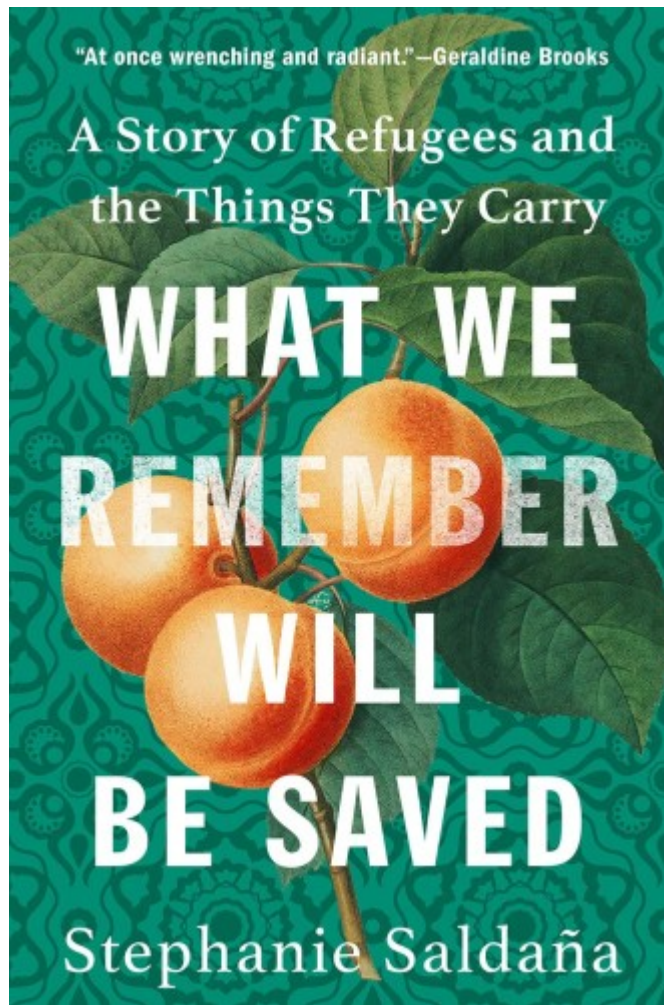


What do people who've lost everything bring with them?

Stephanie Saldaña reminds us that refugees carry a whole world inside them.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

## In Review



### **What We Remember Will Be Saved**

A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry

By Stephanie Saldaña

Broadleaf

The question that Stephanie Saldaña poses in this book is a paradoxical one: What do people who've lost everything carry with them? She travels across the Middle East and Europe, going into war-torn places and in search of war-torn people, to ask them about what they've carried with them. The answers are not infrequently literal: a bar of soap that smells like home, a musical instrument, a kind of candy. But that isn't really what Saldaña most wants to know.

Before we talk about remainders, Saldaña asks us to comprehend the loss. The UN has documented that every day an average of 44,000 people leave their homes due to conflict and persecution. The civil war in Syria, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing conflicts in Sudan, and the political situations in Eritrea, Iran, and Afghanistan have all contributed to this worldwide refugee crisis. Religions, languages, musical and literary traditions, architecture, and whole ways of life have been devastated. But sometimes you can only comprehend the loss by staring at the remainders.

Because of Saldaña's own personal history—she is the author of two captivating memoirs about her life in the Middle East and how she came to learn Arabic—she focuses on the stories of refugees who fled conflict in Iraq and Syria, especially amid the catastrophic rise of ISIS in these regions and the effects of civil war. She goes in search of what refugees carried when they fled their homes.

The first object that she describes in the book is a dress made by a woman who escaped Qaraqosh in northern Iraq and fled to Amman, Jordan, and later to Australia. Hana embroidered her entire town into the fabric of a dress called a *shal*, so that the dress became like a map or a book. Embroidered into the dress were symbols of the town's Christian history, evidence of its agricultural foundation, and representations of many of its traditions. Saldaña had thought that she was in search of fragments, so her first stunning realization was that this refugee had attempted to map her previous life onto the dress as a whole.

More commonly, however, it is fragments and intangibles that make the trip. "Recipes. Seeds. Perfumes. Gardens. Prayers. Languages. Music." Saldaña makes a list in her notebook of the kinds of things that have been saved. Intangibles transport better than objects:

The intangible quality of a song makes it both fragile and portable, able to be carried out of a war even by those who did not have time to pack a bag or who lost their belongings along the way. A mother without a suitcase will still carry a lullaby.

But even though a song can be transported, it can also be forgotten. Without communities to remember, there are no guarantees that music will be carried from one generation to another.

As Saldaña tours refugee camps in Lesbos, Greece, she sees with vivid clarity how desperate Europe was to ignore the people washing up on its shore and the miserable conditions that have resulted. Saldaña listens to stories as she sits “frozen, on a palate on a Greek island surrounded by filth and the smell of excrement.” She documents people sleeping on cardboard, kerosene fires, lack of access to medical treatment, and the poor food that greets traumatized people who have already lost everything. “Either we’ll die of the food or we’ll die of hunger,” one man tells her. Another man, who saved many lives as he fled Mosul, Iraq, and made his way gradually to Greece, told her, “I expected humanity. In the end, I discovered that I was more humane than [the Europeans] were.”

In Amsterdam, one couple who traveled from Aleppo, Syria, to the Netherlands tells Saldaña that they brought nothing with them. Once upon a time, they’d had a pharmacy. It was destroyed. They made another pharmacy out of the ruins of the old one. Then they lost that one too. As they tell the story of the pharmacies, it becomes clear that this is a story of learning to live with the uncertainty that everything could be taken from you at any time. Ghadir tells Saldaña that she and her husband, Adnan, started to look at everything with what she called the “eyes of creation”: what could you do with a severed shelf, a broken table, a screw or a nail that would help you live in the midst of catastrophe? For Ghadir and Adnan, the process of rebuilding was not about preserving what was at risk but about how they wanted to live, who they wanted to be, even as things were falling apart. It became a set of principles that they embodied in keeping the second pharmacy open: be available, be attentive, be dependable, be kind.

One of the final paradoxes that Saldaña explores involves a Yazidi refugee from Iraq. The Yazidis have a mostly oral culture and an oral religion, but these traditions are tied to the land from which they come. When Saldaña spoke with Qassem, they

didn't talk about what he'd saved. They only talked about what he'd lost. During the 2014 genocide conducted by the Islamic State, 5,000 Yazidis were killed, thousands of women and girls were taken in sexual slavery, and more than 500,000 became refugees. Because of their displacement, Yazidis are on the verge of losing their culture, their language, their religion, and their ancient practices.

Saldaña comes to understand that what Qassem lost is also what he saved. It's a painful paradox for the world's refugees. You carry the loss with you, and you can't put it down. She writes, "Even in listening to his stories, I understood that he had saved so much among the devastation: His stories. His history. The memory of places now destroyed."

This book is an act of love and an act of translation. A story of the savers and the saved, it's a vivid reminder that every refugee carries a whole world inside them, and these worlds contain the seeds of both remembrance and survival.