Excerpt from: ***'A state of emergency: travels in a troubled world'***
Navid Kermani

Sheet lightning wakes me. The moment I step out into the terrace, lumps of ice come crashing down from the sky, the likes of which I have never seen, never even believed possible. At first, uncomprehending, I scurry under the roof to escape serious injury. Only then do I realise that it must be hailstones, the size of table-tennis balls and not the apocalypse. The storm breaks after a few minutes. The water floods the terrace so quickly that it spills into the hotel room even though I spread towels in front of the door joints.

Two hours later, I ride my scooter through pond-sized puddles up and down the desolate but brightly lit shore promenade until I discover some people standing at the far end of the old port in front of a French battleship. Sixty five Somalis have been rescued in the storm, I overhear, including thirteen women, eighty nautical miles ahead of the Libyan coast, one woman five months pregnant, one injured. Doctors Without Borders wonder why a FRONTEX ship has picked up the refugees and that too from so near the Libyan coast. No one knows details but everyone, even the woman from the United Nations, thinks that FRONTEX is there to keep refugees away from Europe. Those working for the Italian state, except for the customs officers, carabinieri and employees of the refugee centre, are recognisable by their white rubber gloves. Someone unloads a canister of disinfectant from a pickup truck.

- And the refugees, where are they? I ask.

Since the bus is yet to arrive, they are sitting inside the ship where it is warmer. I know what Somalis means: the people probably all belong to a single family or a clan, their flight began several months ago. They faced war at home, perhaps they were driven away, some were killed surely. Soldiers hand down

large, virtually empty red plastic bags from the deck, one for each refugee, I assume, their bare possessions. Everyone on the pier, with or without latex gloves, speaks in muted voices, almost in a whisper, very little in fact. They all stand around staring at the brightly lit ship as though waiting for the birth of child Jesus. If they were to now all hold hands – with or without latex gloves – and sing a Christmas carol, I wouldn't even be surprised, for I am filled with gratitude for the blessing, for that is what the rescue really is. It occurs to me that I may be the only one among those present to witness such a landing for the first time, but a Tunisian translator is also filled with pathos when I talk to him, his eyes bright. If at all the word martyr *means anything today,* testimony, *which is precisely what the Arabic word* shahâda *means, he says, then it is the people, waiting in the ship's belly to emerge into the light, them and all other refugees of this night who will not see the light. The derived word* martyrdom *is fitting too, I add. We talk about Jonas and the refugees in the Scriptures, about Maria, Joseph and the baby Jesus, and I observe that these stories do not belong in the distant past but here, three hundred metres from the beach where holidaymakers will come again to bathe tomorrow, and behind them stand the port restaurants where they will eat lunch when the French battleship has long returned to cruise in front of the Libyan shoreline to deter other refugees.*

Even before the bus arrives, I can feel the tension which grips everybody, a soundless excitement, even though the only ones to have moved appear to be the three soldiers on the deck. They step inside the ship through a hatch and emerge shortly with the first of the refugees, supporting an old man who is obviously injured in the leg, followed by a pregnant woman, just like Joseph and Maria, two incongruous strangers, not only because of their dark skin and the woman in a flowing exotic robe wearing a red bandanna reaching down to

her stomach in the Somali manner, even more incredulous is their gaze, confused, shy, afraid but still grateful to life for being alive. The others follow in a procession behind Maria, first the women, mostly young girls, much more delicately featured than Europeans or the central African women I saw at the camp in the afternoon, then the men, also slight, carefully stepping ashore as though for the first time. And truly, a new birth it is for them. I want to welcome them, call out peace be unto you *in Arabic but nobody else does so I restrain my urge. So they stumble along without a word from the onlookers, not a welcome nor an expression of joy, unsteadily on the arms of the French soldiers the few metres along the deck to the pier where Italian soldiers are waiting. They are led across the bridge to the shore and into the waiting bus where they can sleep soundly on foam mattresses and paper sheets. I am shivering, so moving is the sight of life at its starkest, as in a birth or when someone is dying, life for what it is: a gift.*

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Navid Kermani

In autumn 2005 I visited the Spanish exclave of Ceuta on the Moroccan coast. The previous night, hundreds of refugees with homemade ladders had tried to climb over the border fencing, which even in those days resembled the East German border and have since been reinforced: two successive barbed wire fences, three and six metres high, between them a road patrolled by the jeeps of the Guardia Civil*, watchtowers of course, video cameras, night vision equipment. The refugees knew fully well that they could not cross the border undetected. So they tried to storm the fences in large numbers so as to overwhelm the border police. If five hundred people scale the fences using homemade ladders then fifty will get through – that was their strategy. A few bled to death at each attempt, the others were herded like cattle on trucks and driven into the desert between Morocco and Algeria, to be left literally in the middle of nowhere with a few jerry cans of water at best. The refugees turned around on the spot and returned to knock on – no – storm the doors of Europe.*

I did not drive directly to the official border crossing where I would have been immediately waved through thanks to my German passport. Instead, I turned off the main road shortly before the border and drove along the outer perimeter of the fence. I got out at one place where I saw signs of tumult. I walked to the fence which made a deeper imprint on me than all the subsequent news of refugee calamities in the Mediterranean, of two hundred or four hundred or six hundred deaths. These are just numbers, we don’t see the drowned, we don’t know their stories. Which is why we quickly forget the numbers, forget the European Union’s promises to try and prevent such catastrophes in future. But now I saw blood on the borders of Europe, blood still dripping. And when I travelled in Morocco and to

Europe’s other borders, I also heard the stories. One cannot sleep when one listens to such stories, of wars, of torture, of hunger, of misery, of relatives at home praying every morning and evening, praying that the son, father, brother should call at last, send a mail or a message that he has arrived, interned in some miserable camp but alive, that he will soon send money so they too can survive. One cannot sleep but Europe sleeps. Yes, even now when a new, bigger number does the rounds, and Europe again makes new promises which will soon be forgotten.