

Swallowing Stories

*Anna Hammarstedt**

I clutch his light blue folder in my hand – the light blue folder containing eight numbers that will make him recognizable to the Swedish state during this time. The folder is now nearly empty, but will soon contain atrocious experiences and memories summarized into comprehensible sentences that will allow his future to be accurately determined. I look at my watch. It's exactly 9:00 a.m. I am right on time. I open up his folder, balancing it between my right hand and my left forearm, look at his photograph, and try to find his face in the waiting room. Day in and day out, I do this. I go out to the crowded waiting room, which fills with silence when I approach. Children, still immune to the seriousness of the situation, keep pulling at their siblings' clothing and chasing each other through the reception, collapsing in giggling piles around my feet while embarrassed parents try to separate them, arranging them into little individual human figures again. My eyes quickly scan the room, face by face, each one eagerly awaiting eye contact from me. My eyes settle on the man from the photograph. I confirm his name and he approaches me, smiling, as he quickly stuffs the paper defining his new rights and obligations in this country into his bag. We begin to leave the reception together. As my back is turned towards the waiting area, I hear the sound of giggling children and small stomping feet chasing each other begin anew.

As soon as I see him in the reception, I make a snapshot analysis, quickly attempting to deconstruct him into the neat little categories that society has taught me are important when interacting socially: sex, sexual orientation, age, nationality, occupation. I think to myself, 'Around thirty-five years old. Here by himself. Therefore, wife and child left in Syria.' He must be a father. I feel like I have met this man one hundred times before. The snapshot is taken without my conscious consent. I have analyzed him before I even realize that I have done it. Despite this recognition, I continue to allow myself to speculate. The image of the man standing in front of me, calm and collected in the sterile reception room, is quickly contrasted with the representation of innumerable Syrian fathers that have appeared on my *Al Jazeera* newsfeed over the last few years; fathers frantically carrying their children through carnage and chaos. My mind attempts to place him back into this environment, attempts to reconstruct a newsfeed photo of him holding his sleeping daughter against his chest, her mind and body having finally surrendered to sleep as exhaustion overtakes willpower. The exhaustion of aerial bombardments and an empty belly. An image where his t-shirt is soaked through in the way that only another parent could recognize as being the result of a hysterical child's tears and snot, with the fabric uncomfortably rubbing the skin beneath it. In his light blue folder, this will most likely be summarized as, 'I left because there's a war. I fled so that my daughter could be provided with a better future.'

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I hold my card against the card reader until it beeps and enter my pin-code. This same card reader has, year after year, recognized and accepted that I belong to this specific workforce, we, who process asylum claims on behalf of the State. I am often the first case officer that one meets upon arrival in this country. This is a profession either loved or hated by members of society since the autumn of 2015, as if our occupational existence wasn't interesting enough for public scrutiny prior to the media-dubbed European 'refugee crisis'. I feel him towering behind me, holding onto his bag with one hand while he tries to grab the door for me with his other hand, as I struggle with the weight of it. He attempts to hold it open for me and considering that my intention was the same for him, we end up in an awkward position reminding me of the game Twister. 'Put your left hand on red.' 'Now your right foot on blue.' I finally win the scrimmage over the door, and he laughs as I tell him in Arabic to be my guest and enter the corridor. As we pass by each room, we can see caseworkers busily typing on computers while others nod sympathetically to the figures in front of them. With their backs towards us, some figures are either frantically speaking with their hands whilst others are hunched over clutching rolled up and well used shredded tissues. In the evenings when I work late and am in charge of closing the office, I often think of the expression 'if walls could talk' as I skim through room after room turning off the lights. Time and again I wonder what happens to all the energy that has been contained within these four walls. Where does it disappear? Sometimes I wonder if it has absorbed through my skin, hijacking my body, never seen but constantly there.

