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Missing Words

Language is the only homeland.

—CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Tamer was the first refugee I met.

It was August 2015, in a dusty transit camp on Lesbos, a Greek island where I'd been vacationing with my husband's family. In the space of just a few weeks, it had become the center of a humanitarian crisis.

The camp barely lived up to its name. In a parking lot and an adjacent olive grove, an NGO had erected a few canvas tents; everyone else used nylon pup tents bought from the gas station across the road. The only steady food was from a snack truck selling chocolate croissants and coffee.

Stalled mid-flight by Greek police bureaucracy, probably a thousand people, mostly Syrian and Iraqi, baked in the summer sun, to a soundtrack of cicadas. People paced, argued, fretted, charged their phones on a daisy chain of cords patched into the base of a lamppost. Their faces were marked by bone-deep exhaustion. Tamer, though, had the energy of someone who has just arrived at a party; he strode right up and introduced himself.

We were at cross purposes, in a way. I had come to the camp to speak Arabic, which I'd studied in college and graduate school and I hoped could be useful now. I also knew Syria, from several trips before the war, and I wanted to repay some of the kindness I'd encountered there. Tamer, however, insisted on buying me an iced coffee, then set about practicing his English—really, showing it off.

This young man, all elbows and Adam's apple, already knew, for instance, "extenuating circumstances"—a phrase I suggested when he described how the war had come to Aleppo just as he was studying for his college entrance exam. "Yes, for sure," he replied, with a wry smile. But, he continued, the Syrian system had no room for excuses. His scores were lower than he hoped, so he was placed in engineering rather than the most prestigious program, medicine; he would not be a doctor, like his mother.

As he proceeded with college, Tamer faced a dilemma: Every year brought him closer to graduation—as well as certain conscription into the Syrian army. After his third year, with no sign of war's end, his grandmother—the family matriarch since his mother's divorce, Tamer explained—came

to a decision: Tamer and his older brother, who had already dropped out of school to avoid the draft, must finish their education, and the safest place was Germany. So the two of them, along with their mother, went off in a minivan to the Turkish border, where they forded a river in the dark. A few nights after that, they crossed the Aegean in a rubber boat, again in darkness. And here they were on a rocky edge of Europe, in unrelenting sunlight.

Tamer and I talked for a couple of hours that day. He was funny and earnest and engaged. “Thank you,” he said at one point. “That is the first word I’ve learned from a native English speaker.” What was the word I taught him? I can’t remember, and every few months I poke at this missing memory, the way my tongue pokes at my missing wisdom teeth.

To know enough words that you can afford to forget a few: This is a luxury that Tamer and other refugees don’t have. No sooner do they find relative safety than they run into a new set of problems: strange sounds, an alien grammar and vocabulary. The language barrier is a second border, one that language may take a whole remaining lifetime to cross. Their lives can change according to what they are able to say and understand, and what words people use to describe them. Compared with war or persecution, language may seem a trivial concern. Unlike a bombing, though, you can’t run away from it; the only option, if you want to thrive, is to turn and face it head on.

Perhaps I see things this way because I’m a writer, and because I’ve spent a lot of time studying foreign languages. I can see that even for someone like Tamer, who spoke so fluently, language is hard work. In the past few years, I’ve done what I can to assist, using all the bits of languages I know to help people feel more at home, wherever they’ve landed. Most often, it has meant listening to them speak however they can, in whatever language they have. Sometimes I understand; sometimes I don’t. We work together around the missing words, rephrasing or coming at a subject from a different angle, maybe finding something better to say in the process.



I met Mirza in November 2015, when I returned to Lesbos. By that time, several thousand refugees were arriving every day, despite the onset of winter rains. The port city of Mytilene hummed with broken English, bouncing among aid workers, civilian volunteers, shopkeepers, and refugees.

One evening, at a busy travel agency where I'd gone to collect money from Western Union, I noticed a young man attempting, in halting English supplemented by gestures, to get a ticket for that night's boat to Athens, rather than the next day's. "No changes," the Greek desk agent cut in, his face a mask. The man shrank away from the flat words, as if wounded.

I could add what the agent hadn't cared to, or wasn't able to. Turning to the man, I said, "It's just the policy. They can't change the date on the ticket—for anyone, not just refugees." Even if he didn't understand all my words, I figured, he'd at least hear kindness in my voice.

