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# The Women and Children of Dilley

**I**N OCTOBER 2018, when children were being ripped out of their parents' arms at the border, I volunteered to interpret for a week with the Dilley Pro Bono Project (DPBP)—a partner of the Immigration Justice Campaign—at the South Texas Detention Center in Dilley, Texas, the largest immigration detention center (at the time) in the United States. Every week for many weeks before I went and for every week since, a group of volunteer lawyers, interpreters, law students, and assorted other professionals from around the country do likewise. The conditions and legal realities these women were facing at the detention center in October 2018 had not changed much since the center opened in 2014, this despite the fact that the current administration is tweaking every regulation they can in order to limit the grounds for asylum, most relevantly for the population in Dilley: mostly victims of domestic and gang violence. Building a case became harder, but not impossible. The staff and the volunteers continued, and continue still, to help these refugees according to the regulations that exist today, then tomorrow, then the next day. As one lawyer I work with in Oakland reminds her staff and volunteers: This is a marathon, not a sprint.

THE LARGEST IMMIGRANT detention center in the United States houses women and children, women with children, children with their mothers.

I want to put that in bold and italics and cover it with exclamation points because the words themselves seem insufficient.

BEFORE GOING TO Dilley, volunteers had to request authorization to use a laptop computer within the facility. By signing it, I acknowledged and certified that: "I will not use the device to record, broadcast, Skype, or transmit any video images or audio sounds." As far as I know, I signed nothing that prevented me from using my senses and

my memory and my limited ability to translate the ensuing thoughts, feelings, and perceptions into the written word.

Since then, some things have changed on the southern border. There have also been changes in how the United States government and its people justify and understand what is going on. What follows is an immediate account of my week in Dilley.

ONE OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD of being a translator and an interpreter is that we consider what words connote as much as what they denote. We also consider their associative sway, the heft they bring with them from all the other contexts in which they have been deployed. So, for instance, these women and children are *imprisoned*, as well as *detained*. The word *imprisoned* is harder to look away from, hence more accurate.

Another note on nomenclature: Most of the detained women of Dilley, Texas, the women in Dilley, Texas, these particular women, are from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a region sometimes referred to as the Northern Triangle. These countries are located in Central America, which is one of three, or two—depending on how you divide up the hemisphere—American continents. Together these continents make up The Americas, and they comprise most of the land in the Western Hemisphere.

These imprisoned women are Americans, as much as any and all of us are Americans, in many cases arguably more so, for many of their ancestors were here, in the Americas, thousands of years before Europeans even knew these lands existed.

If we continue to claim the name “America” for this piece of the Western Hemisphere on what could be called the continent of North America, and “Americans” for those with citizenship in the United States, then we are also denying the connections among us. The intimate connections of cause and effect, colonialism and imperialism, economic and military power, cultural destruction and intrusion. Haves and have-nots. The massive, continuous, and devastating interference by the United States (not America) in the political and economic and military development of The Americas. A book could be written. Many have been. But in the meantime, in casual conversation or lazy mimicry of the powers that be, we call ourselves Americans and thereby deny the inhabitants of the rest of the Americas their belonging to the land that they inhabit. Misnaming is lying and it is violent because it displaces, because it makes others invisible.

The women and children in Dilley, Texas, are not *of* Dilley, Texas. They are *in* Dilley, Texas. Or: They are of Dilley, Texas, just as they are of America. As they are of us and we are of them.

Apart from the imprisoned American women and children we were helping, there were thirty-eight American families in Dilley who had been reunited after being “separated” for up to six months. These women were in a complicated legal trap, a Kafkaesque holding pattern, which meant for them a vastly extended period of imprisonment, arguably illegal though somehow justified by overlapping directives, regulations, and pending lawsuits.

AGAIN, REGARDING THE LANGUAGE we use: Children were not separated from their parents at the border. The politicians who said that they did not have a policy of separating children from their parents at the border were, in some sense of the word *truth*, telling the truth. The pediatrician working with us that week to offer psychological and medical evaluations of the women and children was, as she said, *separated* from her young children for the week. They talked to each other and saw each other over their devices every day. She knew where they were. She knew they were safe. They knew where she was, that she was working. They all knew when they would see each other again and were confident that this meeting would depend on them, the mother and her children. If language were used more carefully to describe reality and make distinctions, would we, the privileged, have less choice about what we cared about? Or does sloppy, opportunistic, euphemistic language allow us to more easily turn away, choose more freely and with impunity what we allow to occupy our minds and our hearts?

