

Nonfiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: “From Death Threats to a French Dandy, Afghan Contractors Abandoned by the U.S. Struggle to Find Asylum Abroad”

LYON, France—When the Taliban shoved him out of the sedan with the butts of their Kalashnikovs, Medhi could barely walk. For eight hours, they had blindfolded him, kept his hands tied behind his back, and beat his legs with plastic pipes.

“To kill you is our right for two reasons,” he says the Taliban members shouted at him. “One, because you are working for the Americans and therefore against Islam. Second, because you are [Hazara](#) and not a pure Muslim.”

The Taliban are [Sunni Muslims](#), mostly [Pashtun](#), who have a history of persecuting the Hazara Shias.



Medhi poses in front of a rosebush at Bagram Air Base. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the third time the Taliban had threatened Medhi for his work as a security guard with the U.S. military on [Bagram Air Base](#). They indicated they wouldn't let him survive a fourth.

After seven hours, the Taliban offered Medhi a deal: "I could live, but it was my responsibility to help them sneak six of them into Bagram so they could plan an attack," Mehdi tells The War Horse. "I had 24 hours to get security uniforms and make up lies to infiltrate them. I had no choice but accept,

and they let me go.”

He never went back to Bagram.

Rather than betray the Americans he worked with, Medhi went straight to the apartment where he lived with his mother and four younger siblings.

“My mother told me that whatever happens, I would be killed,” he says. “I knew that if I carried out the Taliban’s orders, I would be executed. And if I didn’t, I would be executed anyway. My father had disappeared, and I didn’t want my family to be targeted.”

Medhi’s mother called his uncle, who arranged for him to leave Kabul the next day.

It’s possible that Medhi’s decision saved numerous American lives at Bagram.

‘The Rights of Man’

Medhi, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, tells this story from Lyon, France, where he fled—taking a circuitous, potentially deadly route—after leaving Afghanistan. There, his request for asylum has been rejected twice. If it is rejected again, he will have few choices: to try again in another European country with perhaps the same results; stay in France illegally, which means spending his life hiding from authorities; or, if caught, be deported to Afghanistan, where he will most likely be threatened again or even killed by the Taliban.

“France was supposed to be the country of the *droits de l’homme* (rights of man),” Mehdi said.

And America?

After Afghans risked their lives working with the Americans as

interpreters, guides, sources, and guards—sometimes assuming the United States would keep them safe in return for their help—they've instead been denied visas by the thousands. This comes even as the U.S. military members they served with say they worry about the consequences both to the Afghans and to future generations of U.S. service members.



U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Kevin Rincon, left, and Lance Cpl. Zidan Sheabar, both with 2nd Platoon, Company I, Battalion Landing Team 3/8, teach interpreters attached to Company I how to apply a tourniquet at Forward Operating Base Price, Afghanistan, in 2011. Elements of 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Afghanistan to provide regional security in Helmand province in support of the International Security Assistance Force. Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper, courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

In Afghanistan itself, there is no hope: Tens of thousands of people who worked as Mehdi did to help the United States fear the [Taliban will hunt them down](#) the instant American protection leaves.

Rather than face rejection by the United States or likely

death back home, Mehdi pins his hopes on a French dandy named Walid.

A Silk Scarf, Artfully Draped

Walid presides at the center of the table under the intermittent snapping fluorescent ceiling lights of a convenience store. No one ever catches Walid without suede shoes and a silk scarf draped artfully around his shoulders. Like his look, his smell is unmistakable: Dior cologne, cumin, and a lingering scent of the Cuban cigars he smokes with his cognac when the sun goes down.

“My ex-girlfriend is the former Miss Lithuania,” Walid tells us, tossing back his long salt-and-pepper hair with a wave of his impeccably manicured hand.

He flips through his cell phone looking for pictures of the courtship.

Everyone in the Lyon community of Afghan refugee applicants knows that, when all else fails with French immigration, it's time to call Walid. In addition to providing friendship and food, he runs a free-of-charge service to assist refugees like Mehdi navigate the notoriously cumbersome French paperwork.

