

# Invisible Ventimiglia

by Charlotte Rouault

Between Italy and France, between sea and mountains, between solidarity and rejection, between life and death, that's where you could find Ventimiglia. If you listen carefully, this town can tell you that the border is not just a dividing line between a here and a there. It is a space in its own right that puts to the test all attempts at antogonal simplification. A space that breathes and suffers, that welcomes and hunts, that enriches and disintegrates, that illuminates and terrifies. An elusive space, constantly in motion, invisible. Because sound is an impalpable but powerful wave, it is through the sounds of this territory that I have tried to convey the particular yet universal story I have heard in Ventimiglia.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-137531695/ventimiglia-le-citta-invisibili-rsi-charlotte-rouault>

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### *Beach soundscape*

**Charlotte:** We're here on the beach at Ventimiglia, in Italy.

It's the place where the Roya River, which comes down from the Alps, flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

If you look west, you can make out France.

Everything here is stunningly beautiful.

But now, it's difficult to look at the Mediterranean without thinking of all the people who have lost their life there because they didn't have the right documents to travel in safety.

### *City soundscape*

**Charlotte:** Here in Ventimiglia, the border has been closed and heavily guarded since 2015.

### *Sounds of a demonstration*

**Protester:** Another person has been killed by Italian-French border system, near to Ventimiglia.

**Charlotte:** But it's not so much in the water that migrants risk losing their lives to cross this border.

**Protester:** A 17-year-old boy from Bangladesh died when he was electrocuted on the roof of a train. His death is the umpteenth consequence of a border that's invisible and open to Europeans and tourists, but closed and deadly to those without documents.

**Charlotte:** From what we know, and it's certainly very far from the truth, 13 people have been electrocuted on trains...

**Protester:** The border is destroying life...

**Charlotte:** 8 have been run over on the motorway...

**Protester:** Enchains life...

**Charlotte:** 3 on rail tracks...

**Protester:** It's an enemy to the free flow of life.

**Charlotte:** 2 fell to their death in the mountains; 1 was shot by French police.

**Protester:** The border kills. And behind it, we see the face of European institutions, sovereignty policies, police forces, but also ordinary, indifferent citizens, like you and us.

### *Sound of feet climbing steps*

**Charlotte:** Not many people use the sea to cross this border.

However, lives have been lost in these waters too.

Because here, it's not only the physical border and its dangers that kill.

It's also the whole world created by the border.

**Protesters:** "Freedom, hurriya, liberta!"

### *Train station soundscape*

**Charlotte:** 22 November 2016, Kingsley Alimonu, 23, born in Nigeria.

13 June 2017, Alfateh Ahmed Bachir, 17, born in Sudan.

20 June 2018, Abdalaziz Mody, 42, born in Sudan.

9 September 2018, Mohamed Amiri Bolvardi, 21, born in Iran.

29 May 2019, Omoregie Osakpolor, 26, born in Nigeria.

3 June 2021, Ghiyath Aljondi, 21, born in Syria.

4 June 2023, Saïd Mohamoud Momin, 27, born in Somalia.

20 June 2023, Ahmed Abdulahi, 36, born in Somalia.

20 October 2023, Aadam Mohamed Cabdi, 18, born in Somalia.

### *Departing train*

**Charlotte:** These nine people who lost their life in the waters of Ventimiglia were distinct individuals; they had their own life, their own goals, journeys, plans and wounds.

Some were regularised, others weren't. Some were living on the streets, others weren't. Some were in Ventimiglia to cross the border, others weren't.

Besides their status as non-Europeans, the only thing they had in common was that they had run into border obstacles along their way.

Bodies and minds traumatised by the various facets of the world's violence.

They lost their lives in these waters of loneliness, rejection and suffocation of hope.

In a variety of circumstances, not all of them known.

One wanted to wash themselves because in Ventimiglia, there aren't any decent washing facilities.

One was swept away by the flooding of the Roya River, whose banks were the only place they could camp, because in Ventimiglia, one has to hide to sleep.

One was trying to escape an attack because in Ventimiglia, trafficking and violence thrive on the grave of free movement and self-determination.

*A train goes by*

**Charlotte:** It would be utterly unfair to say that it's all Ventimiglia's fault.

Unwittingly, this town has become a laboratory for managing migrant bodies on a local and international scale.

*A crowd arrives*

**Charlotte:** Fences, checks, deportations, walls, evictions, camps, raids, trials, promises and threats.

**Charlotte (in the crowd):** Do you know if someone is going to speak, address the crowd?

**Charlotte:** It's a lot for a small town of 25,000 inhabitants.

**Protesters:** There should be some speeches... Nobody does anything... One of them climbed over a gate... Last evening, they were fighting again...