The numerous dates that I have been on, the numerous head tilts and puppy eyes that I have been given when I speak about my work. The constant, 'you must hear some horrible stuff,' 'I don't know how you do it.' That tilted head look, followed by the awkward silence. The craving after human stories of despair. The silence that if not smothered in shame would say, 'Tell me about the shattered refugee that you met today, so I can impress you with my political views, so I can secretly congratulate myself on voting for the correct political party as I sip my organic red wine. Their blood is not on my hands.' Countless dates feel like the fragmented pieces of a puzzle; they can all be pieced together into one. One date, where I am the main character and the faceless figure sitting in front of me can easily be exchanged for another. One date, where my eyes quickly shift to the television screen in the pub, showing a commercial of a grinning couple at the beach. I wish that I could confide in my date that I can't swim in the ocean anymore. I wish that it didn't sound like a cliché. I hear stories about how it consumes people, how it swallows children whole. How it grabs ahold of their ankles, as their mothers and fathers attempt to punch and kick at it, screaming at it to consume them instead. My British friend often says to me, 'I love the bones of you.' The ocean loves the bones of anyone asking for its permission to allow free passage. Sometimes the ocean spits out the whole bodies of children onto its shores, flesh attached to bones, as if its stomach was full for the day. I wonder if my date has ever met a woman the same week that she has lost her children to that ocean. If he has experienced the way that she stares through you when bureaucracy requires you to document her reason for having fled to Europe. Perhaps my date and I would have something to talk about then.

I see my date's mouth opening, closing, smiling, chuckling, but I don't register what words are being projected. A table in my periphery has caught my attention. A mother and her two sons are having a pub dinner. As she cuddles the one child in her lap, stroking her fingers through his hair as he battles with resisting sleep, she laughs at something the other child says as he colors on his placemat,

chatting eagerly. For a split second I think back to a child that I had met earlier that week at work. The memories of my interviews at work are often reincarnated through fragmented sequences, lasting only a second. These sequences disappear almost as quickly as they appear, sucked back into the past or comfortably nestled into the future awaiting the next visit. I rarely remember the transaction of words that my fingers have actualized into permanent existence as they pound the keyboard, as I document their stories. *Boom, boom, boom.* I recall the sound of the child's knee nervously hitting my office table as it moved up and down as he informed me that during his exodus through Europe as an unaccompanied minor, his body had not belonged to him for a very long time. It had been violated again and again as part of a 'transaction cost' to pay for his journey from country to country until he finally reached Sweden. As I realize that I am pre-occupied with trying to figure out the age difference between the child that had been in my office and the child embraced in his mother's arms in front of me, I am snapped out of my trance by something that my date says. That inevitable phrase.

'Your job must be very difficult. Your strength is really commendable. I mean, you do hear some horrible stuff...right...?' The guilt washes over me. I am made to sound like a hero. A hero for what? For whom? Once again this conversation has ended up being about me. I realize that I haven't replied as quickly as I used to. I have self-destructed the one-liners that I often use in these situations, twisted them to the point that I can feel my gag-reflex triggered as soon as the words roll off my tongue. As soon as the words leave my mouth, it is as if my tongue dangles in mid-air waiting for my opponent to cut it off in disgust, yet it never happens. 'My job consists of meeting the strongest people in the world, it's an honor to meet people who have overcome the unthinkable, that's why and how I am able to handle it.' The words are always met with a nod, a nod in awe. An attempt to give agency back to the people whose agency has been stripped from them in the current political discourse. That simple answer that makes everyone happy. I can't be bothered making it pleasant for my date nowadays, can't be bothered playing the Oscar-winning role of the 'altruistic light-hearted girl-next-door.' So I don't answer anymore. I want to tell my date that it is disrespectful to assume that others' experiences of suffering are to be shared over a platter of Brie and crackers in a British pub, as we shift from topics of best bands to see live, to the refugee crisis, to the weather, to best weekend destinations. I swallow the stories that I hear as if they belong to me. As if I've been asked to swallow them for safekeeping. In these situations I have become one of those people that I hate. A self-proclaimed and self-appointed spokesperson of others' suffering, yet on my terms and conditions. Silence has overtaken this date. The same eyes that had decided within two seconds whether to swipe left or right when my photo appeared on the dating app are now attempting to decide within two seconds if I should be given a second chance. I'm not even sure if I want one.