It is a lie to say that children were separated from their parents at the border.

Our government, the government of the United States, had a policy of *kidnapping* children at the border, and still now, almost a year later, nobody has been held in the least bit accountable for this crime, yes, against humanity.

Our government kidnapped children from their parents or adult guardians, and they did this at a moment when those parents were at their most weak and vulnerable, at the very moment those parents were arriving in the United States to ask for help to keep those children safe. And this kidnapping was ordered by the elected officials of

what passes for a democracy, our what-passes-for-a-democracy, and in the name of keeping us—yes, you and I and our children—safe.



IN ORDER FOR an American woman and her children imprisoned at the South Texas Residential Center—run by the private, for-profit, publicly traded CoreCivic Company (previously named Corrections Corporation of America, and whose motto is “Better the Public Good”)—to be released, the Asylum Officer (AO) who interviews her must give her a positive result on her Credible Fear Interview (CFI).

Helping her to prepare for this interview was our primary job. A positive outcome allows a woman and her children to be released into the United States, often with an ankle bracelet that tracks her, usually to a family member or friend who has agreed to sponsor them, and to live here while applying for asylum, a long and demanding process. In the meantime, she and her children will most likely be safe from the gang members/abusers/torturers/rapists they have fled from, and, within a certain number of months after filing her asylum application, she can apply for work authorization. Her children can go to school.

Imprisoned women who do not receive the kind of legal advice and services that DPBP offers have approximately a 50 to 60 percent rate of positive results on their CFIs. According to the DPBP staff, 98 percent of the women who receive their services receive positive outcomes.

Some say, and anti-immigrant talking points claim, that the legal assistance these women receive is suspect, unethical, that these women are being coached to lie, distort the truth, embellish. Such accusations seem to be based on the view that the legal advice these women are receiving is somehow different from the legal advice everybody in a country with due process has the legal right to receive. Or: That these women do not deserve the legal advice guaranteed to those who live in a society where there is rule of law and due process. Or: That their “raw” stories, usually of so many layers of trauma and violence and abuse and horror, are “true” only if: 1) they are told to the asylum officers while they are in detention and under a shit-pile of stresses and constraints and without the aid of legal counsel; 2) they are kept ignorant of the laws and regulations they are at the mercy of; and 3) they receive no encouragement, compassion, support, or understanding in order to be able to remember, let alone articulate, let alone tell to a total stranger who wields absolute power over their lives, key aspects of

their own life story, aspects they have often buried deep inside them in order to be able to continue to function and keep their children alive. These women, unlike all residents in the United States, do not have the constitutional right to legal representation/counsel, hence the need for organizations like DPBP, and for thousands of volunteer hours.

IMAGINE IF the powerful were deemed unworthy of receiving legal counsel for their nominations, their tax avoidances and frauds, their scams, their corruptions, their abuse of women and underage girls, their stomping down of other lives.

IT CANNOT BE asserted that none of these women ever lies or that no legal adviser ever suggests the memory of a spoken threat or a word said during a beating or while being gang raped, or that, through the lawyers' attempts to shape and frame these stories events may become embellished or exaggerated or even in some cases wholly fabricated. But the DPBP lawyers and interpreters and assorted legal assistants, as well as all the lawyers I've worked with in the Bay Area at various stages of the asylum process, are not helping anybody invent stories or tell lies. They are helping to elicit stories, to dig them out through painful, persistent, and sometimes seemingly heartless questioning, to imbue, even if momentarily, enough agency into these women's wounded hearts and souls and bodies for them to be able to name their abuse as abuse, to look at the horrors their lives have been subjected to, many of which they have had to normalize in order to survive. The counsel they receive is about *how* to tell their stories, not *what* to tell, how to build and carry the narrative, what to emphasize about their stories so that the officer will hear what he or she needs in order to decide that she has a credible fear to return to her country and that she has suffered serious persecution. That's what lawyers do, for everybody. That's what our laws and the carrying out of those laws depend on. Not fraud. Effective, purposeful storytelling.

