

# poetry by sanctuary seekers



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NOVEMBER 2021 - ISSUE I

POETRY BY  
SANCTUARY  
SEEKERS



# Introduction

Poems communicate emotions that are intangible and unknown, going to the core of what it is to be human. They are an ideal medium for speaking about difficult experiences and mental health.

This anthology brings together poems from people who have sought sanctuary in the UK, primarily Iranians and Afghans. The poems were created from interviews for a PhD on mental health during the asylum process.

After each poem, is a little context on the asylum process from the PhD. Some of the poets have used their real names, and others have chosen pseudonyms. Alongside the poems are photos from Ravi, a photographer from Sri Lanka.

We hope that this zine will raise awareness of the realities of the lives of sanctuary seekers, as well as their resilience in the face of extreme, man-made adversity. Money raised from this anthology will go to the poets and to Migrants Organise.

# The word asylum

By Ghaanim

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I didn't know the English word asylum, I never heard it.

Mentally in anxiety, physically you have to sit.

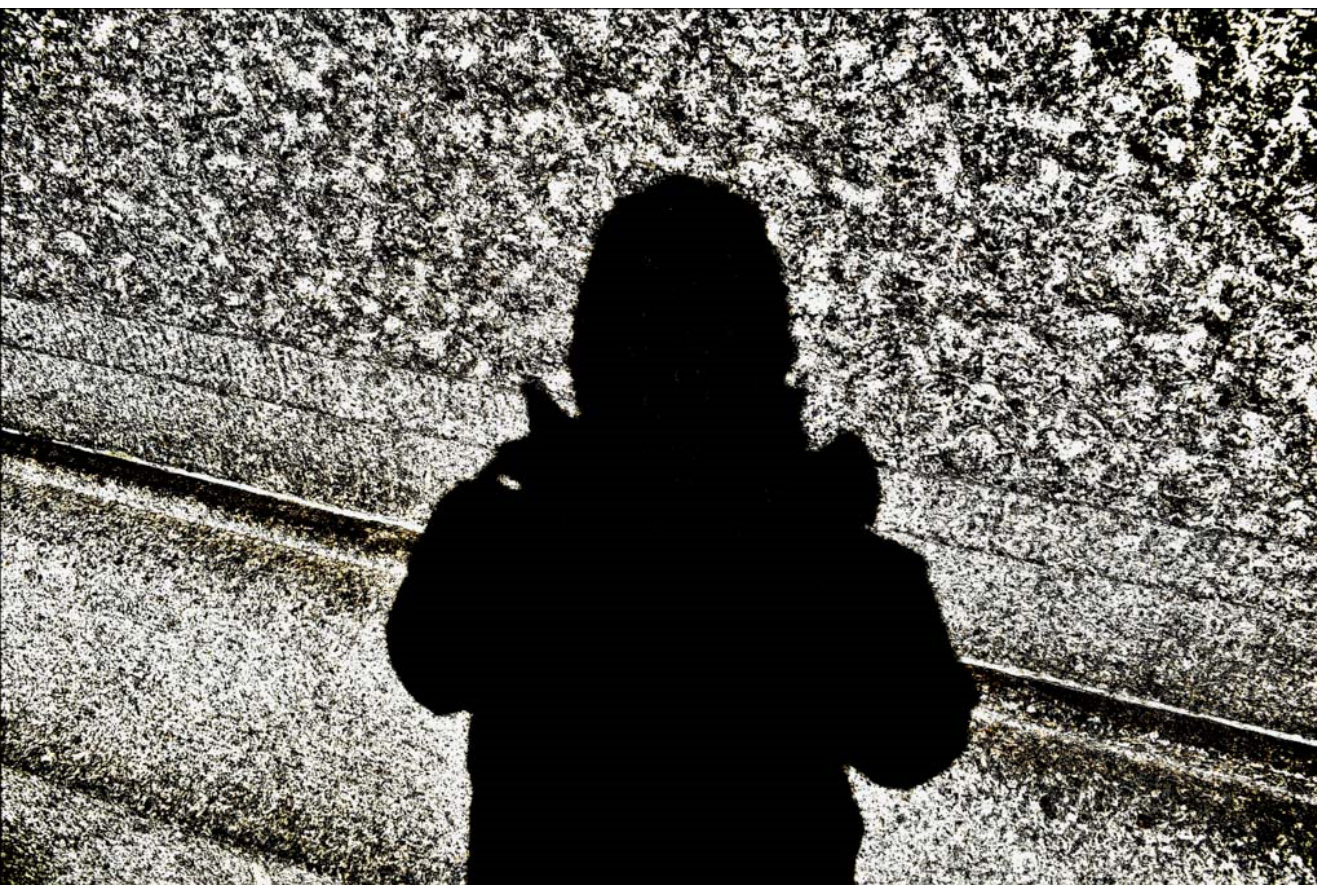
The description of yourself from yesterday is incomplete,

Coming from a dark stage to see a light, your fate is lit.

