never passed on to us. We did this work for three months. During that time we were fed pasta for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and almost nothing else. The gluten intolerance that this diet produced on our systems, which had consumed rice for twenty or more years, was not enjoyable. At that point I had an idea. The idea was that we could carry about a hunger strike along with a signature strike. If we did not eat, it would have small effect on those who ran the cooperative. But if we did not sign each day, to verify our presence, the public authorities would cut off their reimbursement. Our individual signatures were their paycheck. There was no law that could force us to sign. Word of my idea went around the camp, and we enacted the strike. On the third day, rather unexpectedly, everything changed. The cooperative started to feed us decently. However the camp started to investigate as to who had thought up the idea of the strike. Someone they spoke to indicated me, and the next day they shipped me off to another camp in Naples, that was even less enjoyable than this first one. Fortunately I was only there for three weeks, as they did not have room for me, and I was reassigned to Genova. But for the first three months in Italy I barely spoke. I had become nearly mute, with the recollection of what I had endured over six years to cross back and forth over North Africa and finally through Libya to reach the North side of the Mediterranean.’

‘…When I first came to Genova I was coughing up blood. Quite a lot of it. They put me in the isolation ward of the main hospital in quarantine for three weeks, while they tried to determine what was wrong with me. After many tests, they could determine no cause related to any exotic disease, and the discharges from my lungs were thankfully reaching their logical conclusion.’

*The body takes a while to process what the mind has born witness to. The trauma that others have endured to reach Europe, may stay with them for all of their lives. Continual fear for one’s life often produces chronic physical reactions.*

72. the fifth horseman is fear

Ik was arrested again. Cursed for the second time by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Waiting in the pouring rain for the local train from San Pierdarena to Genova Principe. It just happened that there were other Nigerians on the platform. He exchanged a few words with them. It just happened that there were plainclothes men on the platform. They were backed up shortly by those in uniform who closed in on the group rounded them up, took them to the police station for six hours. The accusation was ‘concorso per spaccio/association for dealing drugs.’ Ik had just come back from handing out his CV to a mechanic nearby, and had nothing to do with the possible activities of the other members of the group. It have been self-evident to anyone who was not a policeman in need of a promotion. But the specific place: the platform for the trains of that specific station was considered an annex of the South Bronx. It had been outfitted with television surveillance cameras, and overly enthusiastic members of the enforcers of the law, anxious to fashion a plot out of the flimsiest evidence.

What is the result of all of this? Another visit to the lawyer. The grim news that he will never get a permit to stay in Italy even in a million years, with three black marks on his record. Never. To see the look in a person’s face when he receives this news is to see the deepest recesses of human despair. The night before when he first arrived home after this episode, he cried for three hours. Sobbing and screaming uncontrollably. It was after one at night when I was finally able to calm him down.

He has to leave this country. A country whose racial profiling surpasses Alabama and Texas combined. But legally there is no way out, as his documents don’t allow him to travel. So he will have to figure out how to escape to France and hopefully to Germany or Holland, in a surreptitious manner. In the summer he was able to swim to France, from Ventimiglia to Mentone. But at the end of November this is not so feasible. I thought I had gotten him an informal ride through car sharing, in a not so risky situation but he refused to go the following day. He had not fully processed his actual fate. So he will be here for the next four weeks until he gets up the nerve to take the risk. He spends his days, in his room; huddled under the covers with his cell phone, trying to make contacts abroad. I have stopped asking him if he has made progress. He has stopped telling me how he feels. My nervous system has absorbed all of the tension emanating from him, like a sponge. Fear is a most infectious disease.

*I foresee what the apartment will look like when he is gone. All of the care he put into it. The furniture he found on the street and repainted. The precision with which he placed each object he owned in its proper place. The drawings he made to place on the wall. The care and devotion of his actions. His smile of gratitude, when I was able to enact even the most trivial act of generosity to help him out.*

*It is tearing me apart to think of what he may face when he tries to leave. It is tearing me apart to see him each day in the apartment, more and more a ghost of his former self. The most energetic, talented, quick-witted of all of the group of thirty or so refugees I have known, reduced to a shadow, shaking in his uncertain future. The tragedy that no one will even consider giving him work, simply because he is black and arrived on these shores from Libya. My own fear is that my own nervous system will not hold up to this stress; it is eroding fast. I will be away in Senegal for two of the next four weeks. But my emotions will be chained to the canyon into which another human being is falling.*

73. Sunday morning

The boom came down on Ik yesterday morning. The police interrogated him for the fourth time, and tried to implicate that he was dealing drugs, whereas he had gone down from my apartment to throw out the garbage and pick up some cardboard boxes, so that I could pack to move, on my return from Senegal. It was clear to me that the authorities were tracking him via his cel-phone, as had been indicated to me by other people with greater knowledge of how these units operate. The fact that he was completely extraneous to the events he was accused of, was useless to him, at this point.