To judge from his bearing, the man was in his early twenties, but his pocked and sun-weathered skin made him look older. He huddled inside a large leather biker jacket. His eyes met mine, then he looked away quickly, shrinking back into the jacket, into the crowd.

Not long after, I was walking on the waterfront when he appeared next to me. He was no taller than my shoulder. "You know hotel?" he asked, softly. "Here all full." He gestured toward the two hotels within sight.

I did know hotels, in fact; I had just written a kind of guidebook for volunteers on the island. Together, we walked around the Mytilene harbor, checking each hotel for a vacancy. In the blocks between, the man told me about himself, using mostly nouns and unconjugated verbs: Afghanistan. Name Mirza. Go Germany. Family no.

At the far end of the harbor's arc, one hotel had a room. "Sixty euros," said the receptionist, apologetically. "But I can give him free breakfast."

Mirza's brave face, the one he had kept as we walked and talked, was slipping. His sharp leather jacket looked slumped and shapeless, his shoes scuffed. I recognized the glazed look in his eyes. Our English chitchat—so easy for me, so demanding for him—had sapped all his remaining energy.

Not wanting to embarrass him in front of the receptionist, I ushered him a few steps out the front door before pressing two crisp €50 bills into his hand. Because I'd received the money just an hour earlier, it seemed to barely belong to me; it was easy to pass along.

Mirza protested once, faintly, then marched back to the desk and took the room. Then he asked me to stay for tea.

I saw this was the only gesture he could offer in thanks, and my instincts told me he was kind and safe. Our lack of common language was an asset, in this case: During gaps in the conversation, I'd scoured his eyes and his

body language more closely than I would have if he'd been a fellow English speaker. So I perched on the chair in the lounge area of his room—€60 bought a whole suite—while he went downstairs to fetch the tea.

He returned proudly with the tea on a tray; bearing it seemed to have given him a fresh burst of energy. We sat and sipped our Lipton tea, sweetened with three packets of sugar, and fumbled for words. Mirza showed me photos of his family on his phone. They looked prosperous, official; several posed in elegant robes in front of spring-green mountainsides, while another sat behind a big, gleaming desk. One male relative, Mirza managed to communicate, had been kidnapped and threatened by the Taliban.

Finally, conscious that every minute was eating into his night's sleep, I excused myself.

“Good night, my sister,” Mirza said.



The next time I went to Lesbos, in May 2016, I met Félix, from Cameroon, and Mamadou, from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Again the situation on the island had changed, and now anyone who arrived on a smugglers' boat was held in a razor-wire-trimmed detention camp. After a month, they were allowed to leave by day, which is what Félix and Mamadou had done. They'd volunteered their skills as a plumber and an electrician, respectively, to a shelter on the north coast of the island, which is where I met them. I offered to give them a lift back to camp.

Both men spoke French. I had studied the language for three years, in high school and college, but only ever used it on a couple of weekend trips to Paris, to order coffee and croissants. The drive across the island, normally an hour on winding roads, was even trickier and slower than usual, as I struggled to understand my passengers without constantly turning to check their faces for clues.

We talked, as best we could, about the men's situation: what it meant to be in Europe, how to request asylum. Our conversation mixed high-flown legal terms (fortunately cognate with English) with the most elementary vocabulary, plus body language and repetition for emphasis. When I speculated that Mamadou might have to go back to the DRC, if Greece gave *une décision négative* on his case, he shook his head furiously. “La guerre,”

he muttered through pinched lips, staring fixedly out the passenger-side window. “Non, non, non.”

Félix—a tall, sturdy man with an easy air about him—was calmer. He sat directly in the middle of the back seat, the better to catch my eye in the rearview mirror. “I am thirty-one years old,” he said, in French. “I am strong. What work is there for me, madame?” He just wanted to make a little money, he didn’t care where. If Greece offered some security, he would stay there happily; he would learn Greek. What should he do?

I explained the asylum system, as I understood it, in the simplest terms. Greece was in *une crise financière*, and there was no work, even for Greeks. To stay in Greece, I told him, he must have *le traumatisme psychologique* or show *la persécution*. He must be—I finished too bluntly—“une victime.” And then we drove on in silence. Wasn’t it odd, I reflected, that a country would take in only victims, and not a thoughtful, able-bodied person?

