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Editorial: The function of stories in hostile asylum regimes

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Editorial on the Research Topic
[The function of stories in hostile asylum regimes](#)

The welcoming

IN ELEMENTAL REBELLION, the small boat's white hull rose again and again on the swells pushing it against the pier. Watching from above, Kabir says the sea is purest poetry—its rhythms change, but never cease repeating the same basic pattern—like time itself, Kabir continued, wearing the world into song.

Marija looks from the boat to her colleague and back again without a word. Below them they can make out the boat's huddled passengers, some looking a little green, and a crewman in a high-vis vest, throwing a rope to an official above on the pier deck. Milling around Marija and Kabir are other Greeters, from other councils, some smoking, some leafing through papers they have clutched in their hands, the wind pulling at loose pages.

Look at them, Kabir says, still gazing at the boat below. Like the dead having just arrived at the river Acheron, not yet aware they have already passed over into another world entirely. Marija frowned, although she was used to Kabir's running commentary. I hope these are better than the last lot, Kabir sighs, making Marija's frown deepen, her eyes shoot sideways at her companion once again.

For her part, Marija had been trying to recall the names of seabirds. Cormorant, she says silently. Tern. Herring gull. The way you can say something inside your head, and hear it as clear as a bell ringing over some city of which you are the sole inhabitant. She says godwit. She says dunlin. She says sandpiper. She says Kittiwake, skua, and guillemot. All the while Kabir is waxing poetic and the tired travelers, from god knows what devastated nations, drought-driven and war-torn, carrying all they had left in the world on their backs, hollow eyed, exhausted, cold and more than a little frightened, climb one after another—some with assistance as they sagged or missed a rung—up the rope ladder to the pier above.

ACROSS THE CHANNEL, across a stretch of water that sometimes seethed with storm, sometimes became clear and calm and almost willing to let you see the far side, migrants gathered at Transfer Stations. That was an innocuous term, rendered more magisterial in the language spoken there. Really they were just camps. But, during the crossing season, and under the auspices of the PRN (Population Redistribution Network), these camps were at least emptied almost as quickly as they filled. Admittedly, those arriving spoke of feeling unsafe there, frightened or overcome by loss and trauma and nightmares and deep uncertainties, but they also told of fleeting moments of celebration and hope—of the gathering of those who did not speak the same languages and did not eat the same foods and did not sing the same songs nonetheless sharing a night of feasting and music and dancing round a huge fire on the beach that they hoped was large enough to be a beacon to others and an announcement for the great island off the shore that they were coming and that they would bring only their music and songs and dances and light and peace with them.

Marija always wondered about the storm months and the cold that was so much colder than when her parents came as children and what those camps across the icy water must be like in those long dark months when they sat derelict and mostly empty. Because surely some people must arrive there then—she knew they did, had heard rumors even if she had not herself met anyone who actually spent a winter there, in desperation, cold and hungry and feeling lost, waiting for the PRN officials to arrive, for the quotas to be announced and the initial interviews to take place and the doctors to check them and the boats to start loading small clusters of the displaced and seemingly perpetually mobile, crossing to what could be their final destination—a furthest flungness they perhaps had long sought, in their attempt to get away from the pain or horror or memories that had sent them out into the world in the first place. She wondered this most early in a season, like it was now—just the second time she and Kabir had come down to the south coast this emergent spring, curious about what had now come ashore.

THE GROUP of new arrivals shuffled along the pier to the waiting Greeters. A few of the latter held signs with names, or the names of countries or languages, or even jobs on them—a preemptive strategy of which Marija did not really approve. Most of the Greeters just looked on, some smiling, as Marija was, others looking on with expressions of doubt and even, in Kabir's case, a hint of distaste.

A gull cried, and then shot up above the pier, arcing overhead and then diving down below the other side of the structure, its wings never once beating, just holding the perfect airfoil form that allowed it to follow its desired path through the air over the small human crowd, its beak angled and eyes looking for chips or anything else marginally edible below.

Kabir stubbed out his cigarette and nodded in the direction of a figure ambling uncertainly toward Marija: Flotsam or Jetsam, you can christen this one Marija.

