Hair caught in the barbed wire: A young woman's story of crossing borders and migration

*By **Ermelinda Xheza***

According to the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, it is only when we ask the other person "who are you" that we can get to understand their personal identity and subjectivity. Allow me then to narrate my story so that you may understand who I am; to attempt a reconstruction of the past, going against memory's refusal to retrieve what was in many ways a traumatic experience.

It was April 1991, just two months after the migration flow from Albania had begun and only few months from the fall of communism in the country. My father had gone to Greece since February, having told my mum that he would return. But things had gotten even worse in the meantime, and I remember my mum saying to him on the phone: "Stay there, we will come to you." None of my family wanted us to leave, but we set off all the same. We got in a big car, 10 people and me. I was only five years old.

It was early in the morning when we arrived at the Greek – Albanian borders, and our first task was to remain unobserved by the Albanian soldiers. We began to ascend Kakavia mountain, which is neither huge nor impressive, but in my eyes it seemed so. I was with my mother and my two uncles, and with us came others whom I do not remember; I never asked who they were. I've walked in many places since then, but that was the first journey that taught me the feeling of fear. I didn't know exactly what was causing this fear; I was only told that we would go to Greece, and I already knew that Greece was an 'elsewhere', an unfamiliar place, and in order to get there we had to keep quiet while we were walking. Nobody told me to keep quiet – after all, if there is one thing we are taught all too well by fear, it is silence. Since then, that silence and that fear forced me to be 'somehow different', or it uprooted 'something' from me for good. And this 'somehow' and 'something' are beyond the limits imposed by language.

We came upon a large wire fence that separated the Greek from the Albanian side. There was already an opening we could go through, obviously made by other people before us. My mother was ahead while my uncle and I were trailing behind. I remember watching her trying to go through, when her hair got caught in the barbed wire. She pulled it violently —she had no time— and I could see she was in pain. My gaze immediately turned towards the hair that remained in the wire fence, swaying in the wind. Eventually, I crossed over as well. I turned around one last time, wanting to hold this image in my memory. Something of hers was left behind; but haven't we all left

something behind? Now I know that in every crossing something always stays behind and something is always missing.

On our way, we saw lots of weapons left on the ground ahead. The abandoned weapons bore witness to the stability of those borders. For many years neither side had violated these borders and no one expected anyone else. It seems there had been discipline, obedience and predictability between "here" and "there", between "us" and "them". After a bit of walking, we suddenly saw my father, who had come to the border along with a Greek man from Corinth, a city in Greece, for whom he had been working since his arrival in Greece. They were accompanied by a couple of soldiers. We climbed down the mountain and appeared in front of them without a plan, as spontaneous and ignorant as only those who have not seen the world can be. The Greek, Mr. P, had told those soldiers that he was waiting for us and that he would assume responsibility, but then he was told that he could only get the woman and the girl.

The act of those soldiers who let us into the country illicitly was the absolute definition of hospitality. True, authentic hospitality is only when you welcome those who come to your door uninvited. Yet at the same time, and in contradiction to the first emotion before the gaze of the other, the one who would decide for me, I felt vulnerable. Having crossed the notional and physical barriers of the border, we had placed ourselves in a position of asking something of the other person, in a relationship which would never be equal, natural or easy. When we got in the car, P. gave me an orangeade, opened it and put a straw in it. I just stood there looking at him, not knowing what a straw was or how to use it. He showed me how to do it, and I think that was the first time I smiled. Even before we had set off I remember thinking that some day I would go back and show everyone the straws.

In an effort to read my own past, I am telling this story in the hope it that will help us deal with a time which brings some fundamental ethical dilemmas to the surface. Thus, while I am a person who experienced that no one spoke for me, I am now called upon, through the contradictions we each encounter in our path, to talk about others and link my own displacement to theirs. It is not important here that their displacement was more violent than mine; it is not important because the trauma of displacement is not quantifiable. Yet perhaps by sharing my story I may be able to make a little more familiar what is to most people an infinitely strange experience.

It would be utopian or dystopian, to invoke a world in which nation-states lose their meaning and our emotional attachment to them fades away. What does concern us all now, whether we like it or not, is the demand for the serious handling and the resolution of the refugee issue by the Greek, European and international leaderships. In view of the degradation, the despair and the all-encompassing misery of weak and humiliated people we must know that nothing other than man can ever have a fixed meaning. And it's only man who can be the beginning and the end of every story.

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