By the time we neared the camp it was late in the day. Félix spoke up to say that he and Mamadou would be getting back after the other two thousand or so residents had formed the line for dinner, and so would have little chance of eating that night.

OK, I said, let’s go to Mytilene and get some souvlaki.

As we descended the hill into the town, Mamadou gasped. His slim thighs had gone rigid and he was clutching the seat and the door. I looked around in alarm, expecting an oncoming truck.

Instead, Mamadou exclaimed, “C’est la vie normale!”

All around us were people shopping, zipping by on mopeds, parking, eating. Normal life, taking place just over the ridge from the camp, ten minutes’ drive away. And it had been going on the whole time Mamadou and Félix were locked up.

“Vraiment,” Mamadou said, hand to heart, “je me sens mou ici.” Truly, I feel weak here.

At the souvlaki stand, I asked the men what they wanted. Mamadou wanted a chicken sandwich with nothing but salt, and a Coke. Félix wanted pork. “With everything?” I asked. “Yes, with everything,” he said firmly. “I will try it.” He also wanted a beer.

We sat at a rickety sidewalk table, facing the harbor. Mamadou bent seriously over his sandwich, packing his cheeks full. Once done, he stretched in his chair, sitting straight and tall.

A well-dressed older Greek woman strode by on the sidewalk.

“Bonjour, madame,” Mamadou said.

“Bonjour,” she murmured, with a tiny smile.

Félix sipped the last of his beer. “Thank you for share the meal,” he said with care, in English. We all stared out at the late-afternoon glow on the harbor. For just a minute, life was normal, and no one was a victim.



Near the end of my stay on Lesbos, I happened to meet a middle-aged Syrian man from Raqqa. His wife had been kidnapped by ISIS, he told me in Arabic, and he had been forced to flee to Turkey without her. Then, by some miracle, she was freed and escaped to Turkey, where the family was reunited.

We were talking in the shade of fragrant pine trees, in front of a log cabin. This was not the detention camp, nor the parking-lot camp, but an actual summer camp, now housing the most vulnerable refugees: the chronically ill, the disabled, the severely traumatized.

While the man was relating this harrowing story, his young son, eyes vacant but sweet, toddled over. The man picked the boy up and held him close.

“I don’t want to get into politics, but...,” he continued. He went on to voice an opinion that was increasingly common among Syrians and Europeans alike: Economic migrants—the people who traveled to Greece without the heat of war at their backs—were a burden. “All these others,” the man growled, cradling his son in his arms, “they are ruining things for us. They make the system slow, and they don’t deserve to be here. They are just here for work. We Syrians are here for our lives.”

The boy burred and stuck his fingers in his mouth. Up close, he looked much older than he had first appeared.

I drove away from the shady, fragrant summer camp—the most beautiful place for the most victimized—picking at the man’s terminology. In Arabic as in English, the distinction between “refugee” (*laji*) and “migrant” (*muhajir*) was ever more critical. Refugees still garnered sympathy. “No one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land”: Everyone was quick to quote those lines by the British poet Warsan Shire. But what of those without children, from countries where the hazards didn’t make the

evening news in Europe? They were, by default, “migrants” and treated with some skepticism. In the months since the refugee crisis had bloomed, “migrant” had taken on a pejorative cast; in practice, it was almost synonymous with “African.”

I thought of the men who’d been in my car just days before. Mamadou, tense and anxious at the thought of returning to the war in the DRC. Félix, leaning forward from the back seat to ask about work. I saw the Syrian man’s point, and I wished him speed and luck and care for his son—and his wife, who had probably endured more than was spoken. At the same time, who could blame Félix for wanting something better in life?



That same spring, I stopped in Germany to visit Tamer, the Syrian engineering student, in the city where he and his family had finally landed. When he spotted me at the train station, he bounded up just as he had on Lesbos, hand outstretched. But when he opened his mouth to greet me, he froze in surprise.

I knew—as a fellow language student knows—what was happening in his brain. Tamer had been in Germany a little more than eight months, and learning German for six. Now, fishing for English words, he caught only the German ones that swam at the surface; he threw those back and fished, deeper.

