Paper(less) selves: the refugee in contemporary textual culture

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Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.

Contents

Editorial, Anne Collett

ARTICLES

Liz Mondel, 'V.S Naipaul: The Melancholy Mandarin' 18

Anthony Bourke, 'Lines in the Sand: The Personal and Historical Story of an Exhibition' 34

Tony Simoes da Silva, 'Paper(less) Selves: The Refugee in Contemporary Textual Culture' 58

Brenda Cooper, 'Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*’ 79

Ouyang Yu, 'Against Autobiography: Towards a Self-Fictionalisation' 97

Sara E. Cooper, 'Humorismo en Cuba: Bohemia Comics from The Year of the Revolution' 116

Orna Raz, ‘“From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”: The West Indians and the Church in *An Unsuitable Attachment* by Barbara Pym’ 137

Mohammad Quayam, 'Interrogating Malaysian Literature in English: Its Glories, Sorrows and Thematic Trends' 149

Pauline T. Newton, 'From Chempaka, the Muslim Tree of Death, to Scarf-Covered Banana Plants: Postcolonial Representations of Gardening Images in Tash Aw’s The Harmony Silk Factory' 170

FICTION

Olive Senior, ‘A Father Like That’ 106

MEMORIAL ESSAY

Robert Sullivan, ‘Hone Tuwhare 1922–2008: An Extraordinary Poet’ 8

POETRY

Syd Harrex, ‘Egina’, ‘Walking Out in the Clare Valley’, 33, 73
‘La Fontaine de Vauclose’, ‘Leaves’, 105, 136

REVIEW ESSAY

Anne Collett, ‘Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet’ 188

ABSTRACTS

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

NOTES ON EDITORIAL ADVISORS

194

197

200
TOWARD A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Ira N. Liss

THE REFUGEES OF ISRAEL

Refugees, the human waste of the global economy, and the "outsiders" and "enemies" constitute the major conflictual groups in contemporary society. They are perceived as "foreigners" and "strangers," as "others," and as such are often subject to violence. Their presence is seen as a threat to the national identity. This is a paradox, since the very existence of the state is based on the exclusion of these groups.

The refugee experience is characterized by a sense of displacement and loss. The refugees are forced to leave their homeland, often under violent circumstances, and settle in a new country where they are often viewed with suspicion and discrimination. This experience is further compounded by the fact that refugees are generally denied the same rights as the host population.

The refugee experience is also characterized by a sense of identity. The refugees are forced to redefine their sense of self in a new cultural context. This process is further complicated by the fact that refugees are often denied the opportunity to express their identity in a meaningful way.

The refugee experience is a complex and multi-faceted one. It involves a sense of displacement, loss, and identity. It is a process that is ongoing and evolves over time. The refugee experience is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity for adaptation and change.
However, passing reference will be made to novels such as South African Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001), Moroccan Mahi Binebine’s *Welcome to Paradise* (1999 in French; 2004) and Australian Nicholas Jose’s *Original Face* (2005). This eclectic selection aims on the one hand to bring into relief the point made earlier that the concern with refugees is now especially pronounced in visual and literary narratives throughout the world; but it is also aimed at juxtaposing a range of broad imaginings of the condition of refugees in today’s world as part of a larger debate about the political function of literature. While I am conscious that the novels constitute merely individual articulations of each writer’s perspective on the refugee phenomenon in contemporary society, I see them overtly intervening in complex debates about politics, human rights, ethics and literature.