His work with them is a testament to the reality that Afghans have been fleeing war and violence in their country in waves for almost half a century: first the Soviets, then the Taliban.



Walid smokes a cigar outside his shop. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid, an Afghan refugee himself, comes from a different generation and socioeconomic class. His well-off family escaped to France in the early 1980s as his father, an intellectual and critic of Afghanistan's government, was threatened by the communist regime. They were granted asylum easily.

Walid tells *The War Horse* Medhi represents the face of many caught up in a sordid phenomenon of the Afghan refugee crisis that will be exposed further as U.S. troops leave: Working alongside Americans provides little guarantee of gaining refugee status. However, it is certain that Afghans who worked in any capacity with the military and have remained in the country confront retaliation from the Taliban.

'I Was Afraid There, Too'

Mehdi felt a sense of hope—for himself and for his family—when he took the job at Bagram.

At first.

In 2014 when U.S. and NATO forces began to wind down their 11-year-long occupation, Medhi checked entering vehicles for explosive devices. He'd heard about the post while selling produce from a cart in Kabul where he didn't earn enough to take proper care of his family. The job, obtained through a U.S. contractor called [Anham](#) and managed by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, came with a high monthly salary. Medhi says he couldn't refuse.

"The experience was a good one overall," Medhi says. "However, I never even thought about living anywhere else than Afghanistan. When I took the job, it was for economic reasons for my family only."

He would spend three days at Bagram, where he slept, and return to Kabul to see his family for the remainder of the week. He worked with Afghans and men from places like Nepal and China. Even though he was employed there for two years, he had almost no contact with Americans. He didn't speak English, and the few exchanges he had with the Americans were through his boss, who had a translator.

"I had some problems with my work for Americans," Medhi says, sheepish about saying it in front of an American.

The first was the payment system. His paycheck was automatically deposited into a bank account, rather than paid in cash, and he had few opportunities to withdraw it. It was dangerous to take out money from banks when he was alone, so he relied on the head of his group at Bagram to take employees to the bank in groups for safety.

Sometimes, “I didn’t trust what Americans were doing,” he says. At Bagram, he was assigned to scan under trucks for bombs as they entered the base. He was also supposed to look inside the vehicles, but only Americans were authorized to unlock and open the doors for the guards during the security checks, Mehdi says. Once or twice a week, when he asked to open the doors, drivers would refuse, he says, telling him they had orders to allow access only to Americans.

“They didn’t let me do my job,” he says.

But something else was at stake. At this point in the interview, Mehdi stops speaking in English and asks Walid to translate his words. Mehdi suspected the trucks he was forbidden access to, which came from various Afghan provinces, carried pillaged items of historical value to his country that would later be sold and exploited in museums around the world, he says through Walid. After the trucks entered the base, helicopters or planes would airlift the cargo containers from those vehicles away from Bagram.



U.S. Army Lt. Col. William J. Butler, commander, 2/503 IN (Airborne), and Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad, commander, 6th Kandak, Afghan National Army, and their staff during an assumption of command ceremony for Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad at Forward Operating Base Joyce, Konar province, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

No evidence today points to the veracity of this claim, but, as Walid explains, his misgivings are understandable. “No one can forget the [Koh-i-Noor diamond](#),” he says.

Even the least educated person in Afghanistan knows about the cultural damage caused by widespread Soviet looting or the theft of the 105-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond that sat on the crown of the Queen Mother, Elizabeth of England. It is now on display in the [Tower of London](#). While Britain’s East India Company used underhanded tactics to obtain the gemstone from the 10-year-old Indian Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1849, it once belonged to what used to be part of Afghanistan and the country has made several claims for its return.

After Medhi was kidnapped by the Taliban, he fled in the back of a pickup truck with a group of people who huddled together for warmth. It took him 15 days to cross the southwestern [Nimroz Province](#), known as Afghanistan’s “Wild West” due to its reputation as a smuggling hub into Iran.

“I was in Iran one day, and everyone told me I’d be sent back, so I went to Turkey,” Mehdi says. “I was afraid there, too.”