HERE, MORE OR LESS, is the talk the clients receive that will hopefully inform and strengthen their storytelling:

In order to qualify for asylum, you must have suffered from severe harm in the form of persecution in your country and have a well-founded, or credible, fear of suffering further persecution if you return to your country. Severe harm is not limited to physical

violence; it can also include threats, sexual abuse, kidnapping, coercion, and even psychological abuse. In order to qualify for asylum, however, the persecution you have suffered must be on account of you being of a certain race, religion, or nationality, having certain political opinions, or belonging to what is called a protected social group, or PSG, due to characteristics you cannot or should not have to change and that are recognizable to others. Unfortunately, gender, femaleness, is not a protected social group, even though you would never have suffered the harms you have suffered if you were not a woman, and being a woman is easily recognizable to others. A protected social group can also be belonging to a particular family, or even just a family relationship. You have to be able to explain to the asylum officer why this happened to you and not somebody else.

In addition to these requirements, asylum law requires that the persecution you suffered and the harm you fear if you return was perpetuated by a government actor or agency or by members of a group that the government cannot or will not control. Finally, in order to determine likelihood of future persecution, you have to show that you would not be safe by relocating to a different place within your country.

How twisted does a mind have to be to actually believe—and act or speak on that belief—that any of these women would travel from Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador to the border with their small children just because they feel like it, and that they then concoct yarns of trauma and fear and abuse in order to sneak through the gates of our fair city?



BEFORE TRAVELING to Dilley, I remembered my visit to Oświęcim, the town that hosted the camp we know as Auschwitz. I thought of the scene in the movie *Shoah* when Claude Lanzmann interviews a group of local residents about what they knew about the camp, about their neighbors who had disappeared, how he drew out their deeply held negative feelings about their Jewish neighbors. Most of the residents of Dilley are first, second, or third generation from south of the border. According to Wikipedia, “As of the census of 2000, . . . the racial makeup of the city was 66.93% White, 10.40% African American, 0.57% Native American, 0.76% Asian, 18.81% from other races, and 2.53% from two or more races. *Hispanic or Latino of any race were 72.24% of the population*” (my emphasis). After we told a waitress at one of the Tex-Mex restaurants where we ate why we were in town, she very

assertively told us that if we come across a woman who doesn't have a sponsor, who has nowhere to go when she is released, we should send her there, they'll give her work, even if she doesn't have papers. Her boss, a third-generation Texan who was embarrassed to admit she didn't know who her congressperson was, was very excited about voting for Beto O'Rourke, who was, at that time, the Democratic nominee running against Ted Cruz for Senate. Many other people we talked to, there and in San Antonio, thanked us for the work that we do. In some cases, repeatedly, as if one expression of gratitude weren't enough.

All the employees I ran across at the South Texas Residential Center were Spanish-speaking—either immigrants or first or second generation U.S.-born. I did not experience or witness any unpleasant or disrespectful exchanges with any of them, nor did I witness any mistreatment or disrespect of any prisoner. However: We were eyes and ears on the ground. We were lawyers or as good as, so our presence might have affected their behavior. Fact: We were not allowed inside. Fact: All the women we talked to reported decent conditions, good and plentiful food, some kind of nominal play area for their children, something called school for the children to attend. Fact: Women and children seeking asylum in the United States are locked up in Dilley, Texas, in a prison owned by a corporation, which makes a profit off our tax dollars.

We worked from 7:30 a.m. to between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m. in a trailer on the grounds but not inside the fences. We could not see into the rest of the facility from anywhere we were allowed to be. Every time we entered, we passed through a different trailer where we were subjected to airport-like security. Our trailer was one large space with as many as ten small rooms around the perimeter, where lawyers (and interpreters) could meet with their clients, the inmates/residents/women/refugees/mothers and children. For most of the day there were up to eighty women and fifty children in that large room. The noise level was sometimes deafening, making it almost impossible, when the smaller rooms were all taken, to meet with clients there. The week we were there, approximately sixty to seventy women cycled through that room a day, for *charlas*, or talks, that offer them general information about intake, CFI prep, and release, or for their one-on-one prep sessions with the staff and volunteers.

That means sixty to seventy women a day were imprisoned there and came to the DPBP trailer seeking legal assistance.

At any given moment total chaos might reign, a cacophony of crying and talking and shuffling and screaming, yet the volunteers and the staff—overworked, impossibly devoted, maybe too young to know that they have to take care of themselves or they will burn out too soon—managed to make sure that everyone was attended to, seen.