HIS BELONGINGS could be found to consist of: the clothes on his back (a worn plaid shirt, particularly thin at the elbows, a forest green fleece jumper, tattered blue jeans—it's uncertain whether they were produced and sold this way, or arrived at their current ventilated state through long use—and sneakers, at least a size too small, clearly not his, laces perpetually untied); a wool blanket (likely supplied to him before his crossing); and a small rucksack which contained a dogeared paperback book in a language neither Marija nor Kabir could read, a pack of chewing gum (unopened and rather crushed), a half-eaten bagel wrapped in plastic and likely more than a day old, a spare shirt, spare socks (although he was not currently wearing any socks), and a map of a country that he was not now in, had not come from, and chances are would never visit at some later date—although who knows for sure, and the pulses of human movement were constant and reached all corners of the globe over and over again—from evolutionary African origins to the furthest archipelagoes. None of this was revealed. No one knew the map was more talisman and oracle than destination or guide.

The traveler was never asked to divulge the contents of his small bag. Nor was he asked to show any papers or other identificatory documents (none of which he was in possession of anyway). He had never been fingerprinted, his eyes were never scanned, his biometrics never taken and stored amongst a seething mass of data no mechanism made by man could ever plumb to the deepest

darkest depths. He was simply asked his name. By Marija, after she introduced herself. Carefully and clearly, in a calm and kind voice. He looked from Marija to Kabir, who barely seemed to be paying attention, and back to Marija, and then, stabbing a thumb at his own chest, he said, *Sibi*.

Sibi, Marija repeated. She introduced her colleague Kabir, and then welcomed *Sibi* to the island nation, noting that it was their job to accompany *Sibi* to his new home, introduce him to his new community, and make sure that he was properly settled. If he had any questions, he could ask them, and they in turn would have just a few questions for him.

KABIR TRIED several languages—he spoke most of six—but the only one he and *Sibi* had in common was one neither of them spoke particularly well. It would have to do, and Kabir now took over the short list of questions. Did *Sibi* have any relatives on the island already? People to whom he was related? Family—blood kin? No no, you don't understand—not over there, *here*, on the great island already—already crossed over to here. Yes *here*, where we are right now, on this side of the channel. No don't look around! Kabir broke into English loudly, you aren't going to bloody well find them here now are you! No? OK. How about people you know and who also came from your village or province or country or ... backwater or what-have-you? No? OK. Friendless—that happens, some people just aren't easy to get along with. A joke! Kabir glanced at Marija. Just a joke my friend. Teasing. You know jokes? Funny, ha ha ha? No? OK. Are you expecting any others? Family members—kin folk again—who might be coming along too? Those to whom you are related by blood or ... love. No? No one? Wait what—a child? *You* have a child? No—a brother, OK, a little brother, back home—where you came from? Yes. OK. He hasn't left yet. And a mother or, a grandmother? She's old? Older than Marija? Much older than Marija! Kabir winked at his colleague. OK, that's pretty old! She can travel? No? Not easy travel? Walk? Not far, right? OK. She's what? Sick? Ah I see. Medicine, yes. Who gives her medicine? Your little brother? That's good—not easy for him maybe, but good. OK. What work do you do? Work—jobs—what can you do? Cooking? Oh, you can make tea and coffee. That's something I guess. And animals? Cooking—you can cook animals? No, no, I see—you know how to ... take care of animals? Eating them is a different way of taking care of them! Better for you and I maybe, but not so good for the animals! Good. Like, herding or whatever? Herding—the animals—making them go where you want them to go, taking care of them? Yes? OK. That's good. Kabir turned his head to Marija, switching into English again. Not a bloody lot he has to offer. But lucky for you, he continued, switching languages once again, someone has to do the dirty work. Joking again my friend! Marija, meanwhile, shook her head. No, she replied, he's tired now, confused and overwhelmed, and needs a few good meals. But he's strong. And look at that face—that's an open, honest face. We can find him something. I promise you, he will do just fine.

ALL AROUND THEM Greeters and the newly arrived were finding each other and stumbling their way through the basics. It could be an airport or a train station almost anywhere, except strangers would likely not be greeting each other this way there. It was more like adopting parents meeting their new charges, or better, teachers meeting new boarders and escorting them to school. Marija wondered what it used to be like when it was uniformed

guards at a barrier that confronted you with their aggressive skepticism. She could barely remember herself, though she had crossed territorial boundaries that way in the past, as a child, and some countries, ones that hadn't signed on to the PRN, still had borders and walls and armed guards and even camps outside their borders and prisons for those who crossed over *illegally*, as it was called, whom they would *detain* and often *deport*.

Sibi had produced his map and Kabir was looking at it with him and laughing and shaking his head. Sibi was a striking young man—tall, with thick jet hair and a thin beard that framed his square jaw. His eyes were large and dark, and his eyebrows thick and expressive. When he smiled—only faintly for now, but Marija could tell he had a smile that could melt walls—you could see that he had good straight teeth in his wide mouth. Marija liked him instinctively.