When he got to Greece, he boarded one of the [special trains the European Union](#) provided in 2015-2017 as part of their [Emergency Relocation Scheme](#) to transport refugees north into various countries. He got off in Austria, but after two years, immigration services there rejected his asylum request.

“I decided I wanted to become a chef in Austria,” Medhi tells *The War Horse* as he sips tea in the back of a small convenience store with other Afghan refugees. “But France is a good place for that too.”

Spending long weekend afternoons over tea with friends is an Afghan custom, but it is also decidedly French, a people who are world-famous for their cafes where, for a \$2 coffee, customers can linger at their leisure. Lyon has also been recognized by [UNESCO](#) as the world gastronomical capital and is seemingly abound with cooking opportunities. He could fit in here. If France would let him.

Things started out well for him when he got to France. He made friends with other Afghan immigrants and hit a stroke of good luck: He was chosen through a lottery for a place in a temporary residential center for asylum seekers. The French Office of Immigration and Integration also provided him with 210 euros per month for food and other expenses. He was later transferred from Paris to another residential center in Bourgen-Bresse, a city about 50 miles northeast of Lyon. He shares a room and living space with asylum seekers from around the world. The common language in the centers is English.

“I can talk to Americans now,” he jokes. He has also learned French.

But over the last year, things have gone downhill.

At a slender five-foot-three, and with a soft voice and ready smile, Medhi, who turned 25 this year, doesn't cut the traditional figure of a security guard assigned to the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan.

In France, officials from [l'Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides](#)—the immigration office—don't believe he worked for the Americans in Afghanistan. At first, they didn't believe he was Afghan.

“I think nobody believes me because of my size and face,” Medhi says.

And even though he has provided a work contract, identity card, and photos of himself with colleagues at Bagram, his

application for asylum has been denied.

After his second rejection in early spring 2020, the French immigration ordered him out of the country—but then extended his visa because of the Covid-19 crisis. With borders doubly enforced because of the pandemic, Medhi doesn't know which country will let him in next.

His time in France is running out.

But while visiting an Afghan friend in Lyon one weekend in the fall of 2020, he met Walid, who restored in Medhi the most he could ask for: a fragile sense of hope.

'Who Will Work With Us Again?'

American veterans say they thought that hope would come from their own country—in the form of a nation they thought they were helping to rebuild.

"My objective was to go and visit the families of the interpreters I knew and have tea or dinner with them in a stable Afghanistan one day," says [Adrian Bonenberger](#), a decorated combat veteran, of his deployments there. "That's what would happen. But it's not."

Bonenberger, who wrote *Afghan Post*, expresses the disappointment of other members of the military who served in the war. Bonenberger served in Afghanistan for 25 months on two deployments.

"I would have loved to go back as an artist," echoes [Colin Halloran](#), who served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan 2006 and is now an award-winning poet. "I really believe they were the most soulful, artistic people with a giant sense of hospitality that stems from their faith."

Instead, they both fear those visits will never occur. Worse, their "soulful" friends may not live to witness a time when

such a thing could happen.

“Many of the Afghans who have worked for and supported the American presence in their country over the past two decades face a life-or-death dilemma,” states a [recent Costs of War report](#) authored by Noah Coburn of Brown University’s Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs. “Many of these military interpreters and other civilian workers are no longer safe in their own homes, threatened by anti-government fighters and criminal groups.”

But they haven’t found help elsewhere, either.

Medhi came to France after the two rejections in Austria. After the second rejection in France, he decided to contest it, a process Walid is helping him navigate. This will be his last chance.



Walid, who immigrated from Afghanistan to France during the Afghan-Soviet war, helps recent Afghan refugees with their visa applications. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

The Dublin Regulation, a European Union law that determines which member states are responsible for handling asylum seekers under the rules of the Geneva Convention, allows an adult applicant to stay in a country for six months after they submit their legal file. They have the right to appeal a negative decision, which grants them an extended stay. If they are rejected twice, immigration officials ask them to leave the country and the refugee may travel to another European country to reinitiate the process.