EARLIER I MENTIONED twisted minds, minds that doubt the veracity of the stories, that wonder if some of these women, after all, don't really deserve our succor, our moments of compassion. Some cases present as stronger and some as weaker, and by way of explanation not excuse we must force ourselves to think in terms dictated by the system, the rules, the regulations, and the superstructure, in the Gramscian sense. At moments, we become the system. That is frightening, and in my case, at least a few times, was a source of deep shame.

Most of the time, we simply needed to dig deeper, question more intrusively. H.L. was abused by a man for years, restricted, beaten, kept under strict observation and control. But this isn't enough, now, to qualify for asylum. In the great wisdom of our former attorney general, there has to be a "plus" factor in cases of domestic violence, an "account of," a reason she, because of some quality she cannot change or should not have to change, was thus abused. How pleased we were when we heard, after lengthy questioning, that she and her daughter would hide their Bible when he came in the house because if he saw her reading it he would beat her all the more ferociously.

MORE OF MY OWN twisted mind: I didn't believe I.R.G. at all. Her story begins with a rape in the hills, *en el monte*, where she is abandoned, then escapes, then they come to her house, then they come to her house first, then she escapes, then the next day they take her to the *monte*, where she escapes, is not raped, no, the rape happened later, and they are in a gang, for sure they are in a gang, because they all had tears tattooed around their eyes and all over the bodies. Our questions began to feel prosecutorial: But you said X? What happened before that? Before you said Y? Where, again, did you see them the second time? How many raped you? Earlier you said one, now you're saying "all." Which is it? How did you manage to escape if they were four men with machetes? The more we questioned, the more tripped up she got, which is what a prosecutor wants, but not at all what we came there to do.



Fortunately, we realized what is going on and sought guidance from the staff. That night I felt sick to think that it was just as likely, perhaps more so, that her story was confused and contradictory because she was traumatized, not simply by the events of the past but again, by her present imprisonment. I am ashamed for having denied her, even for a moment, the benefit of the doubt instead of the condemnation of its prejudice.

AS PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED, during the week I was in Dilley, there were eighty American women and children indefinitely imprisoned at the South Texas Residential Center, a different kind of hell than all the other women we were helping. These are women whose children had been kidnapped from them at the border and were then returned. Although their legal limbo was somewhat confused and confusing, it appears that most if not all of these women had failed the CFIs they were given right after their children were kidnapped. I have not read the transcripts of those interviews, but I heard that they went something like this:

*Asylum Officer: Why did you leave your country?*

*Woman: Where is my child?*

*AO: What kind of persecution did you suffer in your country?*

*Woman: Where is my child? I want to see my child. What have you done with my child?*

*AO: What kind of harm do you fear you will suffer if you return to your country?*

*Woman: Please just tell me where my child is. Is my child alive? I want to see my child.*

Without legal counsel, and under the circumstances (*are there words for that? can we imagine? is their pain knowable?*), these women's stories about the persecution they had suffered were not convincing, and in most cases the officers issued negative results. This is part of the reason they were still imprisoned, so many months later.

DILLEY AND THE SURROUNDING terrain is flat. Flat and hot and humid, and the dirt is reddish orange, and grackles—an annoyance of grackles—gather on power lines and rooftops and on the rare tree, and make a racket of unique and wondrous qualities. In 2014, the year the South Texas Detention Center was put into operation to house women and children who had crossed the border seeking asylum, the

population was 4,158. One set of statistics I saw put the urban/rural split at 96/4 percent, but there's nothing in or around Dilley that would qualify to most of us as urban. Estimated median household income in 2016: \$32,577. There are twice as many men as women. I also heard while there and have read on the Internet that the residents of Dilley welcomed the detention center in part because they were promised good, well-paying jobs. Instead, most of the employees are brought in from San Antonio, about an hour and a half away.

I can't find a count of the grackle population. In Mexico, they are known as *zanates*. I read: "In the creation, Zanate, having no voice, stole his seven distinct songs from the wise and knowing sea turtle. You can now hear Zanate's vocals as the Seven Passions—Love, Hate, Fear, Courage, Joy, Sadness, and Anger—of life." Now, that's a good story.