I helped him pack. I accompanied him to the train. I gave him some cash to use to try to get across the border. And I waited. A day has past. I am still waiting. Not knowing if he will make it, still in to France and through the meshes of the border to Germany. He is the ninth person whom I have helped to leave the country where I have lived for forty years. When I hugged him before he got on the train, I have never seen a person so vulnerable, but trying to be brave. As I am waiting and not knowing what will come of him, I think of what he told me of his trip across Libya, one recent evening, a tale two hours long. A person who had been on the same trucks crossing the Sahara with him had posted a series of pictures. He pointed himself out in the pictures, with the group lying momentarily in the shade of the truck, and then he spoke about the other pictures:

‘These are two of the girls who travelled with us, who were raped every night by the truck drivers. They dragged them away when the sun went down and brought them back each morning. Here is my girlfriend who was also raped. First they demanded that she point out her boyfriend, me. When she refused they threatened to kill her, so she relented. At that point they grabbed me, tied my hands and feet together, tied me to a horizontal stake like a chicken on a spit and force me to watch them raping her.’

‘ The truck broke down twice crossing from Agadez into Libya and Saba, where they first put us in prison. At the very beginning a tire exploded with the heat. The burst tire caused the truck to tip over. I rolled out onto the sand. One person died, caught under the truck. You can’t jack up a truck on a sand dune. So the whole group had to turn the truck back upright and lift it up so I could get the tire off and replace it. I was the only mechanic in the group.’

‘Shortly after the tire was replaced the gear box broke down. So the group had to crawl under the truck and dig out a deep enough hole in the sand, like rabbits, so that I could get down under the truck and fix it. I finally got the gears in place again but there was no wire to link the two metal pieces that I had to join. So I finally found a shoelace that miraculously held the mechanism in place until we got across the desert. But when the motor started to roll again and the driver tried to pull out he drove a back wheel of the truck into the hole that our group had dug. The truck was sunk again and its whole weight had to be lifted out again by hand.’

‘This picture, is of the skeletons in the sand which we buried. The Libyans did not want to stop or waste time to bury anyone. Mostly they just drove on. But occasionally they let us stop to bury the remains of someone who had died en route. There was one friends who died in my arms as I was trying to hold him. His name was Innocence. It was at the beginning of the trip, but his strength had given out. He did not have the will to continue. I kept trying to shore him up but it did not work; he was gone.’

‘This is in the jail in Saba. Those on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs are about to be shot. They did not have the money to pay the middlemen to continue their journey. I was lucky, I knew if I refused to work for free, I would be shot too. So I kept telling them that I was a mechanic and I would work for anyone, even though I knew it was slave labor. So they pulled me out to see what I knew how to do. When they realized that I was able to repair, even their twenty-four valve Helios, they stopped beating me, and found someone who needed a skilled mechanic at zero wages. Those who had no money left to pay the middlemen to move them forward were left to die, or shot outright. Even the ten year old boys roaming the streets in the cities of Libya had machine guns, they thought it was a sport to shoot blacks.’

‘Here’s a picture of the kind of boat we travelled on. That’s why I’m close to Osamede . We were in Libya together and came over to Italy on the same boat. When I finally got to the sea, the motor of the inflatable was no better than that of the trucks. It started breaking down as soon as we got twenty miles out from the shoreline. I was the mechanic for the driver of the boat. I don’t know how I managed to keep it afloat until the rescue ship picked us up. The boat had so many people on it who were crying, and dying, through the hours of waiting for the rescue ship to sight us…’

73. Where is the plot?

Books are supposed to have a plot. My literary agent of olden days repeated this to me over and over again. Something dramatic that happens to close up the story. To make the story make sense. There is no plot to this story. No dramatic dénouement. No surprise ending. The story goes on and on. In its inexorable uncertainty, of lives hanging by a thread. For three and a half years I have woken up each day with a pit in my stomach, thinking that I would never get through the day.

