

A view from the edge

Doncaster Conversation Club Newsletter

02 September 2021

STANDING ALONGSIDE REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN DONCASTER

IN THIS ISSUE

We've been here before...

By Paul FitzPatrick

... And I'm not referring only to Afghanistan, although William Dalrymple's historical writing makes it abundantly clear that prior to the events of August 2021, the First Anglo-Afghan War was arguably the greatest military humiliation ever suffered by Western powers in the East. Britain's entanglement with Afghanistan between 1839-42 was catastrophic, costly and entirely avoidable. In the retreat from Kabul, which began on the 6th January 1842, 18,500 men were annihilated by poorly-equipped tribesmen. Dalrymple suggests that Britain's Fourth Afghan War was to an extraordinary, near-absurd extent, a replay of the First.

Events in Afghanistan have drawn attention to Britain's responses to potential refugees. Yet one of the most chilling pieces of writing I have read in the last few weeks was an

article by Anne Karpf, herself the daughter of German Jewish refugees, written in June 2002. It was salutary to read that in 2001, most refugees in the UK were from Afghanistan. Essentially, she was challenging the comforting and self-deluding myth of Britain's long history of welcome towards refugees: ambivalence, hostility and rabid intolerance, as well as sympathy, marked responses to Jews escaping Nazi Germany. Tightening entry requirements seems to be a feature of times of 'crisis'. Such themes as the burden of refugees on the public purse, the non-assimilability of Jews and non-white persons, the need to meet shortages in specific occupations and the blurring of distinctions between the refugee, the alien and the enemy all have a long pedigree. But that was written in 2002.



Back Dane Cottage

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El Salvador

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A Visit to Back Dane Cottage in Derbyshire

By Abdul and Erum

Back Dane Cottage is an amazing place to visit. This is full of beauty and greenery. I have had stayed at Back Dane with my wife and kids number of time on our own before but this visit was different with different families. I (Abdul) and my wife were working as volunteers this time. It was a big responsibility for us and we tried our best to perform our job well.

There were four families in total and Mike from Doncaster Conversation Club. We all enjoyed a lot while cooking and beautiful songs of Mike. Mike plays guitar really good. We got the chance to listen to the songs, sung by Mike.

Everyone played their part really well in cooking, cleaning, setting up the dinner table. Everyone enjoyed helping each other.

1st day everyone walked around the cottage and woodland next to the cottage.



2nd day two staff members from Peak District Wildlife visited us. We went to the river that flows behind the Back Dane Cottage, where everyone did some activities.



Then we went for a long walk that made kids little tired but enjoyed. Then we did the BBQ and everyone ate that together.



On the 3rd day we returned to Doncaster.

It has been a great and wonderful experience for us as being volunteers. We really want to say Thanks to Back Dane Cottage Trust for giving us this chance. We also want to say Thanks to Julia who helped us making this possible. It was really great pleasure to have Mike with us and he was a big help for us.



The trip as seen by Guru, age 9

When we left Doncaster to Back Dane Cottage, we went on a minibus and arrived at evening. We started getting our things out of the bus and then went inside for a little snack. Then we went to put the bird food

outside and we started playing. My friends were Moiz, Hamza, Lily and more, and my little brother Guhan. Our volunteers were Mike, Erum and Abdul. The me and my friends started playing with the board games. Then we started to have dinner, and after dinner Mike learnt us a song with actions. After the song, I played snowflake, snowflake little snowflake song on Mike's guitar and then we all went to bed.

The next day, Mike made us scrambled eggs and also we had toast on butter or jam, juice, water, milk and cereal for breakfast.

After breakfast, two people came with nets to catch fish and it was our first activity. We caught six fishes and one of them had little claw and legs like a crab but the others were the same but they were big and small. Our next activity was in the forest, and there were hammocks, balancing rope, bug catching and making a den. I caught a spider, woodlouse, worm, slug, millipede and centipede. Also I went on hammocks and balancing rope, it was so much fun. We went back in and ate burger and beetroot for lunch. After lunch, we went on a big walk and then came back because we were too tired to walk more. All the adults did the barbeque and while they were doing that, we played where the swings were. We went inside to eat dinner and after we went upstairs to watch a movie but not the whole movie because we had to go to bed.

The next day, Mike made us boiled eggs, also there was toast on butter or jam, and cereal, oat cookies and after eating me and my friends went outside and Mike taught us a song with actions and then called the grown-ups to join and we all danced in a circle.

We had ice cream then played where the swings were and enjoyed it. Then we packed things up and got in the minibus and went back to Doncaster.

Thanks DCC members and Julia and all the volunteers!