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Sanctuary seekers do not usually come to the UK knowing how to claim asylum or even what the word means. Once people have submitted their claim for asylum, they may still be unclear on what is happening to their case, at which stage of the process they are and on what criteria their claim will be judged. This leads to a lot of damaging uncertainty. Charities like Right to Remain try to provide people with information about the asylum process.





*Photo: A self portrait.*

*Place: Nelson Column Trafalgar's Square.*

**The anthology's photographic artist:** I'm Ravi, I'm a photographer and a designer from London. I enjoy taking photos of the things and places that remind me of what I loved the most in the past. They bring wonderful memories of my former country. I also participate in art groups and help refugee artists and young asylum seekers to learn about photography. You can contact me on [ravi@payanam.uk](mailto:ravi@payanam.uk) and see other photos on my website [www.payanam.uk](http://www.payanam.uk).

# I still have knowledge

By Nooshin

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Without information, we won't reach anywhere.

Yet in that meeting, I felt I still had knowledge.

Everyone has rights, but you must be aware,

I am against the fact this country doesn't care.

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Sanctuary seekers often go through a minoritisation process when they arrive in the UK, losing their social and professional status. In some charity contexts, people can also be infantilised and patronised. A few poets took part in participatory action research (PAR). PAR aims to equalise the researcher-participant relationship and give participants control over every part of the research process. In the participatory meetings, people could revert to their home country roles as knowledge providers and producers.



*Place: Tate Modern.*

**Photo Context:** My past was hopeless and painful but I have lots of hope about the future. It is going to be bright and beautiful.



*Photo: A reporting centre where asylum seekers were detained and deported.*

**Photo Context:** Most asylum seekers must report to the Home Office every month or fortnight otherwise they face jail or detention or deportation. The staff working at these centres can treat people as less than human.





*Place: Eaton House, Enforcement Centre, Hounslow.*

**Photo Context:** One day, the Home Office threatened to deport me to the country where I escaped from. In their letter, they said I was living here illegally, they told me I had to leave the country immediately otherwise they would deport me. I have seen the officers detain asylum seekers so many times who came to report regularly. Going to the Home Office for report is like going to a detention centre and there is no guarantee of returning home.

# Our voices heard

By Syed Haleem Najibi

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Your future is on hold waiting for a decision