AGAIN A GULL CRIED, as the small boat was being provisioned for its return across the channel and some of the Greeters and their new friends began to disperse.

Kabir, one morning, almost a year ago, as they rode south on the train to meet a boat: you wonder at my attitude. Really, it's simple. In the city I come from, my father had a shop—a popular and well stocked shop that was the hub of our neighborhood. Everyone knew our shop and the women came there and the men sat outside on the benches and smoked and father gave them tobacco—to the old men of the neighborhood, who knew his father before him, and came to sit outside the shop every night. Gave it to them for free because his was a successful shop and because he respected the old men and they respected his father and the fact that he was a good son to his father, carrying on the shop just as it had always been. In time strangers began to appear in the city—wanderers, outcasts from hinterlands, people with no homes and no work and no possessions and they were dirty (my father said) and they stank (he said) and they stole from my father's shop (which was true) and we cursed them and called them dogs or sons of dogs and I was encouraged to throw stones at them and curse them and I did, heartily, to please my father and to protect our shop. Later still these wanderers, these rootless people, were sometimes referred to as *refugees*, which seemed just another curse, and they came from the other side of the mountains and spoke a different language and still they stole and we cursed them and chased them from our shop.

Then planes came—I cannot remember why it first started—mostly I heard the people from over the mountains being blamed. Their government was bad and our government had perhaps gone bad too and there was oil over there and there were foreign powers and jets screaming in our skies and the sound of distant explosions shook the earth and rattled our windows and brought dust down from the ceiling and soon knocked items from our shop's shelves as the sounds came closer and closer and got louder and louder. Know this: everyone whose city is bombed at first thinks—how could this happen here? How could our city be bombed, its parks and avenues and shade trees destroyed? It's impossible. It can't happen to us. Our city is ours, it's beautiful, it's always been here and how could it ever change? Everyone thinks this at first. But the bombs came. Rockets. Big towering clouds of ash and flame on the horizon. Buildings came down—one right beside our shop came down, and though there was damage, our shop stood, like a miracle, and father and his brother and some others made repairs. Then almost no one came into the street and few came to our shop and people were leaving

the city for good. We left the shop closed some days and on one of those days, it was hit, and it was gone. Rubble. But luckily we weren't there.

Something can happen sometimes. Like this—a young boy can befriend a young girl from across the street. She on her roof, the boy on his. No one is leaving their homes, to shop or whatever, unless it is to leave the city at night, with their possessions on their back, never to return, like my uncle and his family did. But her family and mine, we had not left yet, and even though it was not safe, we both stole up onto our roofs to look at the smashed buildings around us, the missing walls, the beds and chairs and other personal things exposed and falling half out into the street below. And we just looked at each other and sometimes made faces or pointed at things we wanted the other to look at and one day I threw my ball across from my roof to hers and she caught it, like it was nothing, and threw it back, just as good as I could throw. Maybe better, more accurate. And so we played catch until it was dark and one of our mothers called us in. And one night she threw a ball, only it was an orange and I caught it and I stared at it for so long and laughed and she laughed too and I smelt the orange, my nose pressed to its skin, and I peeled it and I could see the little droplets of juice spray up as I peeled it and then I ate it in front of her, smiling and letting her know how good it was and she was happy too.

That was the last time I saw her. Her family was gone the next morning, without a word. And then her house was hit—lucky she left when she did—and I could see the orange tree in the garden behind where the house had stood. A big old tree leaning there, like it had been there before the city and would still be there after. And then it was our turn and we bundled up what we could carry—even I carried a bundle, because I was growing and told my father I was strong and everyone knew I would have to do my share. And so we left. Left everything we knew, our city nothing but ruins now anyway. We became refugees. Rootless. Homeless. We walked and walked and it seemed like we would never stop walking. We crossed borders. We entered camps, lived in camps for months, left again, walked over other frontiers, entered other camps, lived there. My father died—of a broken heart, my mother said, a heart attack probably—and we buried him outside that camp, a little mound of sand and stones. And we moved on—we couldn't stay or wouldn't stay—and eventually we came here. And we were Greeted and settled. And we started anew—never imagining we could. But we did. What other choice was there?

So what? Some of them are still dogs and sons of dogs to me, and I don't want them hanging about my front step. But I do this work now—maybe, it is penance, for how we treated them, back home, for the irony or the fate that we became them, we became someone else's dogs and sons of dogs. I do this work, with the dead old men from father's shop watching over me, may they rest in god. The dead will always outnumber us, I remember my father saying. And you know, I even have a dog, bought it as a puppy from a neighbor, and I try to treat her well, and my daughter loves this dog more than anything, sleeps with it every night, and this makes me crazy—it's a dog! But she's my daughter, and you know, I love her. And I love the stupid dog too.