Finally one day I decided to go to Senegal. I wanted to see what kind of world the people I was trying to help came from. It was an extraordinary voyage that gave me much to think about.

74. Senegal: portrait of the future:

December 11, 2018

The plane has landed: a three weeks investigation of the housing needs of the country, and its neighbors has come to an end. The temperature in Senegal was an average of twenty eight degrees centigrade. Temperature in Milan is two degrees. My re-introduction to the north side of the Mediterranean included a furious altercation between the conductor and an irate passenger of the shuttle from the airport. It stopped the train for a half hour. It was followed by the rantings of a demented passenger on the train from Milan to Imperia, that continued for more than an hour. I have now officially returned to Europe.

What have I learned from the trip? Essentially it has doubly confirmed my hypothesis of the necessity to completely reinvent the building industry, in order to deal with the warming of the planet, and the impoverishment of many of its inhabitants. It confirmed my hypothesis that the only way to do this, is to do away with the need for cement and iron re-bars, currently used to build about one hundred percent of the houses in the developing world.

It also confirmed my hypothesis that there are parts of the planet where civility is not dead, where good manners are not extinct, where dialogue and conversation does not yet need the protection of the World Wildlife Fund.

The greatest hurdle to overcome, in describing a country whose culture is quite different from the country I presently live in (Italy) is the temptation to romanticize the good points/qualities, or demonize its failings and disappointments. In this case, my work has been made half as difficult as it usually is. There were no disappointments. I have only good news to report. This leaves me with the other half of my needs: that of not romanticizing the good points of the country, as many sophisticated inhabitants of the first World are wont to do, in their first encounter with the exotic fascination what they believe to be, the apparent happiness in the midst of extreme poverty.

Senegal is a country that has been stripped of many of its vital resources, by the industrial and commercial interests of the ‘first world.’ If this had not happened for the past couple of centuries it would have become (economically speaking) the ‘Switzerland of Africa’—minus a few ski slopes. The good will of its citizens, their forbearance in the face of numerous challenges to their health, their wellbeing and their options for the future is not due to some naïve and outdated ability to smile in the face of hardship. Rather, it is due to a stoicism, steeled by experience, which leads them to not indulge themselves, wasting energy in the neurosis common to the places I have lived in in the past. They have not forgotten that ‘if we do not help each other, who is going to help us?’

Let me return to the specifics. In the two weeks I spent in Senegal, I connected with a small group of colleagues, travelled to the Casamance, built a bamboo structure the size of a village house, in four and a half days with a team of people with Olympic energy, and heartwarming enthusiasm, thus demonstrating the ‘proof of concept’ that construction which replaces iron re-bars with bamboo is feasible, from an economic and logistic point of view. I carried out the first half of my research on the use of clay and fibers to replace the cement blocks presently used in construction. I consolidated my network of Academic Institutions, Government Research Bodies, Community Outreach non-profits and Educational non-profits, to form a consortium with a common goal: that of reimagining and implementing what a house could be built with, in order to create a zero-kilometer model for the construction industry that would greatly increase the GDP of the country by keeping the profits in Senegal rather than draining the areas’ resources importing the raw materials from other continents.

In other words, as my fellow passenger in the ‘bush-taxi’ told me, if my plans were to be successful I would create a revolution, in the positive sense of the word, for the entire region. It is always nice to hear these words of encouragement at eight in the morning, after a couple of hours stuck in the rush hour traffic coming into Dakar from the city of Thies, only forty miles from the capital but a three hour ride through a wall of diesel smog that puts Beijing in nursery school as pollution goes.

A few more specific notes: a driver on the roads of this country categorically needs, and normally has, the strategic sense of a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the patience of Job, and lungs of cast iron to resist what he is breathing in each day. These drivers would have no trouble guiding space ships to Mars. An average taxi driver earns eighty dollars a month in these conditions. (This is not a typographical error, I repeat a hundred and twenty dollars a month.) This explains without any philosophy why so many of the country’s inhabitants risk their lives to travel across the Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean sea in search of a better living wage, with which to assure their family’s future. The taxi driver who gave me the economic rundown of his profession told me proudly that his children were all completing high school. This is the future of the country: the children. Those who are not yet twenty, full of energy, linked in to the internet, hungry to move their country forward, sponges for knowledge. They represent over half of the population, whose median age is 18.3 years.