AS I REFLECT on the week in Dilley, the ongoing work I do here in the Bay Area, I wonder: Do individual stories matter anymore, outside the hearing room, the courthouse, and only insofar as the boxes get checked, the requirements met, the woman in front of the judge allowed to live? Do they have an impact beyond the prurient satisfaction of momentary curiosity? Already many of the stories I have heard have blended together. They are all the same. They are each horrifyingly different. We love to hear and tell stories. Maybe: We have all heard so many stories of so many tragedies under so many circumstances for so many centuries that they mostly blend together. Maybe: At 7.5 billion and counting, our individual stories matter less. Maybe: We as a species have reached the point of story saturation.

ACCORDING TO ONE source, there are twice as many men as women in the town of Dilley, Texas. Also, on every bulletin board (yes, bulletin boards, with tacks and pieces of paper) there are notices for furnished rooms to rent by the day, the week, or the month "for corrections and oil workers." Some or both of these must be itinerant, so the ratio of men to women might be even higher on any given day.

M. P. IS A NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD woman from Honduras. She has a three-year-old on her lap, then on the chair next to her, then on her lap again. She cries, sobs, gasping for breath, as soon as she begins to talk. After breaking up with her boyfriend of two months, he starts

stalking her and then, with the help of three of his fellow gang members, kidnaps her and her child and takes her to a shack, which she knows is far away from everything because “all I could see through the tiny window high up the wall were a few trees and mountains and I never heard anybody.” He keeps her chained up and comes to see her once a day, sometimes skipping days, to throw food at her, let her out to do her business, and rape her while shouting insults at her and threatening to kill her. He brings other women there and has violent sex with them in front of her and the child. He came and “fucked me everywhere, making me bleed, while calling me a whore, a useless piece of trash, a nothing.” After six months, she is helped to escape by one of her torturer’s accomplices: even he cannot abide what his friend is doing. She leaves the country immediately and comes straight through Mexico to the border. She says that the last three nights, since they arrived at the South Texas Detention Center, for the first time since she was kidnapped, she and her child have slept well. She says her child told her, reassuringly, that the guards are their friends because they won’t allow “El Diablo,” as he calls the torturer, to get in there. He knows that, he tells his mother, because El Diablo doesn’t have a name badge, like they have. As she quotes her child with tenderness, she smiles, the first and only time. The prisoner’s badge: of safety, of belonging, of protection. She has already had one session with a counselor at the center, or should we say prison, and she says she will go back because, as she says, it feels good to talk. And there is lots of food and there are hot showers (“hot water running over my head, I can’t believe how good it feels”) and places for the child to play and even prison becomes a relative concept.

IT’S AS IF THEY all read the same manual or all take the same course. I’ve heard it over and over and over again. Verbatim. While they are beating, burning, kicking, raping, choking, pulling, dragging, they repeat the same words. These words, I’m certain, are accurately and faithfully repeated in every other language on the planet and under a huge range of circumstances, out of the mouths of men in a small village in Guatemala and out of the mouths of Hollywood executives and out of the mouths of privileged little white boys at Jesuit Catholic schools in Maryland and out of the mouths of Ivy League students who have had a little bit too much beer to drink. The only difference in the consequences to women is the level of impunity those men enjoy.

THE *HIELERAS* and the *perreras*, the iceboxes and the dog kennels. All the women I have worked with passed through there, though somebody said that maybe the women who cross over *el puente*, the bridge—those who turn themselves in at the border posts—instead of crossing *el río*—illegally, and are then arrested—go only to the *hieleras*, or maybe are kept in the *perreras* for less time. Somebody must know these details. I couldn't get it straight, and in Dilley we heard conflicting reports. Both groups, it seems, are being “punished,” or at least that is what most of the women report being told when they are thrown into the iceboxes and the dog kennels, where the filthy toilets are in the same room they sleep in, where their food is thrown to them on the floor, where they sleep on the floor wrapped in metallic blankets that don't stop the cold from entering their bones, their children's bones, their souls. Man-made cold. Freezer cold. USA cold. Where they are treated very *feo*, ugly, as many said. Several women reported as long as a nine-day stay in the dog kennels. All this when they are in the custody of Customs and Border Patrol. Then they are transferred into ICE custody and brought to the South Texas Detention Center, in the case of women and children, or other prisons for men or women alone or unaccompanied minors.