As I clutch his light blue folder and we proceed down the corridor, he asks me in Arabic if I speak it fluently. I tell him a bit, if he speaks slowly, and I ask him how he is doing. He laughs and tells me that I speak it well. His eyes are friendly and eager for small talk, his eyes constantly moving from my eyes to my mouth, from my mouth to my eyes, quickly trying to judge my reaction to what he says. I smile back, confirming that I am enjoying the small talk. I notice the sweat beads lining the top of his forehead as I pass by my colleague, clutching a light blue folder on her way out to the corridor. When she walks past us and sees him laughing, she gives me a look. The look of solidarity that tells me that she knows how this interview is going to turn out. She knows that I know as well, and if her squint

could be vocalized, it would tell me to hang in there.

As we enter the room, the room that I quickly tried to relieve from the stench of fear and stress between interviews, he stands behind the chair meant for him. He eyes the pitcher of water, the stack of plastic cups and the box of tissues on the table in front of the chair. A room prepared to hydrate you with water to then dehydrate you with sweat and tears. The table, with its pink highlighter marks and swirls, are the only sign that there has previously been life in this room. No photographs, no paintings, no motivational one-liners, just a child's scribbles on a table as I didn't have the heart to tell the child to stop drawing on State property. As I sit down, pushing my card into the computer, I realize that he is still standing. He is waiting for my permission to tell him to have a seat. I wonder if he would have waited for me to ask him to sit if he thought that he had a choice. I wonder what he would think if he knew how many hours I spend at work and at home reading about the war in Syria, that I take pride in the fact that I know which rebel group controls what area of Aleppo, what city Assad is fighting for due to its strategic positioning and what groups control border crossings to chaotic neighboring countries and for how long. When I later ask him which military group controls his neighborhood, he answers, 'I don't know.' I become disappointed with myself, disappointed for thinking that I understand the war in terms of clear-cut strategic divisions. I always think that I understand until I sit face-to-face with someone who has recently arrived from war. I tell him quickly in Arabic to be my guest, to please sit. He laughs a little, the sweat beads multiplying with each smile that he flashes.

As we listen to the signal on speakerphone trying to reach our telephone translator for the day, I look at him properly for the first time, unfazed by small talk and trying to shuffle him into the interview room so that we can start on time. My stomach drops a bit as I panic, perhaps I have the wrong person in front of me. I click on the photograph of him on the computer screen, look at him, look at the computer screen. It's him. The photograph taken yesterday when he first arrived is lugubrious, his eyes are desolate and his hair is disheveled. There was no need to attempt to impress the camera yesterday. The camera doesn't understand asylum law, doesn't determine whether his loved ones will have the opportunity to be saved from aerial bombardments or the ocean's mouth and brought to a sleepy Scandinavian mountain town that he is expected to call home. The man wearing his button-up shirt and sitting in front of me has combed his hair today, parting it to the side. When we make eye contact again, he flashes me that smile again. As he grins, he lifts the backside of his hand to his hairline, brushing away the sweat beads as they've joined forces, attempting to blow his cover. The translator answers and we begin.

The translator presents herself through the speakerphone and I present the purpose of the interview for the day, that I will need to document some general information about him and we will have to speak about his reasons for seeking asylum. I feel like I should say something, he keeps interrupting me before I finish my sentence, interrupting me with that grin, saying 'yes' in Arabic before the translator is given the chance to translate. When I ask him kindly to allow the translator to finish her sentences before he answers, he realizes what he's doing and apologizes again and again. I ask him about his health. 'Briefly please, tell me about your health, how are you?' He responds that thanks be to God, he's physically okay, he's drained from the journey, but Alhamdulillah, all is well. He tells me that psychologically he's not holding up too well, he wasn't able to bring his daughter; he's stressed about