“Uff,” he finally stammered. “This is frustrating. Hello.”

On the bus ride to his house, his English slipped slowly back into place—though occasionally his verbs would not pop up until the end of the sentence. He told me about his family’s fast but exhausting trip from Greece, along the so-called “Balkan Route” that hundreds of thousands had followed until recently, when Macedonia closed its borders.

“Do you know where one night we slept?” Tamer asked me, eyes wide. “On the earth. In the mud.” That night, he had questioned his grandmother’s decision for the first time. But the family pressed on to Germany. Winter they spent in a camp in Hamburg. In the spring they were transferred to this smaller city farther north. After a couple of months in yet another camp, they had finally moved into their own apartment.

Tamer’s mother, Dima, arrived at the apartment not long after Tamer and me. She was unruffled by the sudden appearance of a near-stranger on

her sofa. I had met her briefly on Lesbos, where we exchanged a few words in Arabic. I'd remembered her only as pretty and put-together, her hijab tightly wrapped and spotless, even in the heat and dust. Now I saw she was younger than me, maybe forty, with frizzy black hair and a smooth, heart-shaped face. After she asked if I'd eaten, she said, "Now, who are you?"

Tamer and I sat on the sofa, our feet on the coffee table like lazy teenagers waiting for after-school snacks. It was Dima, though, who'd just come home from class—she was taking a German course organized by the city's refugee-outreach center.

In fact, the whole family was studying German, and the apartment, with its disorderly piles of books and its starter furniture, had the feel of a college dorm. Tamer had plunged right into a course at the university, eager to fill his prerequisites so he could start again on his degree. His older brother, Imad, more of a free spirit, was being tutored by a German girl. He arrived home from his lessons just as Dima finished making lunch.

"At first, I hated German because it was so difficult," Dima told me when we all sat down to eat. We spoke mostly Arabic, with Tamer translating occasionally. Behind us, the muted TV flashed images of the tens of thousands of refugees camped on the Greek side of the now-closed border with Macedonia.

Dima was no stranger to foreign languages. She spoke fluent Russian, having attended medical school in Russia and practiced in Ukraine. Tamer and Imad were born while she was a student, which meant long hours in daycare for them. Tamer remembered a particular Russian lullaby from his time there, and even now he would sometimes listen to it on YouTube, instantly becoming sleepy.

"German is still difficult," Dima went on. "But now I like that it's difficult. I like to learn." Her uncle, back in Syria, was a polyglot, and he called periodically to and quiz her on German. She pulled up his photo on her phone. It showed an elegant older man, white hair slicked back, in a rakish suit with a pocket square. Behind him was a wall of books. He'd taught himself five languages, Dima said—mostly by marrying a series of foreign women.

Unlike Dima, Imad had not yet found anything to like about German. "It just sounds so bad," he said, with a cheerful smirk. He had a thick swoop of black hair over his forehead and a bit of swagger. Asked how he spent his days, he told me he lifted weights, planting a theatrical kiss on each of his biceps.

Dima had to concede her son's point. "English has a nice rhythm. Russian also. French sounds like birds." The boys nodded along—clearly they'd had this discussion before. "But German..."

"I mean, you bump into someone on the bus—" Imad continued.

"French says *excusez-moi*—" added Tamer, building up to the punch line.

"But here," Imad resumed, "you're supposed to say...*entschuldigung*?" Deadpan and mock-Teutonic, his delivery was flawless. We collapsed into laughter.

"And how they say 'I love you'?" Dima chimed in, when we'd all sat up again. "We say *bahibbak*." She emphasized the whispery h of the Arabic, a romantic sigh built into the middle of the word.

"And they say *ich liebe dich*!" Tamer fairly wailed. "How will I ever say this to a girl?" His mother smacked the table with glee.

After that, every German word was fair game. The three of them took turns shouting out their favorites, as in a perverse vocabulary drill, and we were soon teary-eyed and breathless from laughing at this heavy, plodding language that had taken over their lives.



Later that year, I visited Mirza, the Afghan I'd helped on Lesbos, in a small town in central Germany. He had recently moved out of his camp—a group home with eighty single men who fought every night—to an apartment with eight friends, all fellow Afghans. I said I'd be honored to be his first guest.