The immigrants themselves have coined the names for these places. And the names have stuck. It's remarkable that people so downtrodden, so powerless, somehow retain the power of naming. When I interpret, I do not need to render these words into English—even lawyers with no Spanish at all immediately understand and are comfortable using the Spanish terms. Though I begin to wonder: maybe we should insist on translating them to ICEBOXES and DOG KENNELS, maybe English words and all caps would convey more truth to the English-speaking listener. Maybe those words in English would make us less tolerant of their existence. Maybe they would make it harder for us to turn away.

Since last year, those who listen have heard about the even more appalling conditions for much more extended stays, especially for children. Some things change, some remain the same, or get worse. This story, if that's what it is, keeps getting much, much worse.

BY PROFESSION, I am a literary translator and have been for many years. I have, arguably, translated some of the most nuanced, refined, and beautiful prose written in Spanish in The Americas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These days, the sentences I interpret most often from Spanish into English are:

He hit me. He beat me. He kicked me.  
He pulled my hair. He pushed me down the stairs. Since I was  
little . . .  
He raped me. They raped me. They left me in the hills.  
They told me if I told anybody I'd be sorry. They told me . . .  
The police don't do anything. The police are afraid. The police  
are working with them.  
They said they'll kill me i . . .  
He told me I was a whore. He told me I was garbage/ugly/  
useless/a piece of shit.  
He told me he was doing me a favor by raping me.  
The gangs. The gang members. MS-13. 18th Street Gang.  
He was drunk. He was angry. He accused me of having lovers.

And from English to Spanish:

What did he say while he was raping you?  
What did he say while he was beating you?  
What did he hit you with?  
Where on your body did he hit you?  
Why was he angry?  
Did he beat your child?  
Do you think he thought he owned you?  
How often did he rape you/beat you/untie you to use the  
bathroom?

Many people have told me I am brave to have gone to Texas, to do the work that I continue to do with immigrants in the Bay Area, that they are proud of me. I appreciate those words but am embarrassed by them, ashamed to think that I have had any part in perpetuating such a perception. First of all: Many of the people telling me this have spent their lives in service, in healthcare, in education, in directly alleviating suffering. Also, compared to the women and children of Dilley, Texas, I am not brave at all. Being alive, being in that prison, caring for their children, often having left several more behind, is a manifestation of incalculable courage and intelligence and strength. Incalculable because neither I nor nearly anybody I know has been tested in this way. We do not know if we would have the courage of the women of Dilley, of the women I work with in Oakland, of the women who tell their stories over and over again, who must, for their own and their children's survival, tell over and over again the very worst things that have ever happened to them, the traumas they try to forget. I mostly feel fortunate to have a skill that is useful to those in need.

Make no mistake about it: the gangs, the cartels, the narcos, the assorted bullies and assholes, use terrorists' tactics and have effectively terrorized much of Central America and Mexico. Their violence and brutality is arbitrary enough of the time to call what they do—if not their motivation for doing—terrorism, and their threats do not even need to be spoken. The impunity they enjoy is total.

Speaking of terror and the arbitrary use of force, of government forces causing grave harm and no authority being able or willing to control them: there are many people in certain communities in these United States who would probably qualify for asylum. Ask a black man or the mother of one . . .

ONE WOMAN, O. G., begins by telling us the story of the immediate circumstances that led to her flight. Something doesn't add up for me and the lawyer I am working with, not just in terms of what is needed for her to receive a positive in the CFI interview, but emotionally, the strength and urgency of her fear. The threats were directed, somewhat indirectly, toward her fifteen-year-old daughter, something somebody said to somebody else, a look, attention paid. We ask her if she herself has ever been abused or raped. She grows silent, her face swells and falls. I ask her if she would like to talk without her five-year-old hearing. We ask staff for a set of headphones and a computer and we play a cartoon on YouTube for the little girl.

What is the word or phrase that describes what happens to a face when a long-held secret, a deeply suppressed memory, a pain that has never been shared, comes to the surface and becomes articulate?

O. G., still crying after telling us of her own sexual enslavement to a gang member for six months when she was fifteen, says she has never told anybody the things she just told us, "not even my own mother."

I have learned to say quite fluently in Spanish some variation of the following:

We are very sorry for asking you questions that force you to remember the most terrible events in your life. The strange thing about the circumstances you are in, however, is that the very worst things that have happened to you are the very things that are going to work in your favor through this process, and most importantly, for this interview. If you can tell the officer about these terrible things, you will have a better chance of being released and allowed to live in the United States while you apply for asylum.