Indian novelist Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is not a novel about refugees in the strict sense that characterises the works of Schönstein and Kikamba, or even Frears’ film. Desai’s novel tells the story of a small group of individuals living in a remote Himalayan village, and of the way they are brought face to face with a world they thought they could keep at a distance. This is the shabby, apparently unexciting and deceivingly safe world the novel’s main character, Biju, a young Indian man, abandons to journey to the USA on fake identity papers, a decision that suddenly places him along a fluid refugee continuum. To the American authorities, Biju would fall neatly into the definition of an economic immigrant, but his new life in New York is almost a textbook illustration of a fluid modernity as defined also by Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*. Although Biju’s desire for self-improvement accords with modernity’s ideological call for endless self-improvement and progress, it leads him to break another of modernity’s sacred precepts, the inviolability of the nation state. It is as a result of this latter infringement that he finds himself defined as one of a mass of an ‘itinerant underclass’, to borrow Graham Huggan’s view of the multitudes caught in the vortex of globalisation (Huggan 15) in which subtexts of legitimate or illegitimate claims to protection are overwhelmed by louder discourses of fear and alterity. The novel offers a particularly topical portrait of the complex ways of being a refugee in today’s modern world, as defined by Bauman and others as migrant, legal or otherwise; asylum seeker, exile; marginalised self. For in the semi-legal world that Biju inhabits in New York he regularly comes into contact with people whose status cuts across one or more dimensions of refugee identity in its broader definition. Although a survivor in the way that is second nature to refugees, Biju himself negotiates smartly but anxiously among the multiple identities available to the refugee qua illegal immigrant, asylum seeker, itinerant. However, such deftness comes at great cost to his selfhood. At its most superficial level, this involves a constant flux between acts of literal mimicry and moments when he struggles to reaffirm and ‘salvage’ his Indian self. In one sense, his move to the USA places his ‘original self’ as Indian into abeyance without entirely denying him its meaning. Unlike other fellow Indians, Biju refuses to succumb to ‘American’ ways such as hamburger-eating. However, while his new self in New York has almost cut him off from his family and homeland, he is luckier than many who pay a much higher price to acquire their ‘refugeeness’ (Nyers 2006). In part, the novel’s impact resides in its depiction of Biju’s epic battle to stay true to his Indian self while making his way in the globalised setting of New York.

Recent works such as British filmmaker, Stephen Frears’ *Dirty Pretty Things* and Australian novelist, Nicholas Jose’s *Original Face*, for example, depict a rather different world where refugees will do pretty much anything to exchange the ‘real selves’ signified by their names and original documents for the sake of residency in the UK, in the USA or elsewhere in the developed world. In Jose, this means a gruesome excision of a human face and the potential multiplicity of people with the same names on their fake documents. Frears’ film depicts a similarly disturbing trade in selves and passports where no price is ever too high as desperate people strive to enter the modern world of ‘making business’, in the words of another refugee figure, in Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (62). In London, struggling to save the life of a man brought close to death by a kidney removal gone wrong, Frears’ Olesungun Okwe, the Nigerian-trained doctor, requests the Somali’s relatives to ‘Ask him how much he got for his kidney’. The reply, when it emerges through a mix of pained facial expressions and Somali translated into English by a young girl is a masterstroke in understatement: ‘He’s English now’. Okwe’s angry, cynical response, ‘He swapped his insides for a passport’, is the kind of line Bauman, Agamben and Frears will understand and speak — aqueer with virtuous rage at the ways of a world where human lives are increasingly no more sacred than the latest fashion gadget. The notion of an ‘outsider incarnate’ gains suddenly a wholly morbid new meaning. Yet, as Frears’ film makes clear, for many people this is one of the few ways out of the miserable life allocated them. For the sociologist, the philosopher, the filmmaker and the novelist — perhaps for the literary critic, too — such base trade in human life makes a mockery of being human yet, from the perspective of those swapping their insides for legal documents, the price is worth paying. The sad irony that most of these texts highlight is that for the refugee the documents often result in very little improvement in quality of life. Frears’ film overtly links the harvesting of organs from the bodies of anonymous individuals to their own desperate quest for fake identity documents that will make them ‘real’ once again.