He was waiting for me at the train station, dressed head to toe in white, offset by his dark hair, gleaming with pomade, and a heavy black backpack. He had just come from German class, he told me, gesturing to his bag, and he sprang up the stairs with the energy of a child released from kindergarten.

"Too much difficult!" he said to me in the taxi when I asked how his classes were going. "*Der, die, das!*" Neither Mirza's native language, Uzbek, nor Dari, which he'd learned in school, has a definite article—much less three.

Mirza's Uzbek did give him one advantage in Germany: He could communicate with Turkish immigrants, which helped in little ways. When we got in the taxi, for instance, he'd deployed his German, but when the driver didn't understand, Mirza asked a Turkish driver from farther down the queue to translate for him.

Mirza's apartment was on the very edge of town, in a fringe of wild greenery punctuated by car dealerships and a home for developmentally disabled adults. But it was large and clean, and a bus that stopped right out front went directly to his German school.

Mirza and I shared only the most basic English—a detail I'd almost forgotten because we communicated mostly by swapping photos on Facebook. Fortunately, there was business to pass the time: I toured the apartment—three bedrooms, each with three twin beds and three footlockers, as in a fairy tale—and met Mirza's roommates, all as young and meticulously dressed as he, several in matching outfits. I admired the mountain of kebabs that had been marinating all day, as well as other preparations for dinner.

Just as conversation flagged, an older German couple arrived. Willie and Karla were the men's unofficial caretakers, parental figures who had helped them move and furnish the apartment. They were boisterous and outgoing; Willie tall and bony, Karla plump, with fancy nails. Soon the living room was ringing with laughter and the sound of candy wrappers, as everyone dug into the bag of milk caramels the couple had brought.

Willie and Karla left after only half an hour, but by then it was time to cook dinner, out in the yard. Mirza's friend Hameed, an older man, came to oversee the grilling. A Kurdish neighbor also joined us, bearing a tray of Turkish-style tea in tulip-shaped glasses. Like the Afghans, he was in his twenties, but he'd been in Germany since childhood, and he carried himself with a confidence they lacked. He spoke German with them and, with me, a little Arabic, which he'd learned from classmates.

Mirza heard us. "You speak Arabic?" he said to me, astonished. "I speak Arabic!" He had worked in Dubai for a couple of years before coming to Europe. Beyond basic pleasantries, though, I soon discerned that Mirza's Arabic was barely better than his English. No matter—the meat smoke rose in fragrant clouds, the sky went cobalt, and the dense greenery darkened and hummed with insects.

The next morning, Mirza made me breakfast. We both were nursing colds, and the previous day of pidgin small talk with near-strangers had worn me out. I'd spent all my energy trying to think of things to say, then discarding them as too complicated; I guessed he must feel the same. We shuffled around in silence while he cooked and laid the table.

Mirza had composed a meal that seemed straight out of a Google search for “European breakfast”: boiled eggs, soft white rolls, spongy pink deli meat, cheese slices, apricot jam, coffee with foamed milk.

Gesturing for me to sit down to the feast, he said, “I didn’t understand which you’d like.”

In my exhausted state, it took me a minute to grasp his fuller meaning. *I wasn’t sure what you’d want for breakfast*, Mirza was trying to tell me, *so I made this, and I really hope you like it.*



A year after I gave Félix, the Cameroonian plumber, a lift across Lesbos, I saw him again in Athens. He had been able to move there the previous fall, after he was released from the detention center.

He was waiting for me in front of a café I’d suggested—but it was a Sunday, and the café was closed, the street silent. We had the whole block to ourselves, and we stared at each other with surprise. To see him here was both disconcerting and thrilling, as it had been to see Tamer and Mirza in Germany, away from the grim circumstances where we’d met. In a red plaid shirt and jeans, a khaki jacket draped over his arm, Félix looked incrementally closer to a normal life.

“Bonjour, ça va, c’est terrificque,” I started out in my terrible French, which was completely inadequate for expressing my delight. But Félix gave a small, pleased smile.

“English, madame,” he said. “I learn some now.”