the fact that he left her. As I hear the words, 'I understand' roll off my tongue, I regret it immediately. A combination of words meant to show solidarity, yet when used incorrectly, appear to be a weak attempt at filling space and time. I hold my breath, expecting an 'Oh, really? How?' in return. He doesn't seem to notice. I allow myself to breathe once again. I see that he's so absorbed with trying to figure out how to describe his psychological health in a few sentences in fear that I will cut him off again, that he lets my words float by. I remind myself that if this interview is going to turn out the way I expect it to, the way that my colleague's look of solidarity expects it to, I need to pick and choose the words that I attempt to comfort with. He has never asked me to comfort him. He begins to tell me about his daughter's health. His wife contacted him last night that medical supplies had been cut off to their neighborhood. Her asthma attacks are getting worse. He tells me that if she is without her medicine, she gets fits.

I look at the clock and feel my heart begin to speed up. I am expected to get this interview done within the hour, before I begin my next interview. If one interview passes the time limit, there will most definitely be a domino effect. He has been waiting for this moment. I imagine that, as he was smuggled by rebel groups into Turkey, as he watched families slip from each other's grips on the boat to Greece, as he crawled through the forests with the fear of Hungarian dogs snapping at his heels, as he avoided eye contact with the train conductor in Denmark, he was thinking about his daughter. His daughter was struggling to survive the war in Syria, how would she have survived the war in Europe? Aerial bombardments, roadblocks and hunger versus barbed wire, pepper spray, police dogs raised on hatred, and hunger. The image of his daughter is probably the only reason that, exhausted and starving, he didn't turn himself into the Greek border guards, with his left hand lifted above his head, and his right hand waving a tattered white flag. 'I surrender.' He made this journey so that his daughter wouldn't have to. So that he could hopefully apply for family reunification. That surreal moment where if in that interview room he would have had a portfolio, he would have opened it up with a shiny photo of his daughter, pitching the idea of what she can contribute to this country, and why we really shouldn't say no to this offer. He will as well, learn the language, get a job and pay his taxes and will make the Swedish king proud.

My colleague once told me that although we only hear about catastrophes and the extreme horrors that humans are capable of committing and experiencing, there is something beautiful within these stories. People have persevered and survived thanks to love, their love for life, their love for their family members. This is what has kept people going, has kept people fighting against injustice, the hope and the idea of a better life. That pep talk comforted me for circa one day, until I realized, does this mean that the ones mutilated by artillery rounds didn't have a love for life? I tell him that I understand that he wants to tell me about his daughter, but that we don't have very much time, and we must focus on him, as it's his case that I am processing. His facial expression changes. I ask him where he is born. He answers briefly. I am worried that I have made everything a bit awkward. I attempt to smile again. Shit, perhaps he noticed that I was stressing over the fact that perhaps we won't finish in time. Perhaps he thinks that I don't really care. I really, really do. Smile, smile, smile. Show him that you care. Nod sympathetically. He must wonder why I am giving him the tilted head and puppy eyes when all he did was tell me that the name of his neighborhood in Aleppo. He lights up. He asks me if I've ever been to Aleppo. I tell him, 'No, but I heard that it was beautiful before the

war came.’ He replies, ‘Oh, you made a face when I mentioned the name, it looked as if you’d been there.’ Shit, I disappointed him again. No, it’s just the face that I make when I know I can’t say that I understand, so I attempt to look like I understand with my face instead.

The man in front of me is smiling. I am taken back every time that I see someone in this office speak of Aleppo and smile at the same time. I assume that his thoughts must be elsewhere. Perhaps he is thinking about Aleppo before the war. I feel as if it is impossible for me to unravel that name – Aleppo – from its recent portrayal in the media, represented through the narratives of anxious war correspondents ducking bullets in a ghost town whose only inhabitants appear to be mutilated buildings. If our paths had crossed in a different space at a different time, away from this desk and this office, I hope that he would have given me an opportunity to be emancipated from this confining commentary, by carefully reciting what his neighborhood looked like, grid by grid, with each corner symbolizing a distant memory. Regardless of whether I am listening to the distant memories of my relatives having grown up in the Swedish countryside or to the memories of my friends’ parents, having grown up in the middle of warzones near and far, I find it enchanting that most people are able to recall some tale of childhood innocence, a tale that often encompasses having been trusted with a certain responsibility by elders, and it all going horribly wrong. What would his story be? Memories where every corner is filled with quick meetings, filled with the sounds of traffic, gossip, laughter, aggressive drivers, and the call to prayer.