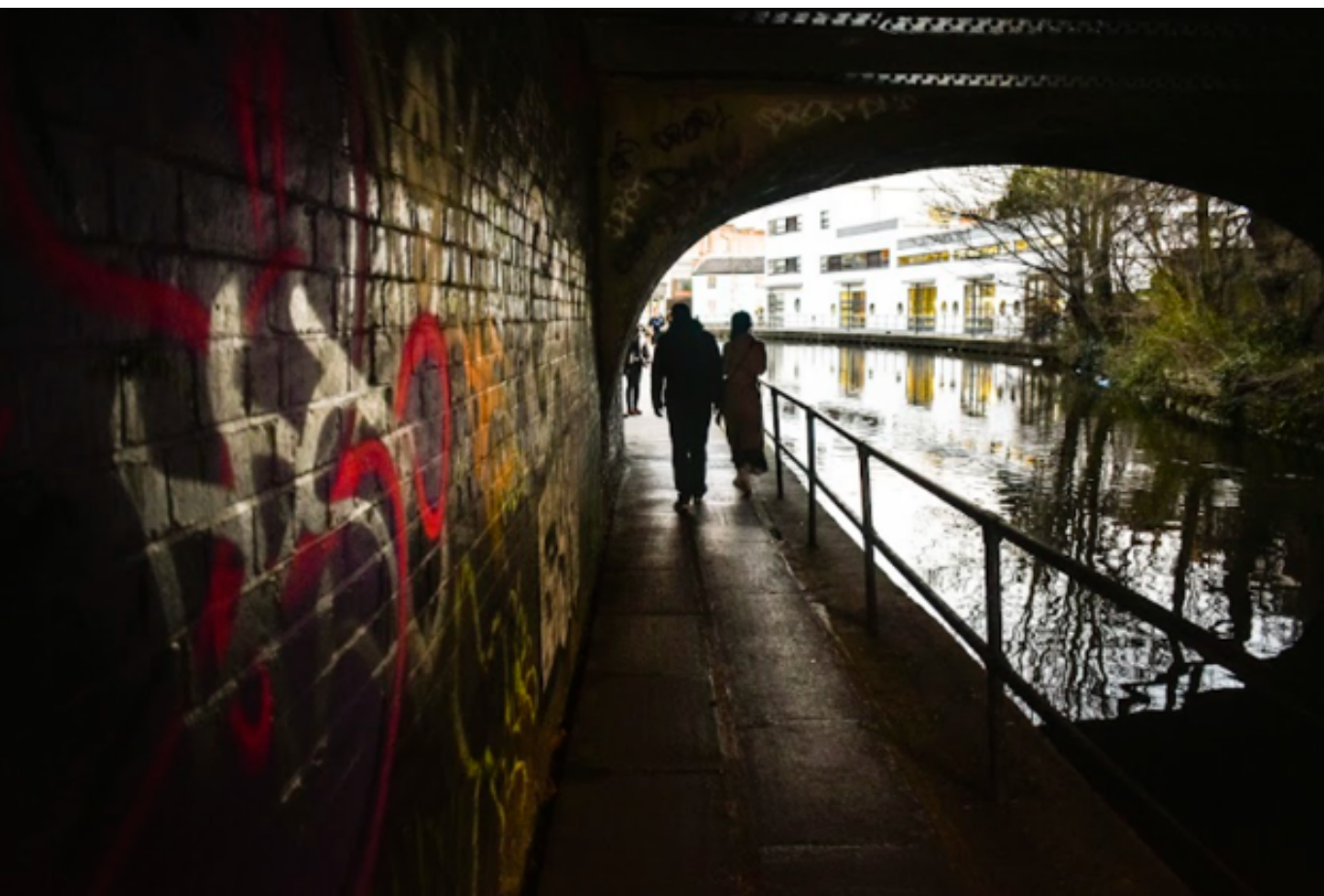
They do their job, to trick, to catch and make you lie

You remember again things you don't want to vision

I want our voices heard and the system to listen.

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The asylum interview decides if someone is granted status. In it, applicants are attacked and disbelieved by Home Office interviewers. Any inconsistency is used against people, and there is a lack of understanding on how trauma can affect memory. People feel betrayed by the institution that was meant to protect them and gaslighted as fundamental facts about their lives are questioned.



*Photo: Exploring Canal Bridges.  
Place: Regent's canal, Camden.*

**Photo Context:** The long wait for an asylum decision can make many people hopeless about their future. People live in limbo and with uncertainty about their tomorrow. Every day waiting can make lives harder and darker.

# Your future is frozen

By Mohsen

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You wait years maybe more, I don't know,

The police come and the refugee shivers,

One way for everyone as you just follow,

Staying inside is a prison, same day tomorrow.

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Sanctuary seekers often felt excluded from mainstream society because of the deprivation and discrimination they experienced. People viewed and interacted with London differently to tourists or long-term residents. The city centre was briefly visited and quickly exited. Landmarks did not comprise the Millennium Wheel, Parliament or the Tower of London, but reporting centres, charity offices, and stops on the walk to a friend's NASS housing. A few sanctuary seeking participants explained how their world, inside and outside home, became a prison and a constant reminder of the bar and borders that followed them.



*Photo: Exploring Canal Bridges.  
Place: Regent's canal, Camden.*

**Photo Context:** Language barrier, lack of support and long asylum process waiting times can make people feel lonely. They are far from their family. They don't know where to turn when they need help and support. It would be really difficult for anyone. Especially, when an asylum application is refused you do not know what to do next or how to get legal support. Some people don't even know their application was refused.



# The smell of filth

By Habib

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The kitchen smelt of filth and was full of dead mice

Why did I have to sit and wait and agonise?

The steps here were a lot worse and a lot harder

The bird puts its head in the snow, the foxes price.

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Nearly all asylum seekers are barred from working in the UK and the majority live below the poverty line. People have to choose between basic necessities, such as clothes, phone data and food. The Home Office provides some people accommodation but this often includes inappropriate sharing arrangements, is away from urban centres and people's social support networks, and is unhygienic. Lift The Ban is campaigning for people to be given the right to work. Check #LiftTheBan and get more information on the Refugee Council and Refugee Action websites.