Yet, for many *sans papiers* the new documents that prove one’s legal status often are also the last link to an older self, the self that left home ‘a Romanian’, ‘a Senegalese’, ‘an Iraqi’, ‘a Colombian’. Given the fluidity of the (post)modern world, increasingly such selfhoods are lived tremulously, forever on the threshold of other selves, both past and future, all more or less real. ‘The future’, Bauman declares, ‘has always been uncertain, but its capriciousness and volatility have never felt so intractable as they do in the liquid world of “flexible” labour, frail human bonds, fluid moods, floating threats and an unstoppable cavalcade of
chameleon-like dangers' (2004b: 67). His view is that to be a refugee constitutes the very core of that process, a mass of anonymous humanity permanently displaced, forever in motion.

In Desai’s novel this fluidity is seen in the waves of ‘Mexicans, desis, and Pakis’ in New York, replaced in Paris by ‘Algerians, Senegalese, Moroccans’ (23), and elsewhere by Mozambicans, Ukrainians and Nigerians. They are all interchangeable and recognised mainly by the cheap labour they provide and their desperately aimless lives. In a novel marked by a pronounced concern with the wasteful ways of modernity’s treatment of human beings, Desai shines a light into the dark recesses of contemporary capitalist culture. For despite their numbers, Biju and the mostly male groups of people with whom he competes for poorly paid jobs and flea-ridden beds shared round the clock, remain invisible to most New Yorkers whose lifestyle they support — an apt comment on Nikos Papastergiadis view that, ‘countless people are on the move and even those who have not left their homeland are moved by this restless epoch’ (2). This is a point Frears also makes in Dirty Pretty Things, that while the politics of the nation-state configure refugees outside its concerns and responsibility, and against its interests, in fact they have become intrinsic to the everyday life of the nation-state’s lawful citizens. Echoing Bauman, Frears, like Desai, exposes the materiality that underpins the presence of refugees in the modern world. Thus, in reply to a query put to him by the man who buys the body organs from the Spanish concierge turned organ dealer, Sneaky, ‘How come I’ve never seen you guys?’, Okwe observes: ‘We are the people you never see. We wash your cars, clean your houses, suck your cocks’. Lives lived largely out of view, they are indispensable to the lifestyle afforded the citizens of London, New York or Paris. If Frears appears to underplay the reasons why individuals such as Okwe now hide in London or Paris, in the process avoiding dealing with cause of their increasingly desperate attempts to gain passage to the USA, it may be argued that the film is as much about the wrongs of world politics as it seeks to show the consequences endured by human beings caught up therein.

Indeed, Desai herself also is careful to distinguish between those Indians and fellow ‘third worlders’ who live in New York out of desperation and those brought there by well-stuffed bank accounts. At its most self-righteous, The Inheritance of Loss posits that even the wealthier, better-educated Indians who now frequent the upmarket hamburger houses in New York where the likes of Biju work illegally, have compromised their Indian identities for the sake of a greater slice of modernity. Since, to many of the Americans they meet the colour of their skin will indelibly mark them as outsiders, they share a ‘refugeeness’ which is associated essentially with being born in the ‘third world’. They wear it each time they step out in New York, in London, in Sydney and they often exploit it to their advantage. To this extent they are caught within a common perception that all ‘brown people’ are naturally deprived and oppressed and desperate to be here, there, somewhere. But unlike Biju, frequently this is a perception they can manipulate in the same way that they trade the skills and currency that allowed them legal entry to the ‘First World’.