The Back Dane Trust is a small volunteer-run charity that owns a converted farmhouse, Back Dane, in the Peak District National Park, to provide educational and recreational facilities for those in need.

Back Dane offers safe outdoor play, fun and adventure in a stunning rural location, with its own nature trail, deciduous woodland, riverside area, wildflower meadow, fire pit and sensory garden. The peace and tranquility offer its visitors both a restorative, wellbeing experience and an opportunity to explore a beautiful part of the Peak District.

The Trust has links with the East Lindsey Area of Sanctuary in Louth. Both the Back Dane Trust and the East Lindsey Area of Sanctuary contributed to the costs of the weekend for the families. During the pandemic they also offered hospitality to Abdul, Erum and family: as a result, Abdul and Erum were able to train to be volunteers for Back Dane Trust, and this established link

facilitated the visit by the larger group of families.

We thank everyone who made this event possible.



Additional thanks to Guru, Saraana (10) and Shuuder (7) for their drawings.

Stainforth Asylum Seeker Support

Come and join us at the Church Hall, East Lane on Tuesday Afternoon from 1pm till 4pm

Enjoy a range of activities, and share your skills



Sudanese Solidarity Organisation



Last week, we went to London and distributed some clothes and shoes to the new asylum seekers living in various hotels in London. Two weeks before that, we provided some clothes to the asylum seekers in Sheffield.

The group is struggling to find a suitable community space in Doncaster. One person is using his house as a collecting point when responding to these emergency situations.



The group is appealing for help to find a community space, as all their efforts so far have been unsuccessful.

'Las personas comen, no se alimentan'

Thus said a person from San Salvador, now in Doncaster and seeking asylum. Roughly translated it means 'People eat, but they are not nourished.'

'The food we eat is no good for us, but there is no other way.' Rich people control the economy, and the United States control the rich! Good jobs are controlled by the politicians: you need to have the right family connections to get a well-paid job. A teacher earns about US\$300 per month, which the politicians consider sufficient, but the same politicians do not consider \$5000 enough for themselves to live on. Poor families struggle to feed themselves on 2 dollars a day. You can buy a pupusa and a coffee for \$1.25: a family of five living on abandoned land by the river, without drinkable water, will share two pupusas between them. [A pupusa is a thick flatbread made from cornmeal or rice flour. It can be stuffed with cheese, vegetables or refried beans].



Levels of poverty continue to rise, as a result of crime, lack of opportunities and the minimum wage.

Many families have to worry more about safety than spend time looking for ways out of poverty. Poor

families have to live in areas controlled by criminal organizations, with less access to proper healthcare, education and employment. Some employers will hesitate to hire someone based on the where that person lives. Even if a person living in poverty can get a job which pays the Salvadoran minimum wage, it is not enough to lift them out of poverty, because that minimum wage is so low.

There is a difference between the 'official' information and the real situation. Officially, the minimum wage for the commercial, industrial and service sector is US\$365 per month; \$359.16 for the manufacturing and textile sector; \$272.66 for the coffee mill and sugar cane harvesting coffee workers; and \$243.46 for the agriculture and coffee or cotton harvesting sector. But the 'real' situation is very different. And it is easy for employers to dismiss workers and hire replacements on lower wages, even in sectors like education, for there are other people desperate to get some work.

6.5 million people live in El Salvador, with a further 1 million in the USA – not 'America' for Salvadorans are Americans too! Salvadorans in the United States are vital for the economy as they send money back (remesas) to support their families.

To get to the United States is very difficult, and it is necessary to use traffickers to facilitate the route. People show great ingenuity in crossing the wall, using ladders on either side or cutting the razor wire, which led to the electrification of the wire. Despite the deaths, despite being captured, people are always

crossing. 'I will get there or die on the way'.

With 81.2 murders per 100,000 people in 2016, El Salvador is the deadliest place in the world that's not a war zone. More than 5,200 people were killed there in 2016. The National Police reported 706 homicides from January to July 2020, compared to more than 1,700 during the same period in 2019, a 59 percent drop. In September, *El Faro*, a digital outlet, reported that President Bukele's government had been negotiating with MS-13 over the past year, granting jail privileges to imprisoned members in exchange for MS-13 commitment to lower the homicide rate and to provide electoral support for the February 2021 elections.

Although President Trump often claimed that lax immigration policies allowed gangs like MS-13 or Dieciocho to spread from El Salvador into the USA, the truth is likely to be the other way round. According to Florida International University professor José Miguel Cruz, the street gang Mara Salvatrucha 13, was born in the United States, in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, by the children of Salvadoran immigrants who'd fled the civil war. MS-13 was at first just 'kids who met hanging out on street corners', and it wasn't until the early 2000s that the group spread into Central America. There, it has brutally deployed extortion, human smuggling and drug trafficking, terrorizing neighbourhoods and helping to turn El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras into the world's deadliest places. From January 2014 to October 2019, police registered over

11,900 disappearance victims (including more than 400 children)—which exceeds the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 disappeared during the civil war (1979-1992). The disappearances are committed by a range of actors, including gangs and the police. Few cases are investigated.