Our meeting is, however, at this desk and in this room, and therefore as soon as he mentions the word Aleppo, I imagine what his neighborhood looked like. Every corner, filled with fear, the sounds of artillery rounds echoing as they ricochet; the dust of the streets slowly floating down like snowflakes as the artillery rounds stop and children line the streets in front of skeleton buildings, queuing for bread, having been given the noble responsibility by elders. This image is imprinted in me from the documentaries I have seen and the reports I have read. I recall the children that I often meet in my office, the ones that were only tiny when the conflict began, or not yet born. The five-year-olds who only describe their city to me through the narratives of bombs, planes, and playing indoors. His memories of Aleppo flow through his thirty-five-year-old veins and pump through his arteries. In his light blue folder, this will be summarized as: ‘I was born in Aleppo and I grew up there.’ My memories of Aleppo are puzzled together through fragments from news agencies and stories that do not belong to me. I know that I will soon have to ask him about his family. Affected by my previous experience of similar interviews and according to my quick mathematical assessment of the situation from the moment I met him (his eagerness in the corridor, the look of solidarity that my colleague gave me, and his mentioning of his daughter from the beginning), I begin to wonder how I can bring myself to ask him about his family now, when he’s smiling. I convince myself that it is better if I prolong the inevitable, for *everyone*’s sake. Strategically, I should gather as much information as I can now, before it’s too late.

We begin to speak about how he came to Sweden. The reports tell me that as he fled his country, he must have handed over an identification card to army men at every checkpoint, as they searched through their lists of wanted men. A quick risk assessment where age, profession, religion, place of birth and political ideology are accounted for. Where low risk means the road to freedom and high

risk means rotting in a prison cell. He must have then been smuggled across the border to Turkey, as I know that he has not entered Sweden with a visa. As I recently saw in a documentary, I envision him sitting in the makeshift Syrian communities in Turkey, meeting human traffickers in parks and shady apartments, trying to get the best deal for a 'luxury' boat trip to Greece. The human trafficker tells the man in front of me that he may be provided with a life vest for an extra fee, as his laughter seeps through his toothless grin and evaporates into thin air. I wait for the answer that I expect to hear. A clear cut: 'With the help of human traffickers, from Syria to Turkey, with boat to Greece, and then I walked and took trains through Europe.' As the translator asks him my question, I begin typing the answer that I imagine that I will hear without even realizing that I am doing it. He cuts off my line of thought.

'Are you married? Do you have children?' I know the answer that I am expected to provide in this situation, yet instead of hearing the words 'We're here to talk about you,' abandon my mouth, I hear, 'Not yet, no.' I provide an emphasis on the word 'yet' in order to convince us both that this is in the tangible future. I smile politely when he responds with 'Inshallah.' He persists, 'I swear by God, I hope that you will never have to say goodbye to your loved ones, not knowing when and if you will ever see them again.' As I see his eyes begin to well up, I pause my typing. 'The night before I left my home, my relatives came over to wish me luck and to help me plan the journey – a last supper, one could say. We made sure that the children couldn't hear us, as I sat with my uncles and my cousins in the living room. Over cigarettes and chai, they told me how much they had heard about what everything would cost, how I should try to find a trafficker in Turkey, how I would have to avoid getting my fingerprints taken before I reached Sweden. In retrospect, nothing could have prepared me for this journey. I used to tell my daughter about Sweden to comfort her at night...about how the sun never disappears in the summertime, about the red cottages and the snow, about skies free of death machines. I told her that Sweden is a country that loves Syrians...'