The contrast in Biju’s position could not be more dramatic. Having moved to New York in search of a better life for himself and for his father, his closest surviving relative, he expends an incredible amount of energy to get out of India only to waste his life in the bowels of a voracious and uncaring modernity. For here ‘India’ signifies simply the source of people such as Biju, those multitudes the American and European print media see as a menace to the developed world. These are the people who, like Biju, exist in a state of legal, political and personal limbo; citizens of countries where, for various reasons, they cannot live and who are living in countries where they are not welcome. However, the tenacity Biju displays in trying to get out of India offers a wider comment on contemporary imbalances between nations and peoples. On the one hand it brings into relief the futile existences of millions of people the world over, treated as the flotsam of modernity; as the narrator remarks at one point: ‘Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run — no papers’ (73). Elsewhere the narrator describes his daily existence: ‘At 4.25 AM, Biju made his way to the Queen of Tarts bakery, watching for the cops who sometimes came leaping out: where are you going and what are you doing with whom and what time and why?’ (75). As an illegal immigrant, Desai’s Biju and countless others like him in the developed world exist fully outside the protection of the state yet he is central to the economic forces that keep it afloat. This is Bauman’s point when he speaks of ‘outsiders incarnate’ (80) as indispensable to the present nation state, a ‘globalisation of the powerless’ (Wells 15) that constitutes the obverse of that other, flashier, globalisation. As noted earlier, they constitute merely the latest source of cheap and expendable labour that fuels the cyclical nature of capitalist economic structures.

Biju’s story earlier highlights also the difficulties faced by so-called developing nations confronted with the ever-growing drain on their human and material resources, as the best and brightest of their citizens opt for living elsewhere. There is a certain irony, no doubt intentional, in the way Desai’s novel juxtaposes the desperate efforts Biju and other young Indian men devote to the task of migrating to the USA and the benefits that modernity, through capitalist expansion, is said to be in the process of bestowing on India and all Indians. In fact, this is an aspect reflected in all the various texts I refer to here. It is a point made more forcefully by anti-globalisation and postcolonial theorist-activists such as Vandana Shiva (2000; 2002) and novelist-activist Arundhati Roy (1999; 2001). Speaking at the ‘Pan African Conference on Brain Drain’ in 2003, Phillip Emeagwali, for example, noted that ‘[w]hat few realise is that Africans who immigrate to the United States contribute 40 times more wealth to the American than to the African economy. According to the United Nations, an African professional working in the United States contributes about $150,000 per year to the U.S. economy'. Although
Desai’s Biju is not a professional in the way Frears’ Okwe is, Emeagwali’s argument offers a broader comment on a Brain Drain that is essentially about the loss of each individual to the nation, rather than simply of the departure of a Western-style educated and trained person.

South African novelist Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s *Skyline* (1999) also raises this issue, highlighting in the story of Bernard, a young Mozambican refugee living illegally in South Africa, the loss of potential that his hidden existence constitutes. At one level, *Skyline* celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, telling Bernard’s story of overcoming impossible odds. But the figure of a refugee allows Schonstein also to explore the new human geographies emerging in South Africa. Set in Cape Town, South Africa, the figure of the refugee serves in *Skyline* as a focal point through which the novel tells of the profound transformations taking place in an urban landscape that was previously largely the domain of White people. Schonstein’s novel resonates with the work of Desai and Frears in their concern with the evolving re-mappings of peoples across and within nation states. The novel’s account of Bernard’s transformation into a legal resident of South Africa positions him as an agent of change, bringing together people who might not have met otherwise. However, although he is embraced by a small group of Cape Town residents who are struggling to cope with the rapidly changing political and social structures in post-apartheid South Africa, this is something of an aberration. In fact, Bernard’s story gives face to a phenomenon that since the end of Apartheid has united Black and White South Africans: that being the growing illegal influx of people from other countries in Africa. In the words of a man whose political views suggest he is White: ‘You see! The whole of Africa is running into the country and to here at the top of Long Street…. And do they think they can just come here from where they come over Africa and take the people’s jobs? What is going on with the government to let them in, hey?’ (10, emphasis in original). Although metaphorically the novel foregrounds the positive dimension of South Africa’s return to Africa, it juxtaposes it with the views of those South Africans who feel the new arrivals are taking their jobs. Interestingly, they are mostly White people, such as the 7-Eleven owner or manager whom the young narrator describes as ‘stand[ing] in Rambo mode’ railing against the state of the New South Africa:

*They just got to come down from Africa and take over our country. Fuck up their own place, then come here to steal from us…. This country’s just gone to shit. It belongs to illegals now, not us. They bought it! They paid somebody something under the counter. I’m telling you! South Africa belongs to Africa, not us*, (50, emphasis in original)

In this new world, Bernard and others like him serve as a metonym of a Pan-Africanism that now sees South Africa returning to Africa, though in this case in a round-about way. Consequently, his ‘adoption’ by a young school girl who lives in the same block of apartments as he does, ‘Skyline’ and the old woman who owns the whole block, might be read as a pointed comment on South Africa’s responsibility to reach out to fulfil its role as the engine of Africa’s Renaissance once outlined by Thabo Mbeki (1998). In the portrait of a growing intimacy between Bernard and the two figures linking past and future, the young narrator and the very old Mrs. Rowinsky — herself a European refugee from WW II — *Skyline* underlines the random and spontaneous ways in which identities are formed and nurtured. It highlights most of all a view that each refugee is an individual, alone, afraid and in search of kindness. Bernard finds protection from the bitterness of the wider South African nation-state in the company and friendship of a small group of inner city Cape Town residents, but he is luckier than most. As the narrator reveals, ‘[h]e is here illegally but we are the only ones who know and we would never tell anyone. He bought a passport from someone in Home Affairs and one of the Nigerians on the top floor sold him an ID’. She goes on: ‘[e]ven though the war is over, he has no home to go back to and he does not know whether his wife and children are still alive’ (29).

Indeed, in what is perhaps one of the subtlest comments on the politics of hospitality of the modern nation-state, opening the doors alone rarely will suffice for refugees; the new arrivals from wars and conflicts experienced by growing numbers of people, carry with them the seeds of their own undoing. Despite their unconditional support, Bernard’s friends cannot protect him from regularly reliving the memory of his brutalisation during Mozambique’s protracted civil war. Of one such moment, the narrator says:

He has a terror again. He lies here on the roof to feel steady. War stalks him day and night, burning him, circling about him with dry flames of nightmare. He has nothing to still the terror with. He cannot shoot it down and it can’t pour water onto it. It is barred wire around his heart and crying in his mind. It is loss and it is unbearable. (74).

As an ‘illegal’ he is persecuted by the South African authorities who constantly raid ‘Skyline’ but most of all he is haunted by memories of a level of trauma that makes him increasingly withdrawn. When he dies from a racist attack tinged with jealousy — he is murdered by an Italian restaurant owner who suspects him of making eyes at his wife, but the attack is framed by a racialised view of the need to protect the white woman from the black man — it is as if Bernard had been dead all along. Post-apartheid South Africa never made room for him or others like him, despite the belief of the masses — the ‘illegal immigrants and refugees’ (8) who ‘hitched all the way down Africa’ (13) — that ‘Nelson Mandela … the new King of Africa’ (15) has the power to bring peace everywhere in Africa and to resuscitate the many relatives the refugees mourn.

The paradox *Skyline* highlights is that when Africa came calling South Africa was neither ready nor willing to enter into a dialogue, for Bernard is not alone in his discovery that apartheid did not make Black South African people naturally kinder to fellow Africans. In his semi-fictionalised autobiography, *Going Home* (2005), Angolan Simão Kikamba tells a similar story. *Going Home* is the story of a man who moves from being an Angolan refugee in Zaire, to a
Congolese asylum seeker in Angola, and eventually an illegal migrant in South Africa. There he remembers being told that ‘there are no jobs for foreigners anywhere in South Africa. If you want my advice, you should pack and leave. This is our country’ (155). Perhaps not surprisingly, again these words are spoken by a White man; many White South Africans have more to lose from tougher competition for unskilled jobs than their Black compatriots who are long used to scant pickings. Like those Africans in *Skyline* who travelled down ‘from the rest of Africa’ (8), Kikamba’s character’s nomadic existence through several different levels of marginality, epitomises the subject position of the refugee today as an example of what Wells’s calls the ‘globalisation of the powerless’ (15). Living in Johannesburg’s inner suburbs, Hillbrow and Yeoville, a dense mass of high-rise and low-rise apartment blocks where modernity truly liquefies, Kikamba’s thinly veiled alter-ego, Manuel Mypanda, learns that the only thing he can count on is the very instability of being that frames his self as an undocumented self, a *sans-papiers*. Hillbrow and Yeoville exist for Mypanda essentially as further ‘stations of the cross’, points of reference in a long journey between his condition as a refugee, an illegal migrant and an asylum seeker.

