



“I TIED MY CHILDREN TO MY BODY”

THE CONTINUING COURAGE
OF REFUGEES IN GREECE

by Becky Thompson

Abbas Sheikhi and his family at Khora in Athens



In the Belly of the Sea

We were in a boat
we were afraid of the darkness
the waves sent us to the sky
and the sky cried for us
women were crying
and men were praying
I prayed but didn't cry
because of my small daughter
our son in my wife's belly
whispered to us, don't worry
the sea calmed down
God's eye saw us.

by Abbas Sheikhi

“I tied my six children to my body with a rope,” the 37-year-old Syrian mother tells me from her cubicle in Elpida, a refugee center for vulnerable families in Thessaloniki, Greece. “Either we were all going to make it together, or none at all.” Fatma Al-Hasan and her six children are among the 57,000 refugees in Greece currently awaiting relocation to another country, possible asylum in Greece, or deportation.

I met Fatma, who is a painter, poet and mother of eight (two of her children are in Germany with her husband), in one of the poetry workshops I recently offered in refugee centers. On this trip, my fifth since I began welcoming rafts to the island of Lesbos in 2015, I witnessed a new layer of the crisis. In addition to the continued exodus of families from war torn countries in the Middle East and Africa, there is a deepening crisis in Greece as the number of refugees waiting in limbo continues to rise, their long term fate unknown.

In Athens, I taught poetry workshops at Khora, an innovative, independently run community center for refugees housed in a five story building in the heart of the city.

At Khora, volunteers are in the background, not in charge. In each class the students guided me. In one, a young Syrian woman asked, “can we start with Jehan Beseiso’s poem, ‘After Aleppo’? I am from that city.” An Afghan mother whispered her comments for the class into her son’s ear who then translated them into English. The students taught me to change my writing prompts on the spot to make my teaching more communal. Individual free writing planned for five minutes turned into the class writing a collective poem, each person offering one line. My plan for them to write their own stories transformed into a group session—writing a list poem of the ten things they do now they didn’t do before.

When the language teachers joined our poetry workshops, I taught ways to harness emotion—to not back away from the sadness and anger expressed through writing. In one workshop, I met Abbas Sheikhi, a young Iranian father who wrote the heart of his poem during our session and then finished it in the hallway as his daughter circled around his legs.

As rafts continue to sneak by the Turkish and Greek coast guards, volunteers stand on the hills—where I used to stand—scanning with fancy telescopes, searching for the latest arrivals. Even as the popular media might lead some to think the crisis is over, we know different. People are still coming. They come wet and tired, risking their lives to save them. I am moved and honored to be a witness. §

TEACHING POETRY IN KHORA

Athens, 2017

Praise this only stand-alone building in Athens for its ingenuity, a welcoming place in the heart of Athens

Praise the tall man from Cote d'Ivoire who refuses to write in class, saying he has no time to think about his past

Praise him again when he says he has no time to write about now

Praise the class when their collective poem majors and minors in despair

Praise another class when their poem is all about green fields and sunny beaches

Praise the Eritrean woman who looks aggravated when I ask if she speaks Farsi

Praise the class that is too afraid to offer popcorn words in response to mine

Praise the mural on the classroom wall that got carried away with color

Praise the teenager who wrote, "they shot us as if we were deer"

Praise the Afghan teenager who wrote a haiku about his eight cousins, "my mother became/ their mother, not enough/ to go around"

Praise the two women who said they could write poetry in the air since they cannot spell or read

Praise the soldier from Syria who asked, "can we write about anything, even if it is scary?"

Praise the artist who wrote in Arabic, "the sea did not save my memories or my paintings"

Praise the Syrian woman who wrote, "the white postbox stood alone after the bomb took everything else"

Praise the twelve-year-old who said, "I carry my soul in my hands"

Praise the mother who wrote, "I sleep with the sea, I do not sleep"

Praise the teachers who try to teach for we know not what we are doing.

by Becky Thompson