I begin to type again. I am expected to be an extension of my keyboard. The words leave his mouth, trickling into my ears, seeping out through my fingertips. I ask, he speaks, I write, I ask, he speaks, I write, I ask, he speaks, I write, he asks, I get thrown off guard. Nothing is as irritating as when a telephone translator tells me that I am pounding the keyboard too hard, that they can't hear what he is saying, all they can hear are my fingers tip-tapping away. I am reminded of the extension, effacing myself. 'Sorry, but this is my job,' I tell the translator bitterly as I stab at my own agency, slowly twisting the knife. When I see that his eyes are now as wet as they can be without releasing any tears, he says, 'When I said goodbye to my daughter...' my stomach drops. I quickly remind myself to try to conceal my panic. I want to know what happened when he said goodbye to his daughter, yet I know that these tears will be released any second now and I know how this will end. How it often ends. I tell him that I see that he is upset when he speaks about his daughter and we will soon speak about his family, but for right now, I do need to know what happened after he said goodbye, what countries he's been to since he left Syria. I quickly glance at the time displayed on my computer screen. 9:33. He gives me a short answer. The short answer that I expected. In his light blue folder, this will be summarized as, 'Syria to Turkey to Greece, through Europe to Sweden.' There's no prolonging anymore. I ask him about his family. He tells me about his wife, what her name is, how old she is and where she was born. He tells me about his daughter, what her name is, how old she is and where she

was born. It feels like there's a stone lodged in my stomach. I smile and tell him that his daughter has a beautiful name. He tells me that it is a beautiful name for a beautiful girl and shows me the wallpaper photo of her on his phone. The stone suddenly drops with an echo. I get irritated with myself for expecting that he will not be able to handle my next question. I get irritated that I think that, after all that he has been through, I still assume that he won't be able to handle my next question. This is his life. I rip the Band-Aid off. I ask him where his daughter is at the moment.

The translator thinks that the phone connection has been lost, I hear her saying, 'are you still there? Hello?' I answer her abruptly that we can hear her; he's just a bit upset at the moment. She's quiet. I'm quiet. He's quiet. He's had his head in his hands for what feels like the longest minute in my life. I've stopped looking at the computer screen and hand the box of tissues over to him. As he looks up at me, I see that his cheeks are covered in tears. As soon as his hand pulls the tissue out of the box, his shoulders are now uncontrollable, up and down, up and down, synchronized with his wailing. Even though I knew that this would happen from the moment I saw him smiling in the reception, stuffing the paper with his new rights and obligations into his bag, it feels like someone is sitting on my chest. I lean forward with my elbows on the desk and tell him that it is okay, to take his time, that I understand that he loves his daughter very much and misses her. As I say this, I see my colleague pass by my room; she wants to check that everything is okay. I see her recognize the familiar situation, give me that 'hang in there' look and walk past. I can't count how many times I have sat by myself spell-checking different interviews to the background music of a person crying in the room next door. I am now stuck in the limbo of what the correct thing to do is. Every time this happens, I still get stuck. I decide to sit there with him while he cries; that unnatural situation where it is unprofessional if I rub his back or touch him; that inhumane situation where it is unfair if I tell him that I understand or that everything will get better.