FROM THE WINDOW of the train, Marija sees a few small birds alight in a field, and then immediately lift off again, like chaff in the wind. They are too small, and the train too swift, to know

what they are. Starling, she says to herself. Robin. Chiffchaff. Song thrush. Yellow hammer. Chaffinch. Blackbird. Skylark. Magpie. Jackdaw. Nightingale. Wren. Not all these names apply to the pattern of behavior Marija had just seen, as well she knew. And not all of these birds were at all common anymore. But she liked saying their names and making lists gave her pleasure. A tally of the living, or possibly still living. A head count. A reminder that she was not alone in the world, that human beings were not the only living things, and not the only migrants. She liked the idea that she was remembering them, calling them back into being, if they were extinct now, which is what *recalling* means—calling back, calling back into being once again, even if only in memory and mind. She wondered about bird migration, the paths they flew and the abandoned paths they no longer flew—the empty roads in the sky—indeed the fact that fewer and fewer species did come across the miles at all, while others which used to migrate south now remained on the great island year round, suffering through winters in fluffed up feathers and moody solitary hops peeps and pecks at nothing.

Sibi was asking something, and Kabir turned to Marija and said, he wants to know about water.

SIBI HAD HEARD the island was a place of waters—surrounded by waters, yes, but, looking out the train window at the green landscape sliding past—a place where the skies opened and rain fell often and where there must be flowing rivers and long deep lakes. Kabir assured him this was true. But water was clearly a fraught subject for Sibi, who seemed a little water-whelmed (Kabir's description), and while he longed to see such waters, he feared them too. In his country, he made it known, there had been a long drought. Year after year, and you could watch the deserts grow, measure the progress of the sands, the loss of farm land, the great river getting lower and lower, the disappearance of certain plants and animals, gone with the blowing soil. And soon different political communities or ethnic communities were fighting over the disappearing resources. This was stupid and unnecessary, Sibi's mother had insisted. She was a scientist or researcher of some kind (Kabir and Sibi could not find the right word). Yes, they couldn't control the climate, but there were other things they could do, other possible ways of managing and redistributing their resources and ways of growing food and sharing what they did have—things as well they could do that defied international agreements that disadvantaged their country but which, if they took back control of certain procedures and resources and renegotiated certain loans, and if as well they resorted to more traditional ways of managing their lands, they could take care of their people—all their people. Sibi's mother was it seemed working for the government when it was overthrown. He was sent directly to the airport with a ticket in his hand. He remembers the plane banking steeply, as it rose into the sky, the slate blue of the ocean suddenly all that could be seen, the dry land left behind. He didn't know if his mother was alive or dead. Probably dead.

Sibi had since crossed several oceans. One he crossed in an overloaded boat—a small boat, like the one he came in today, but with more than a hundred people crushed into it. You could hardly breathe, barely see any boat beneath the mass of people. That boat sank, slowly, over the course of many hours, with people falling in or giving up on the boat and jumping in, most of them drowning quickly, disappearing under the water, only to return later, floating

nearby, buoys or sea markers they now had to navigate. Sibi waited until there was no more boat to wait on—just a bump of hull, mostly under water, like a whale's slick back barely breaking the surface. Sibi tried to hang on to that for as long as he could, as others did too. But most just thrashed in the water nearby. Until they did not thrash anymore. When another boat finally arrived and picked them up, only nine were left clinging to the sunken boat. Nine who only just survived, and who would never forget. When Sibi saw the boat he was to cross in this morning, he almost didn't get in. He did not want to see another boat for a very, very long time.

THIS STORY ARRIVED slowly, in broken bits and pieces, through Kabir's translation, and no doubt interpretation. Nothing prompted Sibi—nothing, perhaps, more than the view out the window, a landscape of rolling farmland, small woods, views that would open up and press the horizon back, before closing in again on the train, hawthorn trees along the tracks about to burst into white. Nothing, perhaps, more than the bottled water he was offered, and the sandwich (stale, truth be told) Marija went and brought back for him. He ate and drank and slowly told his story at no prompting from Marija or Kabir, sometimes looking out the window, sometimes down at the water bottle in his hands, the colorless liquid catching the light. This was how it typically happened. If the story was going to come out, it did so in small disordered snatches, falling out from between silences or the occasional innocuous question (see the river way over there, where the bridge crosses? That looks like a warm jumper you have—but are you sure you are warm enough? Have you ever been on a train before? Of course you have. There are many trains here—though truth be told not as many as there used to be). Again and again he shrugged and looked into the distance, said something like *it is hard to find the words*, something like *I would need a whole book to tell it*. Pauses in the flood. Channels between islands.