**Charlotte:** Even the inhabitants were surprised when the border closed.

**Protesters:** Anyway they'll not get into France. They'll never let them pass, they're not that stupid.

*Applause*

**Charlotte:** Inhabitants who have never been a fixed and homogenous category.

**Protester:** We proposed to gather in the centre of this city to denounce with a bare face, in front of everyone, the malaise in which we have all been living for too many years.

**Charlotte:** Some have always shown solidarity with migrants, others have organised themselves to demand more controls from the authorities.

**Protester:** Because we want security and freedom.

**Charlotte:** Many are simply fed up with the lack of positive perspectives.

**Protesters:** No one is taking care of Ventimiglia!

Now winter's coming, is it bearable that I have to retire home at 4 o'clock because they are hiding here and there?! Mr. Mayor, Mr. Mayor, disinfect the city, it stinks!

I don't know how far we have to go; do we have to defend ourselves on our own?

**Charlotte:** The more the border regime expands, the more difficult it is for anyone to maintain a look beyond the antagonism us/them...

**Protester:** Let's stand shoulder to shoulder to defend Ventimiglia!

**Charlotte:** Migrants/inhabitants...

**Protester:** Those who are here don't mean a thing to Ventimiglia.

**Charlotte:** Solidarity/security.

**Protester:** Because Ventimiglia is here, not over there! Because we were all born here, I think, and we'll defend our town.

*Beach soundscape*

**Charlotte:** With so few nuances in such a complex reality, how can we hope to find right solutions?

When everything seems lost, what happens when people re-create these nuances?

**Francesca:** I think we were doing assembly here.

**Antonio:** We were in the middle.

**Charlotte:** What Ventimiglia teaches us is that powerful experiences of hope can happen.

**Francesca:** That's it, that sound, I remember so much. In total silence, those steps. It was getting near Easter...

**Antonio:** Yes.

**Francesca:** So it was April 2016, maybe 14 or 15 April, and I remember the notice had come that they were going to clear the informal camp under the bridge.

So we had this assembly together with the migrants to understand what we wanted to do and they decided to self-evacuate because they didn't want to come into conflict with the institutions at all.

I remember, it was really early in the morning, like about 4 or 5am, we had taken all the tents down, it was raining, there was loads of rain, and we decided to start walking, go along, show ourselves.

The migrants' aim, I remember, was to say "OK, we'll evict ourselves; we'll show with our bodies that we have decided not to enter into conflict with the institutions, and we'll go to the beach".

I remember the rain and all these people walking in line with blankets and tents. We started to practically take over all this part of the beach. And we had this assembly to work out what we could do.

The hours went by. Many people came along to bring us food. After a while, evening started to creep in, the sun was setting and we were a bit worried. We decided to rebuild the camp right here. The migrants started putting up the tents, so there were all these tents here. We decided to stay.

Then, lots of smugglers arrived, there were loads of them. They ramped up their prices because it was a tense situation. The migrants didn't want the smugglers, because they were afraid that the more smugglers arrived to get them to leave, the more the group of migrants would break up.

Then, I remember at one point, some of the lads ran into the water; they had decided to swim across the border. Others started picking up rocks to harm themselves... I remember it was all rather a tense time. Then, we relaxed for a minute and all decided to keep calm. I remember, at one point, there was an assembly down there, and everyone in their various languages was saying: "We've had two exhausting days; let's keep calm, let's not get stressed, and we'll see what happens".

Except that at a certain point a Salesian, a priest from some confraternity, came up to us and told us to run away because he had seen some coaches on the border that were getting ready to deport the migrants. He said: "You have to escape, you've got to get away because I've seen these coaches and they told me they're coming here, where you are, tomorrow morning and will take you all away".

With this news, well... We said to each other: "What are we going to do? We're here with women and children...". And so, we decided to set off and went as far as we could on the seashore, then we continued on the promenade. A man came up to us and said: "Take the women and children to a disused hotel so they can at least spend the night there. Don't worry, we'll take care of protecting them". In the meantime, people from the territory arrived, offering the most resourceful solutions.

Then, we continued walking and went to a church. There was a church doing mass. I think remembering that at some point, the priest opened the oratory and we all went in there. We were there for two or three days, I think... And then... I can't remember now, I'm a bit confused as to what happened next...

**Antonio:** They opened the Gianchette church.

**Francesca:** Yes, that's right, they opened the church there, OK, well done.

**Antonio:** They were there for two years.

**Francesca:** That's right. I was all confused... After staying in that church, in the end, Don Rito opened the Gianchette church and they were there for more than two years.