*Photo: Exploring Canal Bridges.  
Place: Regent's Canal, Camden.*

**Photo Context:** The asylum process can make people physically and mentally weak. I used to get £35 per week with which I used to buy my food and toiletries. I had to live on bread, egg and milk. Asylum seekers are not allowed to seek employment. If they get caught, they could be deported. I believe that the Home office deliberately makes asylum seekers weak to encourage them to leave "voluntarily".

# Passing Through

By Mohammad Reza

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I've seen this place before, I was passing through,

I didn't come out of my room and I withdrew.

My entire body was bloodied and eaten,

I thought that here they value what is true.

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During the long asylum process, people lose their skills and an imagined future self fades away. While waiting, sanctuary seekers are not only distant from their families back home, but also from a life in the UK. Thus, people can become detached and distant from themselves. However, many people in the interviews spoke of a grim determination and an unbounded patience to see through the gruelling asylum process.



*Place: Tate Modern.*

**Photo Context:** Nightmares became part of my life after I escaped to the UK. I have regretted many times the decision that I made to come here. I had to live with my trauma and had fight against the Home Office at the same time.

# Thread unbroken

By Maral

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I was hanging by a thread, but the thread never ripped,

I will give a heart for anyone who needs a heart.

A window in my life was opened, and a light flipped,

I will tell the story of torture, this is a true script.

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Sanctuary seekers came to the UK with a great deal of resilience, able to accept difficult, new and reduced circumstances. Spiritual beliefs about destiny and a life-script helped some people through asylum process difficulties. Almost everyone in the research was involved in volunteering and determined to give back to the charities that had supported them, and to help others in their situation.





*Place: In my weekly photography group, I was expressing love to create our (refugees) own language using gestures.*

**Photo Context:** After joining a photography group in London, my life has changed in a positive and productive way. I feel love and loved by others. There are so many supportive and kind hearted people in the UK who restored my view about humanity.

# What Crime?

By Pegah

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I became ill, it was raining heavily.

He was detained, what crime had he committed?

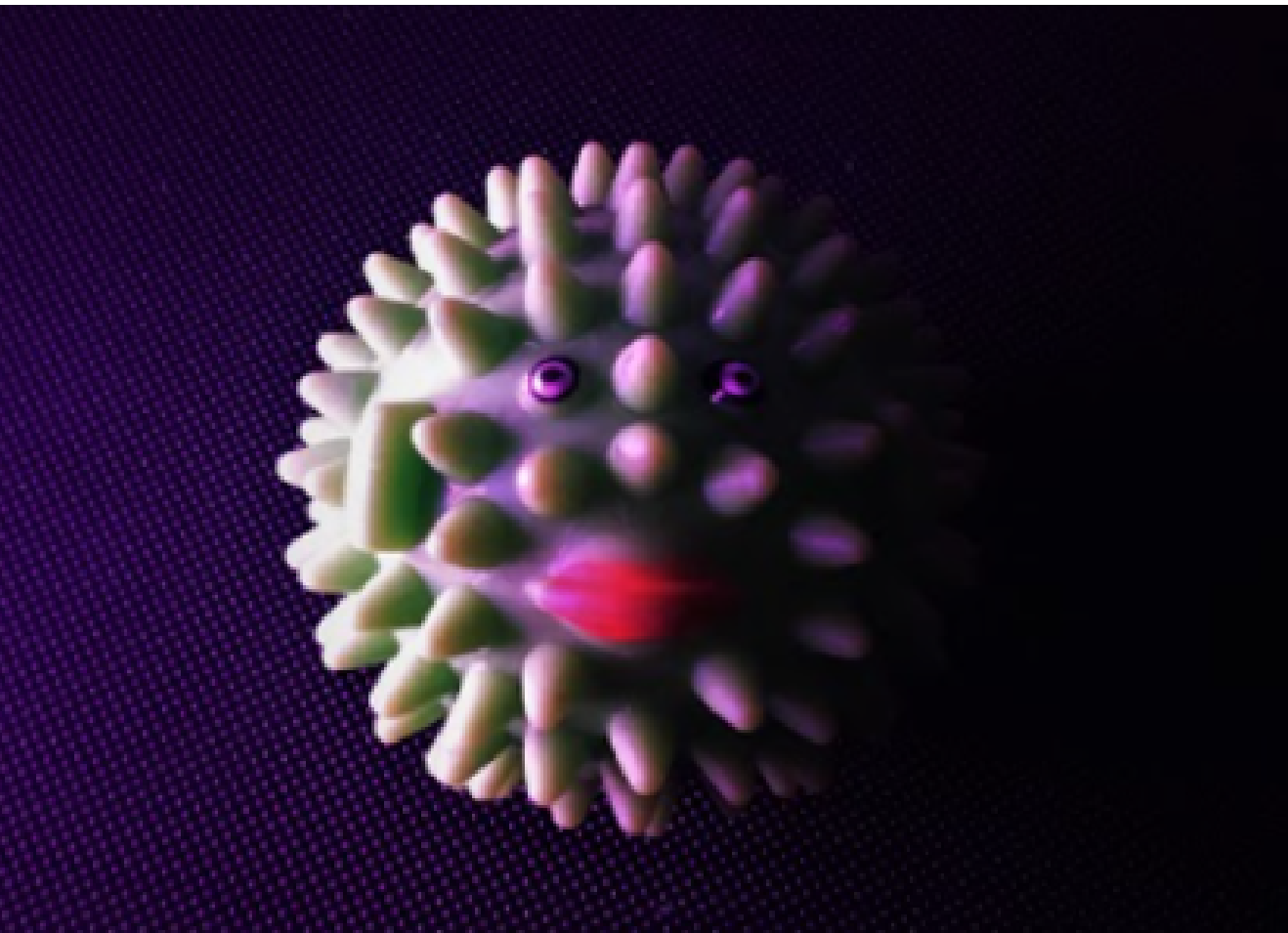
I was keen and would read Rumi's poetry,