THE TRAIN PASSED close to an abandoned town, ruins and shadows, moving through its closed station slowly, bits of paper whipped up in the wind making small vortices, an unreadable sign swinging free from a post and a large and dark church tower looming in the background. Sibi asked something and Kabir replied. Turning to Marija with a wink he said, lapis lazuli was removed from the mountains in my country, for centuries this went on, the stones ground up and made into ultramarine, so your painters could paint their god's virgin mother's robes and the spangled heavens across their church's domed ceilings—a sky taken from deep in the earth—as above, so below!

SIBI WAS PROVING more curious than they had at first expected. Why do you do this, he asked through Kabir, his hand drawing parabolic forms in the air—your work, why do you do this? Since Kabir was translator, Marija gave the explanations. She began to describe the PRN protocols, the rules around asylum and their basis in very ancient notions of hospitality, but Sibi soon interrupted.

No no—your jobs, your work—why do *you* do this work, he wanted to know. It is your job? You are paid to do this?

Well, yes it's a job, a volunteer job. Everyone here receives a basic income, so most people wind up doing something they want to do, and all jobs are to a certain extent volunteer jobs.

It wasn't clear how much, or how accurately, Kabir could translate. He was certainly using far fewer words than Marija was,

but maybe the language they spoke was just economical—or had to be, because of how clumsily both Kabir and Sibi spoke it.

I think both Kabir and I like the seasonal nature of this work, for one thing, Marija went on. We get to visit the coast, and meet people and see them settled. In the winter months it's quieter, has a different rhythm. I paint. Mostly birds. I will show you one day. Kabir, he has a barber shop, where his brother sometimes also works, especially when we are away on our Greeting trips.

Kabir took much longer with this last translation, and the two men began to talk to each other excitedly, back and forth—questions, answers, frowns, then sudden grins and exclamations, in and out of several languages, their hands active in the air between them, parry and thrust, or grabbing a sleeve excitedly. At length Kabir turned to Marija to explain, while Sibi, grinning, took hold of some of his thick hair and mimed cutting it with his other hand making finger scissors.

He cuts hair too! We were confused before, and I was wrong about herding—he or I found the wrong word, some version of *shears* I guess. I thought he was talking about sheep or something. But he learned how to cut hair from an uncle. And you know, he could work in my shop!

THEY CHANGED TRAINS. Then, after a short second leg, they detrained and began to walk. It's only a few miles, Kabir told Sibi who, despite his ill-fitting shoes (he lost his own, he had explained, in the boat sinking, many months ago), seemed eager for the walk. The weather inland was nowhere near as windy as at the coast, and it was a fine early spring day really, cloudy but with a small blue patch always somewhere in the sky, like a hint of more to come—the lush times, before the long dry summer. A narrow lane led downhill from the small country station, turning sharp between large fields. Sheep ranged on the higher ground to their right, beyond a hawthorn hedge, and rapeseed, not yet broken out in bright yellow, covered the land to the left, where it swept toward a large wood.

Kabir sang a few lines of something. A ghazal, he explained. Then he said, for Marija's benefit alone, you know, *diaspora* is a perfect anagram for *Paradiso*—in Italian, you know, paradise. So it's paradise to be scattered to the four winds! It's a rough road, and you must wander far to find your way to all the paradises hidden behind all these walls and over all these seas. Marija laughed—only you would say something as crazy as that Kabir!

HE'S ASKING IF we've always had Greeters to welcome new comers here, Kabir explained. They walked three abreast down the lane, Kabir in the middle. A yellowhammer could be heard in the hedge.

No, we haven't, Marija began. Things were different before. Borders and security and people who were obsessed with the supposed protection so-called *secure borders* provided. Madness and nonsense, if you ask me. Demographics, and the climate, forced some difficult decisions on us—at least, decisions that were difficult for *some* of us. But you know, we make the worlds we live in, and we can unmake them too, and remake them another way. This is what makes us human—the capacity to imagine and do otherwise. Even if it's to imagine what's across the sea or over the mountains, and go there and see if it's true, or a good place to be. To go somewhere you have never been before is to conduct an experiment with your feet!