But the circumstances of fleeing a country, as many refugees do, can make the process harder, as it has for Mehdi. Politics haven't helped him, either.

"This wasn't only a U.S. war," Halloran says. "There were NATO forces, but it was mostly American. We have a responsibility, and the U.S. needs to step in and help these people get asylum."

Former President Donald Trump placed historically low caps on accepting refugees. By 2020, [15,000 were authorized](#)—down from 110,000 in fiscal year 2017, when former President Barack Obama set the cap. To protest Trump's cap, which became known as the "Muslim ban," Halloran helped organize an event in Washington with other veterans and writers.

"We found refugees from each of the eight countries on the State Department's Muslim ban list and let them tell their stories to highlight the danger they'd faced and to show what extraordinary human beings they were," Halloran tells The War Horse.

President Joe Biden has just raised the limit to 62,500—half of the 125,000-person cap he originally pledged. In February, an executive order from Biden allowed for private sponsorship, [the process that allowed](#) some Jews to come to America from Europe during WWII. They're still working out the details for the new order. Congress has allotted [more Special Immigrant Visas](#) to be granted to Afghans and Iraqis whose lives were put at risk because of their service with the U.S. military. But the process that's required by law to take no more than nine months is expected to [increase to up to four years](#). Waiting times have been exacerbated [because of the Covid pandemic](#).

In the last three months of 2020 alone, State Department statistics show [1,646 Afghans were denied](#) one of the special visas, and more than 18,000 Afghans await decisions on Special

Immigrant Visas applications, according to [The New York Times](#).

In addition, the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa application for Afghans [demands a long list](#) of documents, such as identity papers, a letter of recommendation, and verification from a human resources center.

Those documents are hard, if not impossible, to file while fleeing, as Medhi did, from an imminent death threat. While Medhi had most of these items at the time he left, getting a transatlantic flight from Afghanistan to claim asylum would have been impossible. He didn't have a passport and the ticket cost was exorbitant. But Europe is accessible by land, so that's how he traveled.

And, when Mehdi fled, the special visa didn't cover everyone who worked with Americans.

"Many Afghans were not employed by the U.S. military or affiliated missions but by private contractors or subcontractors who, in most cases, could issue no official promises about opportunities after their service," Bonenberger says.

The latest May 31, 2021, report from the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Processing Center shows that in the 2019 fiscal year, 1,198 Afghan were admitted as refugees. In 2020, it dropped to 604, most likely due to Covid restrictions. As of May 31, the United States has admitted 248 Afghans in fiscal year 2021.

If the United States doesn't take more action to help these threatened Afghans, Halloran says, it could influence the way foreign countries view our future military efforts.

"In the future, who will work with us again?" he says. "Why would anyone want to risk their lives or their family's lives if we don't step in?"

'I Cook Afghan Food for Them'

While the United States has stemmed the flow of Afghan refugees in the last four years, the number of Afghans filing for asylum to get refugee status in France has increased five-fold in five years. Until May 2021, little protection existed even for Afghans who worked with the French army.

As portrayed in a book and a recent graphic novel, [*Traducteurs Afghans. Une Trahison Française*](#)—translation: Afghan translators. French treason—only 250 of the 800 Afghan translators who worked with the French army between 2001 and 2014 as part of NATO forces were granted refugee status through asylum. Those who weren't were forced to go into hiding with their families as they had a Taliban bounty on their heads. In May 2021, in response to the worsening situation in Afghanistan, the French [government announced](#) it was issuing immediate asylum status to an additional 600-plus Afghans who had worked with the French military.



Sher Hasan, a local Afghan worker on Forward Operating Base Fenty, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, uses a saw on concrete blocks during a construction project in 2009. Locals who worked with U.S. troops now fear the Taliban will kill them as Americans withdraw from Afghanistan. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

But this won't help Medhi or thousands of other Afghans

awaiting responses from French immigration. The situation in France has catapulted into a crisis for all Afghan refugee seekers. Homelessness and reports of increased police intervention [are on the rise](#).