Not unlike Biju and Bernard, though in vastly different ways, Mypanda’s situation illustrates the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ brief about the difficulties of deciding on the most apt definition for variously displaced peoples. Having fled Angola with his parents as a child-refugee at the age of 2 (15) to settle in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mypanda later flees again as a young adult, this time to Angola, as the cruel world devised by Mobutu Sese Seko collapses and the nation-state implodes. Writing as an adult, he refers to both places as ‘home’ (9, 15) but does it almost unaware of the doubleness of being that that implies. As a Zairean/Congolese refugee in Angola (‘Zaire having reverted to its pre-Mobutu designation, ‘Congo’), Mypanda finds his way to the slums of Luanda, then a city also in a constantly fluid state as the civil war between Angola’s two main political parties and their respective foreign backers dragged on. In the kind of subtle and unsettling shading of degrees of horror of typical of narratives about displacement and loss, Mypanda takes up residence in a slum where his life is as much at risk as it was in the Zairean refugee camp. Moreover, although he recalls his father’s advice as he left for Angola — ‘Do not make the mistake that the crocodile made... He ran away from rain only to dive into water’ (33) — he ignores it. Eventually he will also leave Angola for Johannesburg and join the masses walking towards that beacon of opportunity and fairness that in Schonstein is described as ‘Mr. Mandela’s country’.

It is a measure of the commonality of experience that unites refugees the world over in their ‘refugeeness’ that as a Black man living illegally in Johannesburg, Mypanda’s refugee position in Johannesburg so closely parallels that of Biju in New York and in fact Bernard in Cape Town. Afraid of being picked up by the police yet desperate to make a living by decent means in suburbs dominated by drug dealers and pimps, Kikamba’s Mypanda and Desai’s Biju portray the more insidious aspect of the notion of the refugee as a new kind of person, a citizen of the world unencumbered by nationality. She or he is both invisible and too visible. Conscious of how their foreignness marks them out from the rest of the city, refugees live hidden existences, forever fearful of openly showing their humanity. After a while, as Frears’ film shows with such poignancy and perhaps even a touch of melodrama, the refugee skulks around even when there is no need for it. There is something compelling about Mypanda’s refugee journey that reflects a paradoxical desire for permanence that often intersects with an agonistic impetus that may or may not be forced from without. This is the point Arendt made in her essay on Jewish refugees in post-World War II Europe, and specifically on her own feelings about being a refugee. That, too, is Bernard’s goal as he diligently sets out to acquire his English from any printed text around him.

Frears’ Okwe, caught between two seemingly fulltime jobs, survives by consuming medicinal leaves that allow him to go without sleep for long periods of time. His trance-like existence captures much of the pathos of the experience of refugees the world over: driven by an energy harnessed from the fear of letting down their guard and being caught and sent back to yet another ‘nowhere place’, and the exhilaration of ever-new risks and opportunities. Okwe’s zombie-like wandering across London dramatises both his visibility and his invisibility, the paradox of countless others like him. Survival, after a while, is easier than giving up; Desai’s Biju frequently thinks about going home to his father but now finds himself caught in a cycle that, although initially of his own making, has since gained a life all of its own. In a rather perverse irony, the refugee fears most of all the visibility of invisibility, of an unbeing that is always already over-defined, while craving, almost pathologically, the anonymity of the visible. Seen always already as a refugee, her or his humanity remain concealed under the web of political discourses created to re-signify ‘refugee’ as ‘economic migrant’, as ‘terrorist’, as ‘inhuman’. Yet to an extent, though fearful the refugee is not afraid — of trying new things, experimenting with new ways of being, of doing, for such fearlessness is crucial to the new self. Risk-taking, often with the most horrid consequences, is at the heart of a refugee consciousness as seen in all four texts.