Kabir paused in his attempt to translate, fixing Marija with a look. He nodded. Now who is the poet!

Marija ignored him and continued. The world had changed and people had to move—there was no other way, and no stopping them. No *human* way of stopping them at least. So some began to talk about the ancient obligation to provide hospitality to strangers, and the drafters of the PNR took up this language too. It had become a transnational conversation. The obligation to provide hospitality to strangers is what ensures the freedom of movement: the knowledge that you will be welcomed somewhere else in the world—that if you leave, there's somewhere you will be able to arrive. Borders and walls didn't go up because so many people were coming across frontiers; they went up because the habit of hospitality and welcoming that human movement depended upon had been eroded, lost, replaced by privacy and fear, greed and insularity, arms and anxiety. So people started to pile up at the frontiers, with nowhere else to go, and this fed the feedback loop, with border walls growing taller, and more and more money being spent on militarized border equipment and personnel.

Now, we welcome people. It's as simple as that. Not everyone is happy with this arrangement of course, and there are troubles occasionally, but most accept it now. We welcome people and bring them in and find them a place. And this hasn't triggered an avalanche of new comers—far from it. We aren't overcrowded. Most years, it's just what's needed, just what we have space for. And the various local councils let a central agency of the PNR know how many people they can take, and what sorts of help they might need, and Greeters like Kabir and I bring them to our local assemblies, like we are doing today.

THROUGH KABIR SIBI asked about birds—why Marija painted birds. With birds, you feel like you can share in their freedom—even if you just follow them across the sky with your eyes, you travel too, darting. You approximate their speed, their trajectory, with your mind. Everything they have, they have with them. Their nests and clutches of eggs don't really hold them back or pin them down; in the spring, all day, the adults flit back and forth, building their nests, and then back and forth from foraging grounds to nests and back again—almost perpetual movement. And when the young fledge, they are all free to move. They take their homes with them, the design of a nest in their minds, its ideal building material, the shape a small clutch of eggs will fit in, mobile behind their quick eye. That quickness is their magic—birds are an experience of sudden appearances and disappearances, so that often you can't possibly identify what species they are. They are mysteries that flicker on the borders of what we can perceive. I love the generic nature of the word *bird*. That generality—that unspecifiability—seems necessary. They are a time-lapse of life itself, shifting across space at speed, the only border they will allow being that between feather and air. Besides, it seems important that we cannot name everything—that some aspects of the world are beyond us, not limitable to what we can identify and codify. When I began to paint birds, it was always something generic—the shapes of wings, the blur of birdness, the lanate textures of feathered form, their manyness and smallness and their plummets and turns and sudden departures. Eventually I began to paint more specific species, especially birds that were no more—extinct or just not finding our island in their travels anymore, this place no longer part of their migrations, they were birds our elders could recall or which bird books described but which I never saw year in and year out. So I worked from pictures in textbooks. Sometimes I let them get a

little fantastical, grow or change shape or color in my imagination. Become myths of themselves—larger, wilder, more magical than they had been in life. But eventually I wanted to be more accurate, more true to their ... past. To what they actually once were. So I studied. I copied. I got closer and closer to their missing truth.

FROM THE KISSING gate they followed a footpath across a field, scudding a gentle incline, the town revealing itself in the open valley below. A tree-lined stream ran round one edge, the town itself vaguely circular, with an open space in the middle. Sibi said it reminded him of the setting of his grandmother's village. Only greener. He actually said *wetter*, Kabir remarked. Marija noted that while she wasn't born in this valley, her parents had moved here when she was a child, from not too far away (actually, near where they had detrained). Kabir came here when he was a grown man. He was striking out on his own, he told Sibi, although it came out *striking in his ownness*. The woolly men needed trimming, and Kabir had his own shears.

Soon the three of them were amongst old brick houses, following winding lanes to the central square. A churchyard they passed had more stones crowded into it than a churchyard really had right to. They even had to remove some yews, Marija said, but they planted five trees elsewhere for every one removed here. The square itself had the old schoolhouse on one side, the assembly hall on another, and shops (as well as two pubs) on the others. Your cutting, Sibi asked? Not here, Kabir admitted. He gestured vaguely in the direction of a lane that led off the far side of the square. Down that way. Not far. But I've been itching for a spot on the square. Old rule though: no sharp objects within staggering distance of a pub.