HERE'S A BIPARTISAN IDEA: Declare MS-13 and all the other gangs operating with impunity throughout Central America and Mexico international terrorist organizations. They are. One could. Problem: Then they'd have to believe the women. . . and give them asylum. Maybe even stop punishing them in the iceboxes and the dog kennels. Problem: They would then be able to deny asylum to anyone who has aided or abetted those organizations in any way, even under dire threats to themselves and their families. Problem: It never works out well when the United States intervenes with the use of force in another country. Problem: Other gangs will fill the power vacuum unless government institutions are strengthened and shorn of corruption.

Another idea, probably not bipartisan, an active fantasy I nurture: Write down all the names of all the men who have abused, raped, beaten, kicked, insulted, imprisoned, kidnapped these women. Hand those names over to the Border Patrol to make sure they cannot get in and find those women and children. Or: Form a vigilante squad of interpreters and lawyers and assorted others with superpowers and go to each and every place these women mention, from tiny villages in the Guatemalan highlands to the major cities and small towns of Honduras and El Salvador and Guatemala and Mexico, and find every single one of these men with their masks and their tattoos and their guns, and terrorize them into never terrorizing another woman or young boy or young girl. Let them know we have our eyes on them. That we, in our magical garments that shield our identity and make us impervious to their gunfire, will not let them continue to prey on the weak and the vulnerable. I can see them cringing, slinking away, and my anger is nourished and grows. Or: Physically castrate all of them.

SIMONE WEIL WROTE: "Contradiction experienced to the very depths of the being tears us heart and soul: it is the cross." The issue of immigration is riddled with contradictions, and it tears us heart and soul, in part because it is being used so brazenly to stir up the worst tendencies in many of us. There is a crisis, but it is a crisis for our fellow Americans south of the border and a crisis of our own limits of compassion, empathy, generosity, courage. Somewhere in all this, in our outrage and horror, we know that except for a small number of extraordinary individuals, all humans have a limit, a threshold, a point

at which we will not share our last sip of water, our last crumb of bread, our houses, our gardens, our clean and quiet streets, our airplane tickets, our car trips, our wine, our really good coffee, our flowerbeds, our second homes, our cultural-cum-elevating experiences, our streaming services, our peace and quiet, our air conditioning, our heating, our olive oil, our cities and towns. For most of us there will come a time when we, too, will want to protect ourselves behind some kind of wall.

Few or none of us reading or writing these words will ever be in the situation of the women and children of Dilley. But: In the next thirty years, by 2050—the maximum number of years most of us will be alive, years when climate chaos will take hold of the planet and a cascade of emergencies will affect every life on the planet, and, according to some estimates, there will be a billion climate refugees—our thresholds will be tested many times and then continuously.

ANOTHER THOUGHT about individual stories: they are always one step removed from the listener's experience, fetishized, aestheticized in the imagination of the listener, mounted on top of the circumstances in which they are told. As mentioned, doubts sometimes arise as to the veracity of what is being told, which become moments of shame for the doubter when she, I, in this case, think about who and what I am doubting. There can even be moments when the listener asks if this woman really is deserving of asylum, isn't she really an economic refugee, after all she didn't suffer the horrors M. suffered, and such thoughts, even if so quickly fleeting they cannot be named, evoke even deeper shame, horror at how quickly we can begin to think like the regulators and the regulations, how quickly the unthinkable has been thought: that this woman isn't deserving, that she has not suffered the kind of harm that qualifies her for asylum, the threat to her is not personal enough, it is not enough for her to want her children to be safe and eat well. . .

What remains with me, haunts me, echoes inside me whenever there is a slice in my life of quietude and silence, are the actual moments that I shared with these women, whether in the big, noisy chaotic room, where it was difficult to hear and I often and reluctantly had to ask them to repeat when they said, or removed from the cacophony in one of the smaller rooms. The moments we lived in their presence, *los momentos que presenciamos*. The face that transforms in a way as yet to be described when something is released, revealed, when there is a lessening of the stress, just enough to become aware of just how much there is.