I was lucky enough to be raised by a mother who would gather me in her arms when I was upset, pulling me close to the stomach where I once baked myself into existence. I was lucky enough to be raised without an ocean between us. She would rock me back and forth until I let it all out of my system. 'Let it out, let it all out,' she would whisper while she continuously brushed away the strands of hair that would find their way to my cheek like a magnet, collecting snot along the way. Nowadays if I'm upset she pours me a cognac and tells me it soothes the stomach – the journey of being pulled close to someone else's stomach to having to soothe one's own. I wonder how odd it would be if she had known then that it would later be a struggle for me to have to refrain, on a daily basis, from the concept of comfort that I was taught. I've heard that, professionally, you're supposed to be silent when another person is upset, silent but present. You're supposed to sit there in silence and show the person that it is okay that they are upset and that this doesn't frighten you. Basically, you're supposed to assume that that person, in all of their pain, is reflecting upon your reaction. I sit there in silence and watch him cry. Every now and again, I will hand him a tissue. I've also heard that professionally, you're supposed to let an upset person be upset by themselves, silent but absent. When I've sat there with him for what feels like forever, I tell him that we can take a break, that I will come back in five minutes. He tells me between his sobbing that he is sorry. I tell him that he shouldn't apologize. In his light blue folder this will be summarized as, 'the applicant is crying. 5 minute break.' When I was new to the job, I used to write things such as, 'the applicant is sad,' or 'the applicant is angry,' but

was quickly told that I am not to define others' emotions. I should only write if the person is crying or if the person is laughing. I put the translator on mute and leave the room.

I go straight to the bathroom and put the toilet lid down so that I can sit. I want the stone in my stomach to disintegrate. I look at my watch. It's now 9:45. I remind myself that I have to be back in five minutes, although that's cutting it close. I decide to stay in the bathroom to avoid having to speak to anyone. If I were to meet another colleague in the corridor, the contrast of having to have a conversation about my plans for the evening or how my date miserably failed, as he is in the room next to us, is so uncomfortable that I want to avoid it. I hear my colleague's voice in my head. I hear the words that she said when we shared a bottle of wine and work carefully tiptoed its way, unbidden, into our conversation: 'Isn't it strange how affected one can become? These stories don't even belong to us. How do you process something that you don't own?' I have swallowed his story as if it belonged to me, or rather what I assume his story is. I've swallowed it, as I don't know what else to do with it. Interviews such as these, where less is said, have a strange way of affecting you. The emotional energy clings to every surface of the office and prevents any verbalization within the perfectly planned timeslot. I piece my image of him together with the help of my imagination, from fragmented stories that I have previously been told, from documentaries that I have seen, from reports that I have read. He remains a familiar mystery to me.

The time passes quickly and I return to my office, to the four walls containing atrocities relived and re-performed on a daily basis. To the office where memories are subjected to verbal execution with me as their witness. You know that feeling that you get when you cut your finger and wrap a Band-Aid around it a bit too tight? That warm feeling as the blood pulsates, unsuccessfully trying to find an escape route. I imagine the walls to be pulsating at the end of the day when I quickly close the door behind me, making sure the words spoken stay there for the night. I wonder when they will explode, covering me in the inevitable carnage. As I enter, I carefully shut the door behind me to prevent anything from seeping into the hallway. I am met with that sweet smell of perspiration that a colleague of mine used to always attempt to cover up between her interviews with her standard bottle of cheap vanilla scented perfume. As I notice a pulsing sensation in my ear, he apologizes again while I simultaneously tell him that he shouldn't apologize. He looks drained. He looks as if he stopped crying solely due to the fact that his body gave up on producing tears, gave up on signaling what I can only imagine to be his suffering. Is he apologizing again and again because that is what we are taught to do when we 'break' in public? When we sense that an individualistic fear is awoken within the witness of the 'breakdown,' that fear that whispers: if he is capable of breaking, then you are capable of breaking, and if you break, how will you be put back together again? Or is he apologizing because I have become, in his eyes, the gatekeeper of his daughter's future, and the perfectly planned timeslot that he has been provided has not done his story justice? Has this not gone as he had hoped?