Every village has gang members. They exert control over territory and extort and gather intelligence on residents and those passing through, particularly around public transit, schools, and markets. Numerous security and elected officials have collaborated with gangs in criminal operations, and all political parties have negotiated with them, including for electoral campaigns. According to Cruz, groups like MS-13 have grown and thrived in El Salvador because the political class protects them. Prosecutors have shown that the country's two main political parties had colluded with MS-13 and other gangs, paying more than US\$300,000 for help winning the 2014 presidential election.



In the last couple of years, we in Doncaster have welcomed an increasing number of people from Central America. This contribution, based on conversations with particular individuals and articles about El Salvador recommended by them, is our first attempt to understand what drives people from El Salvador to seek asylum in the UK.

Donny Doodles

12. The stones beneath our feet

The work described in our previous newsletter and co-ordinated by Sarah Villeneau featured in an open platform arts festival, spreading across public space and spilling onto the street. This three day event was engineered through the collaborative efforts of Doncaster Creates, The New Fringe and True Tone.



Situated around Doncaster's hidden architectural and cultural jewel, the Unitarian Church on Hallgate, the festival aims to spark discussion, challenge ideas and foster a new sense of curiosity, bringing art into the urban realm through experimental performance, installations, music, film screenings, workshops and everything in between.



Afghanistan

It seems too early to understand the implications of the unfolding situation in Afghanistan for policy and practice.

A group of European NGOs and migration and Afghan Diaspora organisations in Europe have issued a joint statement on **Current Priorities for an EU Response to the Situation in Afghanistan.**

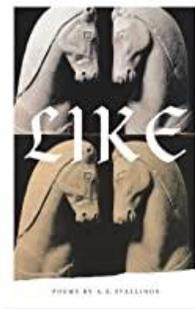
We are alarmed about the situation in Afghanistan and concerned above all about the security of the people of Afghanistan, both those within the country and those displaced and seeking protection in the region and beyond.

The vast majority of displaced Afghans will likely be hosted in the neighbouring countries, as has been the case over decades of displacement from Afghanistan. For reference, since 2015, over six years, 570,000 Afghans sought protection in the EU and associated countries. The majority received a protection status. In contrast, by July 2021, Iran hosted 800,000 registered refugees and up to 3 million other displaced Afghans. In Pakistan, there were 1.4 million registered refugees and up to 2 million other displaced Afghans. These figures have been increasing by the day. In addition, there are close to 5.5 million IDPs in the country.

In this context, it is crucial that the small proportion of displaced people who do arrive in Europe are given rapid access to a fair asylum procedure in line with European states' obligations under EU and international law.

Source: ECRE

Poetry Review



By A E Stallings

New York: Farrar Straus Giroux 2018 ISBN: 978-0374187323 By Julie Page

This review focuses on a handful of poems which explore the choices migrants face in Stallings' otherwise eclectic collection, *LIKE*. The book *Crossing* by Rebecca Hamlin, reviewed in Newsletter 80, quotes as its epigraph part of a longer poem in the volume. 'Refugee Fugue' addresses the human cost of crossings in the Mediterranean Sea and the part played by people smugglers. It is uncompromising. Elsewhere in this collection of poems, the author weaves a number of related themes. There are issues of crossings and identities being reformed throughout. There is the ever-present threat of the sea. Greek myths and ancient Greek history permeate the present. Stallings is an accomplished technician; the reader is positioned by the poet's mastery of form and structure to endure what the people in the overcrowded dinghies endure. These poems bring into being, far more insistently than any news report could, the actuality of the crossings.

The title of this poem is itself indicative of Stallings' method of weaving human lives through myth, time and history. A fugue in musical terms is of course a composition that consists of different parts that repeat and reflect or even pursue each other. This is demonstrable through the four parts of 'Refugee Fugue'. But the term has another meaning, related to psychology, where a person in a 'fugue state' is in a dissociative condition caused by trauma such as sudden travel. The etymology is revealing: from Latin *fuga* 'a running away, an act of fleeing', which also gives 'fugitive'.¹

The collection is rich in cultural references in Western literature in addition to Greek myth and history which creates a deeply nuanced, layered reading. An excellent example occurs in the first part of 'Refugee Fugue' with a nod to *The Tempest* (Act 2, Ariel's song):

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

This is how the poet applies the reference:

The sea is full of dangers, the shallows and the deep.
The sea is full of treasures, down there five fathoms deep,
The sea is full of salt: there are no more tears to weep.

