



Art
IN THE
Time
OF
Unbearable
Crisis

WOMEN WRITERS
RESPOND TO THE CALL

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FOREWORD BY BROOKE WARNER

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Her Name is Natasha

Sophia Kouidou-Giles

A young refugee raises her head from her morning slumber; her face is thin, her eyes dark. She has been sleeping in a basement under a kindergarten where children used to play and giggle in days before bombs fell and shuttered their world. It's a windowless cement box, but it's safe.

Her first waking thought is to make sure her parents are with her.

Her shirt is stuck to her body, wet with the sweat of nightmares—nightmares born of days walking on the rubble of torn streets to find food for her parents. She is part of the mass of humanity that just days ago took the city bus to work or school and then back home, dismissing the threat of war. They will have to part from their beloved city for worlds unknown, in hopes of leaving the chaos behind, daring to believe in a new start that pushes away this dread.

Yesterday, the three of them were late getting to the tarmac and couldn't get on the transport. They do not know where their relatives are, and there is no point in returning to the village. Still, a bus is waiting for them this morning. They are among the lucky ones, able to flee their torn home. They will be refugees—a harsh word, filled with humiliation. Where will they settle? What will turn out to be their home?

She looks at her parents—an aging couple, her father already stooped from the years and her mother leaning on a cane. They look at her expectantly, say, “You are awake!” Still, there is some solace in knowing they will be able to lean on each other in the days to come.

The world is turning on television sets to watch and cry for them; the world is sending them support. Will it reach the city? Will it be on time? They can't wait any longer. The danger is high. Journalists wearing helmets and bulletproof vests broadcast scenes with soldiers, tanks, airplanes, flags, and devastation. They hear the explosions and the sirens, but they don't see the broadcasts or hear the pleas, the leader negotiations that fall flat. All they know is the horror inside and the hope that they can cross the border.

“Natasha, lead the way,” her father says, already up and dressed. “We'll miss the bus!”

So recently—it seems like only yesterday—Natasha and her parents were talking about the Syrian and Afghan refugees escaping on precarious life transports, gray lifeboats in the cold Mediterranean Sea, wearing orange vests, hoping to make it to a shore. They contributed money to aid the millions of Yemenis, half of them children, starving in a remote part of the world.

They are about to earn the same stripes. It's not the first time the world has been saddled with a refugee crisis. On the

global scene, it's a daily event for an astonishing number of displaced people barely tended to by governments and politicians. Amnesty International records over twenty million refugees in the world today. The root cause? War, ambition, age-old claims about empires, desires for domination, grabs for power, and insidious suppression of the weak, the starving, the poor.

The subject of refugees is personal to me. My Greek homeland is a country largely populated by people of the diaspora—like my own father, who came to Greece escaping the Turkish genocide of Greeks nearly a century ago—and yet leaders don't learn. Tragedies repeat and countries are often reluctant to welcome refugees.

I remember hearing stories about how it was for my parents during WWII, the years of deprivation and danger. My father's family survived because he found shelter in a tent at the beach to house him and his parents. Perhaps Natasha's family will land somewhere safe and find shelter on their journey. Perhaps there will be friendly people extending a helping hand.

Natasha had dreams. She still does. Her parents raised her in a house in the narrow streets of Kiev. Lately, beginning to learn independence, she was living at the university lecture halls by day and loitering in cafeterias with her friends in the evening. But her family's house is no more, and her parents now need her more than ever before. She dreams of becoming a violinist like her father, of studying in Budapest, the city they call Queen of the Danube. Instead, she is surrounded by the destruction of war, living in a place where families hide by day and count their dead by night.

Now she gets up, raises her eyes to the sky, moves to pick up a backpack she prepared last night. She motions to her parents she is ready to go. Her name is Natasha, and her youth

fuels her courage. The sirens are quiet. It is a good time to walk to the terminal, where freedom awaits.

Godspeed!



SOPHIA KOUIDOU-GILES was born in Greece and lives in America. A daughter of refugees, she is also a writer, poet, and translator. She published her memoir, *Sophia's Return: Uncovering My Mother's Past*, in Greek and English. Her novella, entitled *An Unexpected Ally*, is forthcoming.

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