In lieu of the shuttered café, we wound up at a generic place with long-heated spanakopita and plastic chairs that creaked under our weight. As the counter woman stared idly out the window—we were the only customers—Félix told me he had been preparing for his asylum interview with a volunteer lawyer. He had also seen a therapist a few times. “It helps a lot,” he said. “Is not easy.”

In the time since he’d sat in my car, looking confident and asking about work, I’d gleaned a little more about him. While he was still in the razor-wired detention camp on Lesbos, he had sent me an anguished text message, in machine-translated English. “Madame,” he wrote, “I just want to go home.” His diabetic mother had been taken to the hospital, and he wanted

to go to Athens and “surrender” at the Cameroonian embassy. I puzzled over this word. Was Félix a fugitive? Did he misunderstand his legal position in Greece? Or was it all a failure of Google Translate? When I consulted a volunteer who had spent more time with Félix, he confirmed that Félix was desperate to return home, “but from what he’s told me,” he wrote, “it’s really not safe for him to go back.” It was the first hint I had that, even though Cameroon wasn’t a war zone, Félix was perhaps something other than a so-called “migrant,” and that he might have a case for asylum.

A few months later came another hint at past trauma. Having registered as an asylum seeker, Félix was eligible for medical care, and he wrote me that he’d be going into the hospital for a small operation, to remove a bullet from his leg, which hurt him in cold weather. He sent a picture of his thigh, marred by a murky scar.

There in that cheap café, on a quiet Sunday, in rudimentary English, Félix told me his story.

Félix’s good friend was gay. One day the police came and arrested both men in a café. In prison, the guards beat them, then took his friend and raped him. Afterward, the guards pushed his friend back into their cell, and the man died as Félix held him. Félix was shot in the leg, and he got so sick in prison that he was taken to a hospital. After a week, a man came to him in the hospital and warned him that the guards would be coming the next morning to return him to prison.

That night, with nothing but the clothes he was wearing, Félix left the hospital and boarded a bus to Nigeria. He called his family and told them to sell his house and wire him the money. In Lagos he boarded a plane for the first time and flew to Istanbul, where he lived for a year and a half, saving more money for the trip to Europe.

I wondered at the story’s mysterious gaps and leaps. Was Félix himself gay? What had prompted the police to arrest him and his friend? Who had shot him? Who was the man who warned him in the hospital? I couldn’t know if these were intentional omissions or parts of the story that Félix had decided were too complicated to explain in English. Still, in its particular horrors and dramatic turns, Félix’s tale was no less plausible than any other refugee’s I’d heard. I thought, for instance, of the Syrian from Raqqa, whose story of reuniting with his wife also had gaps—but ones I could fill in myself, ISIS’s forms of savagery being well known. What did I

know, by contrast, of the Cameroonian legal system? I was in no position to verify anything.

What was certain was Félix's emotion. Concluding his story, he mentioned his friend again, and touched his plaid shirt. "I burn, here, in my heart," he said, and his eyes were suddenly, startlingly red; he was holding back tears. He wanted to go back to Cameroon, he said, to find those guards and take revenge. But if his words were fierce, his face was resigned; he knew this would never happen—nor should it.



While in Athens, I met another Afghan, Ali. On this trip, I had brought a suitcase full of language study materials and posted to a volunteers group on Facebook, asking if anyone might want to distribute the books to refugees they knew. Ali had found the group, read my post, and asked me directly for Greek textbooks and a Greek-English dictionary. I liked his initiative. I also liked that he was studying Greek, because not many refugees did.

Most refugees were in Greece by accident, marooned when Macedonia closed its border. The majority aspired to go elsewhere. Syrians were eligible for "relocation," an EU program that promised only that they would end up anywhere but Greece. Others tried to escape as they had arrived, with the help of smugglers. Virtually no one saw a future in Greece.

Ali was different. Aiming to meet his sister in Germany, he had made it as far as Serbia when the European borders froze. After six months in brutal camp conditions, with no hope of moving north and a hostile attitude from local Serbs, he better appreciated the short time he'd spent in Greece—a country of thoughtful, helpful people, and sunny to boot. So he walked to the Macedonian border, crossed illegally, and took a bus to the Greek border, where he presented himself to the police and requested asylum.