¹ [fugue | Origin and meaning of fugue by Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/fugue)

The first part of 'Refugee Fugue' comprises seven triplets with insistent end-stopping. Against this technique the poet offers a longer line of six metrical feet, unusual for poetry in English, but standard for classical Greek literature. In addition, each line has a medial caesura which gives a measured sense of balance entirely at odds with the subject matter. This triplet has thirteen beats to the line, allowing room for a single anapestic foot around the caesura, creating an uneasy emphasis exacerbated by the insistent regularity of the largely iambic hexameter.

Medial caesurae are used to devastating effect in the next triplet, inviting the reader to reflect on the relationship between the two parts of the line. Here is one of several references to Charon, who in Greek mythology, rowed the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron into Hades, the Underworld:

The ferryman says we cross tonight; and everyone pays cash.
Charon don't take Mastercard, you have to pay him cash.
The water seems so calm tonight, you hardly hear the splash.

Given that Charon only ferries the souls of the dead, there is a chilling inference here, too insistent to ignore. Stallings plays with register throughout the collection; in this triplet the reader is invited to be almost amused by the idea of paying for your journey to Hades by credit card, with colloquial 'don't' suggesting a speaking voice. Metrically, this triplet has an interesting tension between, again, largely iambic regularity which might imply certainty, and some metrical fireworks designed to accentuate a brutal rage seething just under the comedic tone. The first line of this triplet gives an iambic followed by an anapestic foot, foregrounding the authority of 'the ferryman' and therefore the helplessness of his passengers. If the reader has missed the reference, the terrible figure of Charon is revealed in a powerful metrical inversion (CHA-ron) followed by another anapaest which takes the reader to the credit card's bleak humour. Finally, in the last line, the entirely regular iambic feet suggest a false sense of security at best.

In one of the 'Aegean Epigrams' of the third part of 'Refugee Fugue', the poet rhymes *bauble* with *Kabul* in a thinly veiled reference to the Danish Government's law of January 2016 which allowed the confiscation of migrants' money and jewellery. This particular epigram, titled 'Duties', ends with another masterful shifting of tone where the reader's attention is focused on 'smugglers making a killing/Palming Charon's obol'. This is a reference to the payment Charon received, which was a coin placed in or on the mouth of the dead person, the obol being the coin itself, placed initially to protect the deceased's soul then as either a payment or perhaps a bribe for the ferryman.

'Nothing to declare' is another epigram in part three of 'Refugee Fugue'. The epigram as a literary device is conventionally associated with witty, pithy comment on an event or idea. Again, Stallings overturns reader expectation by subverting the traditional form. These epigrams are certainly pithy, but also desolate. This one concludes:

There is no customhouse, no guards,
At the border these have crossed.

'Refugee Fugue' compromises the reader because of the poet's skill in bringing what might be something that is preferable not to dwell on too deeply, into central focus. The people in the dinghies become more familiar, no longer strangers, as the reader is compelled to acknowledge common experience, as in these lines from part two, titled simply 'Charon'. It refers to those who drown and arrive at the border crossing without guards, a shore

Lapped by a numb forgetting, still in the clothes
Someone had washed and pressed to face the day.

When poetry works, it is the most intense form of expression. There is no hiding from the truths it brings to light. Another poem in the collection, 'Empathy' directly challenges received opinion with the observation that 'Empathy isn't generous/ It's selfish.' A. E. Stallings' *LIKE* is not for the faint-hearted. It is for readers who are prepared to interrogate their own responses to a humanitarian crisis for which there appears currently no end in sight.

A view from the edge Doncaster Conversation Club Newsletter

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To receive a copy of this newsletter by email, send a message to Paulfitzp@aol.com

Please send your contributions and suggestions to the same address.

Doncaster Conversation Club offers opportunities for local people and people who have sought asylum in the UK to join together to share friendship, while offering support and practical help.

The Club seeks to create a relaxed, friendly and supportive environment, and works on the principles of

Ownership – *everyone can get involved*

Impartiality – *it is not affiliated to any political or religious body*

Confidentiality – *what you say is private*

Respect – *for each other's differences and individuality.*

DCC is pleased to acknowledge the support of **Doncaster Society of Friends (Quakers), The Red Cross, The Refugee Council, Migrant Help, The Doncaster Clinical Commissioning Group, St Leger Homes, Club Doncaster Foundation, Ongo M25 Services, YMCA, DARTS, CAST, Fareshare, The Brelms Trust, The Ruth Hayman Trust and Doncaster Minster.**

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The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual contributors.

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