Some technical notes: Senegal, in particular the area surrounding Dakar is a bumper to bumper construction site. Every twenty yards there is a house being built. After looking at thousands of these examples of work in progress it is clear to me, that the materials and methods used are the absolute worst case scenario for the climatic and economic needs of the country. All of the house are built with the same system of iron re-bars, columns of reinforced cement, walls of cement block, cast on the site, and doors and windows welded from steel sheeting, galvanized steel roofs or flat roofs with the sun beating down on unshaded walls. From my specific measurements of the thermal gain in these houses the range between the coolest point and the hottest point is nineteen degrees Fahrenheit, (73°-92°). The houses are essentially armchairs in the first circle of Hell in terms of comfort, no matter how elegantly they are furnished. During the night they do not cool down, as they have absorbed at least eight or nine kilowatts of heat during the daytime, which they cannot dispose of at night. They have no natural air circulation, only costly omnipresent air-conditioning to compensate for the heat.

Furthermore, ninety percent of the construction sites are idle, as the future owners, breaking their backs in the diaspora, to pay for the materials and labor, do not have the funds to move forward. Often they sit for years with no inhabitants other than the lizards. When you see a situation like this, the first thought is ‘how could humans be so misguided?’ Why don’t they understand the simplest elements of what would make for better construction methods? The answer is very simple. They have learned these methods from Europe, where the exact same methods originated, with the only difference that in Europe it is cooler, so the damage done to the environment and to the inhabitants’ finances, is not quite as great.

The other consideration is that the style of these houses are generally imitating the ancient homes of North Africa, but with flimsy so called ‘modern’ materials in comparison to the original buildings of centuries past, which had the thermal mass to absorb the heat gain. An eighteen inch baked earth wall is an order of magnitude more efficient than an eight inch cement block wall. The homes of the present are imitating the façade of what was built in the past, but the cosmetic effect does not approach the original substance, just as the present day American balloon frame homes built from flimsy chipboard and spongy pine two by fours cannot complete with the original homes built before the war with first cut spruce timber, real plaster and lathe and solid plywood. These observations can hopefully explain the logic of my efforts to design and implement a model for construction that may seem the opposite of what is seen in the surroundings of Dakar.

The night I touched down in the country, the flight took me over the Algerian desert in the full moon. The sky was mainly clear, the scattered clouds were like a flock of fluffy sheep, glowing in the moonlight, casting their shadows on the sand below. This wondrous view from the airplane’s window stayed with me throughout the trip. The magic of what can be seen from an airplane’s window, gives a sense of what the human imagination can accomplish: i.e. the jet engine of the airplane that gave me this vision. Hopefully with some of the same engineering ingenuity, I can accomplish a fraction of the same magic to open up some new horizons for a better habitat in Senegal and other developing countries.

75. Staring into my own Future

Where to go from here? Actually I know where I am going. My ticket to return to Senegal is on my desk facing me. I have started the count-down to the flight. Fifty two days. A time I must dedicate to winding down my existence in Europe, in Italy, which has stretched out for four decades. A complicated process of closing my company which never took off financially speaking, closing, packing up and moving my apartment in the city, to stash all of my belongings in my huge country house in Ponti di Pornassio, a cathedral in the desert that has not sold and maybe never will sell, and walk away from it all. Simply go to where I want to be. A place with sunlight, colors, plants, oxygen, and affectionate people.

These are not easy choices. I could stay in Europe and continue to fight for the refugees who have come here. But after three and a half years of witnessing the disintegration of all of their civil rights, and possible opportunities for a future, it appears to me that the more logical course of action is to try to improve the economic possibilities of the countries they have come from. Of course when a person makes a decision she is often called upon to justify her decision. Such as ‘why are you giving up?’ ‘Why are you changing course?’ ‘why don’t you feel guilty about leaving?’ All of these sentences echo in my brain. But finally I decided that I have this small possibility to wrest a tiny amount of happiness, that might exist in this universe, and that I should have the courage to risk and reach out for it.

No one should be so presumptuous as to imagine that their own contribution will stand out in the annals of history. No one should imagine that their presence or absence will be noted as they choose to abandon the sinking ship. But that is what Europe has become: a rotting raft propping up its past in a shoddy attempt at self-glorification. The future is elsewhere. And so in a month and a half I will set out to try to contribute to that future.

Genova il December 29, 2018