MARIJA'S HOUSE, small and crowded, backed onto the stream. She had large windows put in, facing the back garden, which looked east and provided wonderful morning light, so insides and outsides blurred. The garden itself housed a veritable miniature village of bird houses (on fence posts or high in the boughs of an oak near the stream), bird baths, and bird feeders of various kinds. And there was almost always some creature to watch, even though Marija knew that the number of birds encountered now was a tiny fraction of what once would have been. There is a phrase—the dawn chorus—that long mystified her. She would love just once to hear such a rousing clarion to begin her day. Instead, she lay in bed in the spring and listened to the few singers close enough to be heard and identified. Robin. Chaffinch. Starling.

Sibi stayed with Kabir and his wife and brother—until the ceremony the following week, at the very least, Kabir told him. The barber shop was in a narrow lane, and Kabir's rooms were behind and right above it—a warren of narrow halls and tiny tangled spaces. There were books in several languages, crammed on shelves here and there. And where Marija's house was filled with light, Kabir's was dark and winding. But it was often filled with his voice—singing, reciting, calling out to his family. To Sibi it was strange and wonderful. His room—little more than a closet off the kitchen—was a sort of paradise, and he sat on his narrow bed and looked at his walls and marveled. On the second day there he took out his map, carefully unfolded and smoothed it on his bed, and asked Kabir's wife for a few pins, and permission to fix it to his wall. Helen told him of course, then later asked Kabir if that was where he was wanting to get to. The Atlantic's a big ocean, she noted. No, Kabir told her. He says he is already where he wants to be; the map is just

a reminder that there was once a direction to go in—a time when *elsewhere* was the only hope.

THERE WERE THINGS Sibi had made no effort to tell his new friends. Things he thought better left alone, or at any rate, things he could not tell anyone, because he did not have the words or the heart to do so. Just pictures in his mind. Flashes he had to flee, into other thoughts, or into thoughtlessness. Waking with a cry in the night in a camp, maybe right after he had been rescued from the sea, imagining the wall he'd rolled against was a body bobbing in the dark water. The horrible sound of his own voice, like it was some other person's scream he had been woken by. Or his little brother, always the brightest, who shall remain unnamed, and who disappeared in the days leading up to Sibi's flight from home. Disappeared because he was the son of an influential person on the soon to be losing side of an unfolding coup. Disappeared but said to be lying in an open grave not far from home, where a cousin claimed to have found him, amongst other bodies, but which his mother and grandmother, shouting this cousin down, would not hear anything more about. And so in Sibi's dream when he rolls in the night sometimes it is to fall into an open pit on top of his brother's shattered corpse, his cousin's voice saying—*see, see—there he is!* This young cousin, who now alone must care for their grandmother, since no one else is left. This cousin, who Sibi will write to in the coming days, and who the PRN will help him try to bring, along with his grandmother, to the great island, although it will take several years more, and their grandmother will not live long enough to make the journey to hold her grandson's face in her worn hands once again.

MARIJA WAS NOT much of a cook, but Kabir was, and he and Helen brought the feast to her. With Sibi and Kabir's daughter Murial and his brother Omar, they sat around a large table Marija had cleared in her studio (which was also the main room in her house). And after dinner, Marija showed Sibi some of her paintings. With Kabir busy regaling his family with some long story, a large glass of red wine swinging in one of his hands, what Marija said went completely over Sibi's head. But he looked and seemed to listen nonetheless. They spent the longest time in front of two paintings: one of a murmuration, where each bird—hundreds of tiny forms arranged across the canvas, clustered thicker at one end than the other, forming a sort of particulate cloud, and the other a close rendering of a single starling, where its lighter speckles flew out of the depths of a background of indigo, purple and deep green—like stars shooting in space, but in many ways, with the star speckles closer together at the bird's lavender neck and head, and larger and more evenly spaced on its emerald and indigo body, mimicked the pattern of the murmuration in the other painting.

Sibi was sure no such fantastical and wonderful bird actually existed in the world. He turned to Kabir to ask a question, but the barber-poet was himself in full flight. We go too far, Kabir was saying—see a boundary, and immediately want to cross it—which, ironically, is what makes us such creative beings. We are forever imagining the other side of any boundary, imagining ourselves crossing it. Imagining what it could be like over there. Then we cross, and too often, we go too far, and we trample and exhaust and destroy what was there, on the other side of the barrier. We ruin it by going where we shouldn't go! Because of our curious and searching nature. But what are we to do? This is our human

way—we cross the boundary, we ignore the limitations, we make marvelous discoveries at one step, and destroy some pristine corner of the world with the next. We create, and we destroy. There is no escaping it. So I am in the business of singing sad songs! This life is elegy, start to finish.