The perfectly planned timeslot that we have assumes that no one will steer clear of the agenda. It assumes that a question is asked and then neatly answered. I quickly glance at the clock, realizing that we haven't spoken about his reasons for seeking asylum. I have three interviews before lunch and two after lunch. Three then two, day in, day out. I still don't know who controls his neighborhood in Aleppo, who was responsible for the bombings depriving his daughter of sleep, or who was in charge

of the checkpoints. I still don't know if he fears the regime and its allies or an opposition group and its allies or if he has been someone's enemy or if he has been someone's hero. We will have to give him a new time to come back tomorrow so that we can finish. Tomorrow will have to be the day instead, the day where he must tell me whether he was tortured or which family members are missing. He will be expected to tell me whether it was psychological, physical, or sexual torture or how indeed he knows that they are missing. Perhaps he might describe how a body looks when the shrapnel from a barrel bomb has distorted it or whether or not he wakes up screaming in the middle of the night. He will be expected to articulate this within our perfectly planned timeslot, the words falling flat onto the computer screen. How will the words do his memory justice and how will rereading them do this meeting justice? How does one capture the experience of war verbally? How does one retell such a thing?

As my thoughts are entangled in which questions I should prioritize for the remaining ten minutes, he asks how long the interview must continue. That worn-out facial expression that I have seen time and time again haunts me, that facial expression that appears to manifest a newfound fear for one's own body and mind and its endless capabilities. That facial expression that realizes that one is not released from the shackles of day-to-day survival that ravished the soul throughout the journey once they have arrived at their final destination. The comparison of passport photos to photos taken upon arrival in asylum-processing centers is a testimony of this persistent truth. People can age fifteen years in the timespan of a few years. Sometimes I am worried that I will forget. What kind of person would I be if I forgot? I will force myself into remembering. If they are forced to remember their stories, then the least that I can do is remember their bearers. Try to remember her laugh, try to remember his face, try to remember who came from what village as the villages appear in scenes of bloodshed on my television screen during the news segment. Five interviews per day equals five faces to remember before I fall asleep every evening.

What's the point of continuing if he can't speak about the very reason for why he fled his country? He will be ascribed many different identities in Sweden. In the public sphere, he will often be spoken for and about, yet rarely with. When the Swedish journalists report live from the border of Hungary, streaming chaotic scenes of families forcefully herded by police, the newspapers will represent his body as vulnerable, a body worthy of mourning. When politicians speak of tightening the borders, his body will be exposed as a signifying risk to the social welfare system, or a risk to security, depending on the political agenda. As long as he is digitalized into eight numbers within the system, for some, those eight numbers will represent one of many that we should grant protection to, a building block in our humanitarian pride. For others, his eight numbers will represent one of too many. I realize that I have ascribed him the primary identity of 'father' from the moment that I met him. For the time being, I assume that his reason for leaving his country is in order to provide his daughter with a safer future. Ironically, I have constructed this fantasy through the transformation of the presence of his words to that which has become unsayable with language.

As I grab a new light blue folder from my pile, we end the interview and leave the room together. The fresh air in the corridor reminds me that I haven't breathed properly for a while. As the air inflates my lungs, I feel renewed. Without the translator, the table and an agenda between us, I feel like the

constraints of interviewer and interviewee are lifted, as I give him a weak smile and ask him carefully in Arabic how he's doing. My weak smile is reflected in his as he politely answers, 'okay.' In the interview room, my pre-packaged questions are a routine formality. His answers require his experiences and emotions to be compact. As we exit the interview room, I can see that the constraints of interviewer and interviewee have not been lifted for him. My reordering of space and time does not match his. As we stand by the table in the reception I inform him of what time he should come back tomorrow. He folds the receipt of his asylum application against the table, rubbing his fingers firmly against the crease, again and again. He carefully puts the paper in his pocket and thanks me for the interview. As I thank him, I tell him that I really hope that he gets to see his daughter soon. His eyes well up with tears. I wonder if he reflects on why I used the word 'hope.' If he reflects on why I can't just make sure that it happens. As he leaves, I open up the new light blue folder that I have been clutching in my hand. I open up the folder, balancing it between my right hand and my left forearm and look at the photograph. My eyes quickly scan the room, face by face, each person eagerly awaiting eye contact from me, as my eyes settle on the man from the photograph. I confirm his name and he approaches me smiling, as he quickly stuffs the paper defining his new rights and obligations in this country into his bag. My watch reads 10:00 a.m. I am right on time.