In each case, the motives for crossing national boundaries vary and the claim to refugee status is precarious balanced on an understanding of responsibility as stipulated in international refugee law and moral obligation. Biju is an economic migrant or an illegal migrant; Bernard has concrete reasons for leaving his country, and a reasonably credible claim to refugee status into South Africa; Okwe, the doctor who fled political persecution in Nigeria, could be seen as a legitimate asylum seeker; Mypanda’s situation is closer to that of a ‘displaced person’. In contrast, Biju travels to the USA as a tourist but with the intention of staying as long as required to gain a Green Card. Even Mypanda and Bernard readily admit that the move to South Africa was motivated by a desire for financial
The feeling that the refugee undertakes is essential into a void. This is, in essence, the message of Tomás Sierra's "Domestic Divisions." It serves as a stark warning to others considering entering Britain illegally, with the assumption that the "irregular" is a label best left behind. But there's a less obvious, more unpredictable translation of someone's self that comes when the refugee acquires the identity papers of someone else or who becomes a part of a larger movement. The term "refugee" can take on different meanings depending on the context and perspective.

The story of a refugee named Desiré, living in London, is told through a series of events that highlight the challenges faced by refugees. The novel "Domestic Divisions" explores the complexities of identity, the lengths people will go to survive, and the moral implications of their actions. The protagonist's journey is not just about surviving, but also about finding a place in a society that often rejects and discriminates against "the other."

Desiré's story is not an isolated one. It's a reflection of the larger issue of how refugees are treated and the impact of their experiences on their self-perception and identity. The novel is a poignant reminder of the importance of understanding and empathy in a world where borders and identities can be razor-thin.

In "Domestic Divisions," Desiré faces numerous obstacles, from navigating the complexities of British society to dealing with the psychological impact of his past. Despite these challenges, he finds a sense of belonging and a new identity, proving that the "other" is not a label, but a complex and resilient individual.
it is back. They are always a walking sign of this process. A refugee is a person who is forced to leave their home due to conflict, persecution, or oppression. They are often defined by their journeys and the ways they move between countries and places. In the process of making visible the lives of those who have been forced to leave their homes, the strength of the work lies in the multiple dislocations described in their stories. The lines between the refugee and the society they live in become blurred as they navigate the challenges of适应新的生活。For many, the journey is not just physical but also emotional and psychological. They carry with them the memories of their former homes, the loss of loved ones, and the hope for a better future. This essay explores the experiences of refugees and the ways in which their stories are often overlooked in mainstream society.

NOTES
1. Patricia Scherr is known for her work on the cover of her works. Often appears without it. In fact, her name is not always included. Since it is a well-known fact, this is a deliberate choice by the author.
2. When asked about her name in an interview shortly after this essay was written, she would use "Patricia Scherr."
Syd Harrex

WALKING OUT IN THE CLARE VALLEY

i
The morning gate is shut
but if you
don’t open it
and walk out
the hour does anyway,
and after it the day.

ii
The distance between
one step and the next
is a length of charred bark
that was snatched
from a passing tree.

iii
Yellow and orange irises
lodged in olive flesh
return my fixed stare:
more wild flowers
in the October bush
than my poor pupils,
may ever number, ever sight.

iv
Don’t speak,
not even to yourself;
so delicious the birds’
tones, their music:
despise commentary.

v
Fields full of grass
like green wool
ready to be sheared
by knitting sheep.