**Maria:** The Church of San Antonio delle Gianchette, where the camp was opened. Camp? I wouldn't call it a camp. An extended family where people can come, sleep and leave again. Let's put it that way.

*A window opens*

**Maria:** The church is right below my house. I look out of the window and I can see the church and its grounds. Now, I see nothingness because there is nothing; I see a state of abandonment. But from 2016, 2017, I saw my window on the world.

We're talking about 31 May 2016. It was the last day of the month of Mary and we had gone up to the Madonna delle Virtù. We have a sanctuary, we walked up and went to the sanctuary. Don Rito had already told us that these migrants would be coming here because the church that had first taken them in, San Nicola, couldn't accommodate them anymore. As I came down from the sanctuary and got to my house, I could see this sea of people making their way to the church here, going through the gate and into the church down there.

Then, next day, we were all at home, my daughters and I. We looked out over the balcony and the president of Caritas, Maurizio, and the cook, Sandro, beckoned us down. I said to my daughters: "Go and see if they need anything". And then, I went down too. "Come on, there's cooking to be done", they told me! Cooking! I don't like cooking, oh well.

Then, in the evening, my husband came home and found us down there. And we just got on with it. For 440 days. We never left.

*A vehicle passes by*

**Hassan:** I remember the first day, that's what has most struck me, the first day. I've told you about the negative ideas I had before... And when I went in, I found Maria and the others offering all this hospitality, playing with the children... Yes, it was a big shock!

Before, this whole place was covered. There were so many people. We set out tables from here to where that football field is. The last door was the men's bedroom; the one in the middle was the women's. There was a first aid room here. This was the storeroom and in here, the kitchen. And then, behind that were the bathrooms.

**Maria:** Help always arrived. Cars would arrive bringing water; people would arrive bringing fruit; people would arrive bringing beds, mattresses, blankets, clothes; medicine would arrive, everything arrived. And we needed to organise it all, put it somewhere, create a system. And I enjoy doing that, it comes naturally to me, I don't know! And so, that's what I did. Organise shifts for meal times, for putting the shopping away, to do the cleaning, because everything had to be clean, of course. There was always a lot to do.

And there were the lawyers as well. A lot of them made themselves available to those who wanted to claim asylum, those who had to be reunited with other people. There was a lot of work.

And then, we let the women do the cooking. Their typical dishes. At Christmas, the traditional dessert from Sicily is cannoli: we made cannoli down here with the girls. We had so much fun. Then we had parties, we also celebrated birthdays, I mean...

There was such harmony, such respect, it was so beautiful.

Seeing a guy bringing me a bunch of flowers...

Everyone played their part. No one felt superior to another.

**Hassan:** It was full of life; it really was full of life. It'd be difficult to find another experience like this. I've met so many people from so many different cultures, languages and countries. Both immigrants and others as well. This place has taught me so much.

**Maria:** It was really just a normal thing. I don't even know how to explain. It wasn't difficult. Certainly, in the evenings, we cried a lot, because hearing all these stories, you realise the truth.

We treated everyone like sons and daughters. Like sisters, like mothers.

And they felt that. When they were leaving, they thanked us so much. They always said: "We've passed through so many camps, unfortunately, and there's nothing like this place. It just doesn't exist".

So, miracles can happen; we can live side by side, be together. Survive.

*The window closes*

**Maria:** That's what we did.

We did a great job in Ventimiglia, brilliant. It could have developed into something magnificent.

But there was no will to follow the example of what was done at the Gianchette.

And that's it... The desire to turn this town into something spectacular just wasn't there.

*A car door closes*

**Charlotte:** Ventimiglia isn't spectacular.

You could say that it sometimes becomes the stage for a media spectacle, but that doesn't improve anyone's life.

But behind the scenes, what simply and genuinely improves lives continues to move forwards because, like people, it cannot be stopped.

*Charlotte and some women greet each other in French.*

**Charlotte:** No spectacle, no staging, no publicity, no applause.

Here, people come together and thank each other.

*A door opens*



**Charlotte:** We're up in the mountains near Ventimiglia, in Italy.

In a house where a man has taken in a family while they get enough energy back to continue on their journey. After so many obstacles.

*People greet each other in French.*

**Charlotte (translating):** Good evening. Thank you.

*The man greets them in Arabic. Kenza, Oussama and Abdallah reply in Arabic.*

**Charlotte (translating):** This person is really kind.

*Abdallah speaks in French.*

**Charlotte (translating):** He has given us this house, he has given us so much. He welcomed us.

*Kenza speaks in Arabic, Abdallah translates it into French.*

**Charlotte (translating):** She says he has a lot of humanity in his heart.

She says she is proud to meet someone like him.

Proud.

**Charlotte:** Everything here is stunningly beautiful.

**END**