Ali's decision was also based on data. In Germany, the acceptance rate for Afghan asylum seekers was plummeting; in Greece, the odds looked more favorable. It was a harsh analysis that meant turning away from his sister, but it seemed in keeping with his manner. He was a serious, somber-eyed man, in his early thirties. His English was careful and measured, as if he checked each word before releasing it into the world. The only suggestion of possible frivolity was a tiny, neatly groomed soul patch.

The plastic bag of books I gave Ali, on a street corner in Athens, caused a faint ripple in his affect. “Thank you very much indeed,” he said, with care, and I recognized a certain glow in his eyes as he flipped through the pages of the dictionary. Here were all the answers, all the words, the key to everything, in one tidy place.

The second time we met, Ali and I strolled through central Athens and watched the crowds from the stairs above Syntagma Square. This was when he told me he was an atheist. He had “left religion behind” (as he phrased it) in Afghanistan, having seen the Taliban up close, and his parents’ compliance with their demands. He also told me he had been a teacher and run a youth center in his hometown. But those were the only details he cared to share about his personal life.

Ali was living just outside Athens, in a camp on a converted naval base. His “room” was a cot fenced off with bed sheets. He showed me a photo, which revealed a white labyrinth in a vast hall. On a map, the base looked convenient to the city, but the nearest bus stop was thirty minutes’ walk away, down an industrial road. When I said this didn’t seem so bad, Ali released only three words: “There are dogs.”

One of the reasons he wanted to learn more Greek was to communicate with the people who ran the camp. He had compiled a list of things that he and the other refugees needed to say, and that might be said to them. Could I help him translate it into the necessary languages?

I agreed. Soon after, Ali sent me the list on WhatsApp. It looked like free verse and, in all that went unsaid, cut as deep as a short story by Lydia Davis:

The food is not good
Give me a bottle of water, Please
Please give me more food
I am sick and I can’t eat this kinda food so give the
 special portion.
Fruit
Give me some fruit, juice.
Orange
Apple
Honey
Bread

These 2 food is enough
 If you want more food, then come back at the end.
 See
 The food is awful.
 It's not eatable.
 Shampoo
 Diaper
 Shaving cream
 Razor
 I need
 If you need anything, come back tomorrow

I was taking introductory Greek at the time, four hours every afternoon, and we'd already covered much of this basic vocabulary. For the rest of the list, I turned to my teacher, Effie, a bright-eyed, middle-aged woman who, like so many Greeks I'd met in this era of crisis, managed to be dour and joyous at once. I guessed that she would help because she was prone to impassioned lectures on the importance of cosmopolitanism and the glory of words. "There is no language or culture that is not interesting," she proclaimed. She sat down to our project with angry energy, a large mug of tea, and much sighing.

When Effie and I had finished, I transliterated the Greek into Roman letters and Arabic script, so that camp residents could sound out the words. I also polished Ali's English and translated his list into Arabic, and Ali wrote it in Dari.

Reading Ali's initial list, his accidental poem, had felt a bit like slipping down a dark well. Our finished project felt more like something that we had built up together: six strong columns in support of human dignity.



Félix's interview went well. Like therapy, it gave him a chance to tell his whole story, start to finish. In his own language, he had much more to say than he had said to me. He used up all the time allotted for his interview and was asked to return the next week for another two hours. His lawyer was happy, saying that Félix had likely supplied enough confirmable

details to offset his lack of documentation from Cameroon. When I saw Félix afterward, he walked with fresh ease.

Improbably (given the state of the Greek economy), he went on to secure a job at a hotel on Mykonos. It was for the summer season only and paid a mere €25 a day, but room and board were included, and he was able to use his plumbing skills. He also picked up some Greek. On the first day of July, he wished me a good month (*kalo mina*), as Greeks do. “Now every night I am tired,” he wrote, “and at the same time proud to be finally helpful. I feel useful, really.”

In the fall, he came back with more than €1,000 in his bank account, and chipmunk cheeks and a little pot belly from the free hotel buffet. Then it was a slow slide into winter. His mother was sick again and needed expensive medication; he needed warm clothes; one of his roommates skipped out with the rent money.