Which is why what started out as helping on weekends and evenings a few years ago has become an almost full-time job for Walid—a one-man show that’s becoming harder to pull off. He has just passed the test to become an official interpreter for the French court system and is awaiting final certification. This job, in addition to managing the shop, will eat up more of his time.

“I help them with paperwork, but I also cook Afghan food for them,” he says as he offers a taste his succulent [Kabuli palaw](#), an Afghan dish made in several steps with lamb or beef, fragrant rice, carrots, almonds, and raisins. “I reassure them. They take a drink or smoke here, and I tell them everything’s going to be OK.”

At least for a few hours on a winter evening in Lyon, Walid provides a safe place for Medhi and the other Afghan refugees. He’s placed a large wool Afghan blanket over the makeshift table set up by the refrigerated section, and the men pull it over their knees and hands for warmth.

‘We Go Back to the Roots’

“When age goes up, we go back to the roots,” Walid replies when asked why he helps the young Afghan men. He’s 47.

He pulls up to his convenience store on most days midmorning in a shiny black Mercedes, which stands out on the narrow one-way street in a mostly pedestrian area in a trendy Lyon historic district. His car, combined with his designer clothing—and the group of haggard young Afghans who congregate around the fruit stand outside the shop from noon to as late as two a.m.—have made him the target of suspicion in the

neighborhood, he says. The gossip heard by The War Horse at neighborhood gatherings over the years includes accusations of being a Mafia boss, money laundering, human trafficking, and keeping an opium den in the basement.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

After the communists in Kabul threatened Walid's father for the first time in 1979, he went to Dubai right away to build a new professional life that would allow him to bring his family from Afghanistan. In 1980, when he returned to Kabul to fetch them, the government put him on home arrest and he faced certain execution.

After Walid's family home was raided, his father fled once more. At the end of that year, Walid's uncle paid someone to smuggle the rest of the family to Pakistan, where they obtained fake passports and flew to Dubai. The [Soviet-Afghan war](#) was in its second year and made traveling through rural parts of the country to cross the border perilous. Walid's family had to change cars and buses several times to avoid being caught.

Walid recalls that poor children from the countryside brought his obviously well-off family food and bread as if they were royalty. He also remembers being frightened by bombs and other sounds of fighting as the family made its way across the border, but, Walid admits, "Compared to most, our way of fleeing Afghanistan was luxurious."

Walid's father couldn't have foreseen that the family would land in Lyon in 1985, but at that time, it was easy for Afghans to enter. As Walid jokes, a look at the history of the [Silk Road](#) and wine draws the two cities together. In the 17th century, Lyon became one of the global epicenters for silk weaving.



Afghan police recruits man AK-47 assault rifles while providing security in eastern Zhari district, Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012. Photo by Sgt. Stephen J. Schmitz, courtesy of U.S. Army.

“All fine fabrics traveling from Asia, including from Afghanistan, came through Lyon,” he says, pointing to an open window on the second floor of the shop’s building through which can be seen an apartment with wood-beamed ceilings. The shop is in one of the old silk-weaving structures, called *les canuts*. The 13-foot-high ceilings created enough space for the large silk looms.

“And the best French wine is Persian,” he adds. A fine wine connoisseur, he boasts his wine cellar contains fine French reds, but he upholds the legend that the French Syrah grape [originated in Iran](#), near the Afghan border.

Having been educated in French schools in Kabul, Walid integrated into French public education in Lyon. After university, he opened two computer businesses in Lyon. He met his wife in India, and a few years after their wedding, she

moved to Lyon and the couple had three children.

“I managed big companies and I handled big budgets, but to manage the emotions of three kids who lost their mom was horribly difficult,” he says.

In 2014, at the height of his career, Walid’s wife died at 35 from breast cancer. With three young children and aging parents to take care of, Walid sold the businesses he had acquired in Lithuania, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Manama, Bahrain, to stay in France full time. To earn extra cash and maintain contact with the world outside during his family crisis, he decided to open a small convenience store.

“OK, I’ll sell food, because if there’s an economic crisis or not, whatever happens in the world, people should eat,” he says. “And this is what the Covid crisis has proved to me: to always be in service to the people.”



