

Displaced lives

August 2015

Migration and displacement are often discussed in terms of abstract numbers. This powerful photo-essay by award winning photographer Alixandra Fazzina speaks of individual human beings in search of a secure place.



Photo: Alixandra Fazzina

There is a man sitting across the room in the shadow, but I know who he is. His brilliant eyes burn through shade. He tells me that if I sit still and listen then all the stories of the world will come to me.

– From 'Lives' in Brian Daldorph's *Outcasts*

In *A Million Shillings* men and women sitting across rooms in shadows tell stories about journeys. Theirs are tales of the Horn of Africa seldom recounted in western media or in 'official' narratives, academic or otherwise, of displacement as a human tragedy. Perhaps these individual accounts, so often explained in the press as cold statistics, could have been told with words, perhaps with poetry. Instead, photojournalist Alixandra Fezzina has told them with images.

Of course there is no shortage of images in Western media to evoke the Horn of Africa, images of war, famine and so called 'natural disasters'. Fezzina's photos though avoid the frontline of the dramatic event that momentarily attracts media attention and are instead concerned with the people whose lives and difficult circumstances continue once the cameras leave, who have to cope with the reverberations of those events in their lives, landscapes and memories. In so doing her images go beyond the idea of displacement as a human tragedy to search for the lived and enduring meanings that displacement can have for specific people. This does not mean that the book selectively focuses on pleasant moments for there are no such moments in the journey – at best there are moments when resting may be less troubled. Neither does this mean that war or violence are blocked out. Quite to the contrary, perhaps the power of these images is precisely the way in which what is shown evokes that which remains invisible to the reader.

The migrants and refugees telling their stories are fleeing Somalia in search of a better life in Aden, the Yemeni city named, ironically for the migrants, after the fabled paradisiacal garden. Most of them have begun their journey in the now almost depopulated Mogadishu, but the book starts on the outskirts of the coastal port of Bossaso, one of the world's biggest hubs for smuggling people, and follows the migrants to the Arabian Peninsula through the Gulf of Aden. By the time they arrive to Bossaso, most will have been threatened, robbed and abused on the way. One in twenty will end their lives during the journey, drowned at sea or shot or beaten to death by the smugglers. Those who make it will see their hopes and expectations evaporate rapidly. Disillusioned in Yemen where they are automatically granted refugee status but are barred from formal employment and are therefore confined to a life in relative peace but with no prospects, many will try to carry on their journey to Saudi Arabia risking being deported right back to Mogadishu. Others will attempt a land route towards Europe. Only a small minority of those who arrive to Yemen will qualify for resettlement as refugees in a third country.

In her quiet and patient attempt to capture experiences through the language of

photography, Fazzina gives a central role to the symbolism of light which often provides an almost sacred or religious quality. Most photographs have been taken at dusk and night in dimly lit streets or, most often, in the interior of doss houses where migrants rest during the day. The effect is that of stressing a sense of vulnerability outdoors and a sense of expectant stillness inside. As the light steals in through the makeshift rooms with walls made of pieces of wood, cupboards, or torn fabric, so the outside world is revealed only through the stories told within. It filters through as something one imagines but never sees, yet revealed potently from the person within the walls.

This outside world of blinding tropical light abruptly breaks into the visual narrative when the *tahrīb* are taken in trucks to the beach from where they will cross the Gulf of Aden. Armed militia, usually young men holding Kalashnikovs and high on hashish and qat, will separate them into groups, each one to board a different vessel. A photograph shows a group of people boarding a small boat in a turquoise sea, anxiously looking back to make eye contact with friends or relatives who will travel in other boats. Once in the boat they are tied down to prevent the vessel from capsizing. In the following page we learn that only eleven of the hundred and twenty eight people who travelled in that same boat reached Yemen alive.

Simone Weil wrote that "There are only two services which images can offer the afflicted. One is to find the story which expresses the truth of their affliction. The second is to find the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: "Why I am being hurt?" It is the second service that Fazzina seems to provide through her work, using photos to tactfully express the emotions of her subjects. And yet, so powerfully are these emotions communicated that when gazing at images of young men and women sitting in the shadows of a makeshift room, their faces obliquely illuminated by a sun ray streaming through the wall, their eyes lost in distant memories, the raw truth from which these feelings are derived hits the reader. Indeed, these indoor scenes, as reliant as they are on the visual, provide not just a picture but they succeed in evoking a particular atmosphere. The power of the visual here is not only in allowing the eye to see but in suggesting embodied, multi-sensory experiences that are at once familiar and different.

At a time when Europe is faced with searching questions regarding their own duties towards refugees, Fazzina's book gives us an insight into the sufferings that untold numbers face as a daily reality. That this fate is theirs rather than that of those lying a mere few kilometres across the Mediterranean sea is due to nothing more than an accident of birth.



Photos: Alixandra Fazzina

Book

A Million Shillings - Escape from Somalia (<http://www.trolleybooks.com/bookSingle.php?bookId=116>)

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¹ <http://www.trolleybooks.com/bookSingle.php?bookId=116>