Sometimes it's just best not to listen to him, Marija said, handing Sibi a small wooden model of a bird. It's pretty generic right now, she said, while Sibi ran his hands over its rough surface. I will shape it into something—I just haven't got there yet. It was going to be a starling, but if I remove enough wood here and there, and splice in a wooden tail, I thought maybe a swallow. I'd like to see a swallow swoop through my garden. Or a swift. Imagine that! They used to come here you know. There are elders who remember, who speak of the sound of them circling the church tower in an endless loop. I wish I could hear that sound, see them in the air.

ON THE MORNING of Sibi's Welcoming Ceremony, Helen presented him with a new shirt, and Kabir cut his hair (although the two argued about how short to go). When they arrived at the square, Marija was already there, and a number of the members of the assembly were standing on the assembly hall steps. A small audience from the community milled about in the open air, chatting, some of them looking bored, yawning. Kabir looked proud and Marija had pinned her sometimes unruly gray hair up. An indistinct bird flew over, which the three new friends took as a sign of benevolence.

The current Spoke of the assembly, an old and very thin woman, called the community together. Immediately a woman appeared at Sibi's side and began to translate fluently. She was around his mother's age, wore a head scarf, and was clearly from his home country, all of which a stunned Sibi found just a little disorienting, and at first difficult to follow what was being relayed to him. As it would turn out, the woman, Karalla, had been located just a few villages away.

What was being relayed was an offer of friendship—which, it was said, is the only true form of freedom: no one alone is truly free. There were other preliminaries and grand gestures, many of which sailed over Sibi's head—that human beings were defined by their movement over the surface of the earth, that there was an intimate and necessary connection between moving *over* space and finding refuge *in* place, and that there was no permanence but nonetheless the temporary stabilities of life were to be encouraged and *tended*, as one would a garden. A lot was said about tending, attendance, and tenderness as core human precepts.

What Sibi was listening to was a locally adapted version of the PRN's Declaration in Support of Human Movement. But he did not know this and it made little difference to his present situation. There was a pause in the proceedings and Sibi's name was called; Marija and Kabir walked him forward before the assembly steps, Karalla coming with them. It was indicated that Sibi's story had been set down by Kabir, that Sibi could return to and amend or add to that story at any time, but that it was now considered a part of the community's story too, which was itself always growing and changing. Then the Spoke began to ask some formal questions, but Karalla's translation was gentle and warm.

Have you arrived in our community as a representative of a foreign government or state, an agent of any organization, or as

an employee or representative of an international corporation with interests to develop here locally and capital to invest?

Sibi looked at Karalla, and then at Marija and Kabir, who nodded encouragingly. No, Sibi stammered through Karalla.

How long do you intend to stay in our community?

Sibi thought of his map, of places he had dreamed of as a youngster, of a world filled with different locales. He did not know if he would ever return to his withered home country—why would he?

I would stay ... for as long as I am permitted.

Why have you left your former home?

It is ... no longer a place you can live. There is death. Murder. And endless drought. Most of my family are, I fear, dead. It now only fills me with sadness. Here, I think, I may have friends. Maybe someday a new family.

How will your time here be a benefit to our community and the lands we live in close contact with?

Sibi thought of the little town in its valley, the stream winding through woods, the fields and other clumps of forest that surrounded it. He thought of Kabir's barber shop and Marija's birds.

I will ... be a gentle presence on the earth. I will watch over the birds with my friend Marija. And I will cut hairs with Kabir, only ... in more stylish ways. I will try to add beauty to these good people and ... I will always try to ... to be useful ... to help others. And to be ... tender.

MARIJA HAD ONE more gift for Sibi, as they celebrated in a pub: a wire model of a small bird. It's a swift, she said. I tried to work it up from the wooden model, but the shape just wasn't right. Too much starling. So I made this in wire. Swifts were great flyers, traveling long distances and remaining in the air for incredibly long periods of time. This swift will keep traveling for you Sibi, while you remain here.

It turned out that Karalla, who had joined them, also had a gift. She placed a potted plant on the table, the fragrance of its white flowers immediately taking Sibi back to his old home. How did you get this, he exclaimed? Brought it with me, Karalla told him. Carried it—the group I traveled with, we brought plants, seeds, and even some caged birds, from home. We said, if the climate is changing, and people are moving—why not our plants and birds too? It's not just people who are displaced—it's whole ecosystems. Everything gets uprooted, everything needs transplanting. Or it's gone forever. But plants move slowly—so we helped them. And it turns out, though the winter is difficult, the summer season here is perfect for many of our plants. So we carry on here together, different, and yet the same.

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