Atiqualla Rahin, U.S. Marine Chief Warrant Officer Bruce Johnson, and an Afghan contractor walk around the grounds of a new building site for a men's detention facility in Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Lt. j.g. Jennifer Franco. Courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

Since he speaks French, English, Persian, and Arabic fluently,

he serves as a translator for the nebulous legal terms that obstruct communication. But this task goes beyond word-for-word exchanges. France has a reputation for one of most circuitous bureaucracies in Europe, and translating also means wading through the language of the cumbersome paperwork that accompanies every file.

“For every small thing, you get a paper,” Walid explains. “If I could show you my boxes of letters. For every small thing, you have some letter and most of the time it’s nothing. And so, I read these letters to them and tell them everything’s OK. Most of what I do for them is basic.”

Other tasks are more complicated. He helps place them in residences and he intervenes whenever they have trouble with the police, which is often the result of some cultural or linguistic misunderstanding, he says. Since Medhi’s asylum application had already been rejected by France, Walid is in contact with a lawyer and has served as a liaison between French immigration and private legal counsel. He is also regularly in contact with people he knows in Afghanistan to obtain birth certificates, work contracts, and other documents attesting to the truth of the stories the men tell their asylum caseworkers.

But he recalls the poor children from the countryside who brought his family food while they escaped Afghanistan.

“They had no food, but they still wanted to help me, and now I feel like I’m giving back,” he says. “I was too young to recall much about Afghanistan, but I feel I need to help people who need it. All the kids I help were thrown out at critical times in their lives.”

Even though these asylum requests are processed in the Afghans’ native language, Walid has to do it for most of them because of their low education level. Many who come from the poor and working class have few years of formal education and

struggle to write a one-page letter.

Medhi lived in Afghanistan until he was 20 and spent only two years total in school. Before arriving in France as a young boy, Walid had seven years of elementary school in Afghanistan. "My education in Persian stopped when I was 10 in Afghanistan, but my writing and reading skills are far superior," Walid explains.

Walid is also inspired by his father, who has helped in raising the three children while organizing local outreach efforts to help educate Afghans from a distance. Walid's uncle, his father's brother, is the head of a larger organization with a similar goal based in California called [Afghan Education for a Better Tomorrow](#) that gives distance-learning courses to students in Afghanistan.

"Humanity is his religion," he says of his father.

'I Fear the Worst for Him'

Just as in the United States, a growing strain of French public far-right sentiment is less favorable to [economic migrants than to political ones](#), which is magnified by a fear of [admitting Islamist radicals](#) into the country.

Since Mehdi isn't an economic refugee, he has a better chance of succeeding than other Afghans Walid advises. Walid refuses to follow through with some asylum cases because the men change their stories too many times. Some lie about their age, and others borrow money from him only to disappear. Others schedule meetings with him and never show up. He had to bail one refugee out of jail.

"One night, I get a call around 7 in the evening," he says. "One of my guys blocked Bellecour metro station for hours. Police were everywhere."

After his second rejection, the young man in question tried to

kill himself by throwing himself in front of a Lyon subway. Bystanders banded together and stopped him, but the police detained him, and that has jeopardized his case in ways Walid can't assist.

"They don't have the same reality as I do," Walid says when discussing the gap in education and socioeconomic status with the Afghans. Some of the young men get angry at him if he can't help them or won't lend them money. But he cooks Afghan food for them once a week and allows them to gather at his shop to drink, smoke, and reconnect with their country. Sometimes fights break out and he plays an objective referee. For example, an older man who believed communism was beneficial for Afghanistan almost came to blows with a younger Afghan who saw his family's rural livelihood destroyed by the Soviet-backed government.

"But we are human beings," Walid concludes. "Right is right. Good is good. I won't let a difference of education or vision come between us."

Mehdi, however, is polite, even-tempered, and willing to help in Walid's shop. His story has been consistent for six months. Walid has never worked harder on a case, he says.

Getting someone to believe that Medhi worked for years on the Bagram base is likely the only way he will be granted asylum by any government in Europe or elsewhere, Walid says. The War Horse has contacted the contractor, Anham, but has received no response.