ONE LAST STORY, or part of a story, the story of a woman who has remained with me more constantly and strongly than all the others. Is it because she is slightly more urban, more “Western,” more groomed than many of the others, hence the connection with her is more readily established? Is it because I was able to more quickly feel the communality that eludes me for longer when speaking to a rural, indigenous woman, someone whose affect is unfamiliar, whose experience is more difficult to translate into terms I can understand? As if she, J. A., her features and her gestures, are written in a script I can read, an alphabet I know, lines and curves I can recognize even if I could not then and still cannot totally decipher the meaning of what is written. J. A. is from El Salvador. Her four-year-old daughter is on her lap. At first, I think, if I think about it at all, she’s simply sleeping, taking an afternoon nap. We begin to go through the steps of prepping J. A. for her interview. Her answers are a bit clipped, there is an edge to her voice, her face is set, she seems even a bit resentful, defensive. She tells her story quite clearly, about the immediate threat that led to her flight, then adds as if anecdotally that she was raped at fifteen, then again at twenty-five. She is slightly older than many of the other women, though I don’t bother to look at her birth date. At a certain point I realize that her daughter is not only sleeping but is sweating and totally listless, and I manage to activate a tiny part of my imagination, sense how hard it must be for her to focus on our questions and her answers, take a rough measure of the effort she must be making, and I turn to the lawyer and suggest that we stop the session, let her go and put the child in bed, maybe even try to see the doctor again. Her interview isn’t for another two days, so there is time to prep her tomorrow. She leaves and returns the next day. We ask another lawyer to help us, because we know we haven’t checked all the boxes. He is an immigration attorney and has more experience, a different way of asking questions, of framing the conversation. At first her daughter seems a bit better, she is sitting on her own chair. Soon, however, she crawls onto her mother’s lap. By the time we have almost concluded the session, but before the lawyer has summed up her case as a way of cueing her how to frame her own testimony, before he has explained clearly and succinctly the aspects she should stress that are essential for her to be released from prison, her daughter is again draped over her lap, damp with sweat and listless. I interrupt the discussion of her case

and ask her if she has gone back to the doctor. She says she did but he was dismissive and gave her more of the same medicine he had given her previously for the vomiting, even though now she has diarrhea and fever and a sore throat. The lawyer begins to give his advice by saying that he thinks she has a very strong case. I look at her when he says this and that same transformation mentioned earlier, which still doesn't have a name, a word, an expression, a metaphor even, happens to her face. I can tell there is something rising up inside her, and in her case, yes, I can call it a softening, a melting. She says, at first haltingly and then in a rush, that while she was in the *perrera*, the dog kennels, she had a very hostile interview with some official, she doesn't know who or from what agency. It was a video call. After telling the rudiments of her story to this official, he told her that she had no case, that she didn't "look" like someone who was running away from persecution, and that she had no right to be here and request asylum. It was only after the lawyer in that room at that moment had given her a smidgen of hope, a glimpse of confidence in her own story, that she was able to access that other viciously undermining moment. The lawyer repeated his confidence in her case and told her that the agent had no right to tell her what he told her, and what's more, that he didn't know what he was talking about, that if she were his client he could get her asylum. I ask her more about the conditions in the dog kennels. For the first time, perhaps the only time that week, I begin to cry with her. The only words that come out of my mouth are, "I'm sorry." I apologize, because I am that man on the video call, I threw her food on the floor that her daughter had to scrape up, I made her sleep with the stench of the toilet. This is why the lawyer and I are here, I say. This is why we are volunteering. Because we are horrified by what our government is doing and want to help in any way we can. The lawyer also tears up. Her child is still in her arms, listless on her lap. The magnitude of the duress she is under, right at that moment in that room as well as the day before, in that other room, comes to me in waves, and in waves it builds and deepens and spreads, and even though I get close, I can never fully grasp it in its entirety. Maybe that's why she does not leave me, why I don't want her to leave me. Maybe that's why, if I go a few hours without thinking about her, I find myself groping around for her. I'll never get it wholly, but with each wave, I wonder how I could have been so blind and deaf and dumb, so unfeeling until that last one washed over me.

We asked her if she would like the lawyer to accompany her to her interview. She did not hesitate to say yes. The lawyer reported back that she did very well and the officer had indicated to him that she had passed, and the lawyer then found a way to indicate this to her. When she comes to me, I imagine that moment, as if I were witness to it, and I want to cry with her again when a smidgen of relief allows her to cry, once again.

ARTHUR KLEMPERER, who remained in Germany as a Jew throughout the Nazi regime, could do nothing but bear witness, which he did by writing an extensive journal and smuggling page after page into hiding with the help of his Aryan wife and an Aryan friend.

WE STILL HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO MUCH MORE.