He also spent his savings on a false Swiss residency card and a plane ticket to Paris, where he hoped to find more work and, as a Francophone, easy communication. Because flights to other Schengen-treaty countries were not subject to passport control, they were considered the easiest way to slip out of Greece. As a black man, though, Félix drew more attention than most passengers, and he was stopped at the gate by an airline employee who doubted his residency card. He tried again repeatedly—different airports in Greece, different destinations, different fake documents—but failed every time. Fortunately there was no legal penalty, and when his money ran out, there was free lunch at the Catholic church a few blocks from his apartment.

Meanwhile, I hadn't heard much from Tamer—probably, I guessed, because he'd gone deep into German studies and found it a chore to write in English. Indeed, when he did finally write, his English was terse and simple, nothing like in the past. His news, however, was good: After a sixteen-month wait, he'd received his papers. He was officially designated a refugee and could proceed with college. Eventually he'd have a German passport. His mother and brother were still waiting, but they didn't expect a problem.

One day, Mirza called me through Facebook. When the camera switched on, he opened his mouth, then paused. He had that familiar look on his face: His brain was searching for words and finding only wrong ones. So we just laughed and said “Good, good!” to each other and hung up.

Two days later he wrote, “I am very sad.” His asylum case had been rejected. Two days after that, Félix, in Greece, heard the same.

The next week, Ali went for his interview. After waiting several hours at the asylum office, he was told that no interpreter was available and his appointment would be rescheduled. The new date was in October—eleven months away.



As for my brief study of Greek, it wasn't particularly successful, at least in terms of vocabulary memorized and grammar retained. I found myself grumbling about Greek articles, just as Mirza had lamented German ones. But I was sharply aware that I had a choice in learning, as Mirza and my other friends did not.

During the last week of class, Effie said something that struck me. Already thinking of life after class, all of us students were drifting and making elementary blunders. “Focus,” Effie snapped. “These four hours are a gift.”

“Gift” was not the word I would have chosen. It had been several years since I'd been in a 101-level language class, and I resisted the rote drills, which struck me as antiquated and dull. I had tried to extemporize, express my personality, make jokes. Really, though, I had only made mistakes.

“This class is a time you do not worry about other things,” Effie continued. Now in lecture mode, she trained her bright eyes on each of us in turn. “Because often the other things in our life are not so nice. This class is psychotherapy, believe me.”

She didn't say more; she didn't need to. The week before, she had rushed to answer her phone in the middle of class. Apologizing after, she explained that it was her niece, whose calls she made a policy of answering at any time, ever since the girl's parents had been killed in a car accident.

I saw then how, for all the refugees I'd met, a new language was an undeniable barrier, but it could also be a respite and a balm. In class, for a few hours a day, they could be not refugees, with all the struggle and trauma and uncertainty that implied, but simply students. They could answer “How are you?” with “I am fine,” and if they said it often enough they might start to feel it. Verb conjugations, chanted out loud, cleared the mind; even those cursed German articles “*der, die, das*” could be a kind of mantra.

Serious, studious Ali was admitted to a college-level English program at an American school in Athens. The work pulled him away from the rage and depression he felt after his interview was postponed. At the asylum office, he was powerless. Language, though—this was something he could control.

In Germany, both Mirza and Tamer were, at least temporarily, content. Mirza, who had appealed his asylum case, had a new apartment all to himself and a job in a clothing shop. “I am too much *glücklich!*” he told me on the phone, again and again, after we used up our other words in common. Tamer was applications to engineering programs, and I sensed that I probably wouldn’t hear from him again; he had slid out of my life and into his German one.

As for Félix, he finally reached France, perhaps because he managed to scrape together money for better fake documents, perhaps because an airport gate agent finally turned a blind eye to an African man with an overstuffed backpack.

For a couple of weeks, he was like any tourist, sending me photos of the Eiffel Tower and descriptions of his meals. I was delighted for him, especially imagining him finally in a place of linguistic comfort, where he could speak to almost anyone and be understood. But I knew he had also gone to France in search of a functioning economy, which Greece could not offer him, no matter how cheerfully he greeted people on the first day of the month.

Language still defines Félix’s existence—or rather, two words do. When he left Greece, he also left behind the asylum appeal that might have won him the legal status of refugee. In France, he became what I assumed him to be when we first met. For now, at least, he is “only” a migrant, living like any other undocumented worker, in the shadows.

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