The river moves and things will finish quickly.

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Home Office restrictions contributed to racist claims that sanctuary seekers are "parasites". People that participated in the research wanted to speak out against their marginalisation in the asylum process, as well as their framing by the media as parasitic.

Supporting self-organised and charity supported sanctuary seeker networks, like Survivors Speak Out, is important to people's mental health. Check actions by Survivors Speak Out on the website of the organisation "Freedom From Torture".



*Photo: A symptom management technique to calm myself.  
Place: At home.*

**Photo Context:** I feared the police siren and ambulance sounds. They brought an instant fear and I react to them weirdly, assuming someone is coming to get me. The smiley ball helps me to control or manage fear by squeezing it continuously.

# Mental health?

By Bose

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How do you name a specific mental health? Do  
you call it distress or does it grow into an illness?

The voice you hear sounds so clear,  
It tells you; you look lovely dear.

Other times, it tells you to get run down by a car  
At the beach, it tells you to jump in and end it.

Is it really mental or spiritual?

If you experience any of the symptoms,  
You are not alone bro,  
if you cannot handle your emotions sis,

Remember we are all Emotionally,  
Psychologically and Socially at it.

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This poem was written by a member of the Migrants  
Organise poetry group. We were inspired to get in  
touch with, and fundraise, for this group after one of  
the research interviewees mentioned how much of a  
positive impact it had on their mental health.



*Photo: A self-portrait*

*Place: Tate Modern*

**Photo Context:** My refugee status, therapy and of course the photography group made me ready to face the challenges as a free man. I completed my studies and started Payanam, a company through which I sell my art.



# Resources

If you are a refugee or migrant and need support with mental health, these resources offer suggestions of who to contact. You can also contact us on Instagram @poetrybysanctuaryseekers.

## *Refugee Council*

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

Have a look at their website and get information about mental health support.

## *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Directory*

For an extensive list of organisations and places to go see the *MHPSS Directory* list available as a PDF download on the website of King's College London.

Get information about the work of Migrants Organise on their website at [www.migrantsorganise.org](http://www.migrantsorganise.org). Part of the proceeds from this anthology will go to their poetry group.

For more information about the PhD the poems arise from, contact [sohail.jannesari@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:sohail.jannesari@kcl.ac.uk) or visit [www.sohailj.com](http://www.sohailj.com) for summaries of the research.

# Epilogue

In recent years, government attacks on the rights of sanctuary seekers have grown ever more severe. The 2021 Borders and Nationality Bill aims to criminalise people arriving via “irregular” routes and to separate them from their families. It is more important than ever to extend our empathy, understanding and allyship to those seeking sanctuary. We hope that this anthology has gone a small way towards doing that.