"He's like my son, and I fear the worst for him," Walid says.

'They Already Have Voices'

Medhi's story, in many ways, is not only Walid's story but the story of all the Afghans who have been persecuted due to wars on their soil for more than 40 years.

“Their voices need to be amplified,” Halloran says. “They already have voices that can be heard, but those voices need to be amplified. This is the role that we can play.”

While waiting for a response to his renewed asylum request, Medhi spends time at Walid’s on the weekend doing odd jobs.

“I offer him money for his services, but Medhi always refuses it.”

He continues to learn English and French at the refugee residence in Bourg-en-Bresse near Lyon that houses several families, also waiting for updates to their status. When the weather is nice, they have group cookouts. If he gets his papers, Mehdi says, he might try to become a chef somewhere in Lyon. If not, he is trained not only as a security guard but also as a tile layer—and there is a demand for this skill in the Lyon area.

“I cannot change my life,” Medhi says. “But I can try.”

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This article previously appeared in [The War Horse](#), June 17, 2021.

Landslide / For Byron Who Was Separated From His Father At The US-Mexico Border



When you left
Guatemala. Crossed the border
Into Mexico. With your father or
How there was a smuggler. Who
Took you. On foot. All the way to

America. How the truth is. When
You went down the road and off
Of the mountain. Where you live.
Have always lived. How you did
Not think. *I will ever come back.*
And now. You cannot get back.
How your mother and father
Cannot get you back. And when
You got here. Crossed over the
Border and into California. How
Border Patrol picked you up and
Your father. How they sent him
Back. Back to Guatemala. They
Deported him. But without you.
Because they kept you. Keeping
You in detention. And in Texas or
How. Texas is so far away. Away
From your father. Your mother.
Sister or the mountain. And you
Were only seven years old when
You left. Left Guatemala. Or how
You are eight now. Because you

Have been. Here. And detained.
In Texas. Or how it has been five.
Five months. They have kept you.
And not let you go home.
I want you to know. This
Was not supposed to happen to
You. How they made your father
Sign a form in a language he did
Not know how to read. Or how.
They told him. Told your father
If you sign it. They would bring
You back to him. And *who will*
Hug him. Your father says. Who
Will hug you now. Now that you
Are still here and he is back. In
Guatemala. On a mountain. Or
Without you.
And he stretches your clothes.
Each day and across a bed. The
Bed where you used to sleep.
How he cannot stop saying *how*
You are very small.

And *how much*.

That this is *too much*. This is just

Too much pain. And your mother

Says that when. They are able to

Call you. How they can see you.

Over video and it is hard. Hard

To connect. How you look away

And off to the side. Whispering.

Whispering *it is dangerous here*.

And I know.

I know what some people will say.

When your father tell the story

About why he did it Took you all

The way across Mexico. And into

America. Across the border. How

He says he did it for you. So you

Can have *a better life*.

How they will say his reasons

Were *economic*. And how. How

You were not fleeing violence.

How there was no danger. And

It was a few years ago. When

There was a landslide. And
Land slid down your mountain.
How it was falling or rushing
Down. And it covered houses
And people.
Or how it buried everything.
And a landslide happens when
The stress of a mountain
Outweighs its resistance.
Or when your father does not
Know. If there will be another
Job. If he can keep you fed or
Alive. When he knows there
Is no more. Clean water. For
You to drink. Living like this.
It is waiting.
Waiting for the land to slide
Down. And bury you. Alive.
Because poverty is always
Dangerous.
But your father knows now.
He knows that

What is even more dangerous
Is a country without a heart.
This heartless country.
That took you away from him.
And will not. Will not.
Give you back.

This poem is part of [Border of Heartbreak](#) – a collection of poems written for children separated at the US-Mexico border. It was written after reading a [New York Times article](#) about Byron – an eight year old boy who was separated from his father at the US-Mexico border in May 2018, detained, and kept in detention even after his father was deported back to Guatemala. Byron was held in US detention for eight months.