

From Same Water Flowing

Aissata

SALL, Aissata

Alien # _____

b. Nzerekoré, Republic of Guinea, 3/5/1963

Married, two biological children, two adopted

Left Conakry, Guinea 8/11/2004 with son Boubacar, aged 17; arrived New York, 8/12/2004, on connecting flight from Morocco.

Application for asylum based on political persecution by government of General Lansana Conté due to membership in political party opposing, among other government actions, constitutional amendment granting to Conté the right to run indefinitely for re-election.

Conduit

*The interpreter as a neutral conduit interprets everything that is said, adding nothing, omitting nothing, and changing nothing. [...] **Conduit** is the role on which interpreters should fall back if there is any uncertainty about which role they should play.*

(From “Roles of an Interpreter,”
Language Access Project, Community
Legal Services, Inc.)

The second time I interpreted for Aissata,
she wanted to know:

Is my attorney competent?
How could he have made this mistake?

I knew
it wasn't the attorney but the
judge's clerk who had made the mistake,

the mistake that meant Aissata's hearing would be delayed
six months.

I repeated Aissata's questions.
I repeated the attorney's answers.

I kept myself
invisible.

The fourth time I interpreted for Aissata,
she wanted to know:

How can this be happening? How is it that Boubacar is telling me
only now, two days before the hearing,
that he and his buddies had a run-in last month
with the police, who could get him sent back
to Guinea?

I repeated Aissata's questions.
I repeated the attorney's answers.

I kept myself
transparent.

Half a year later, after
her case has been won, Aissata and I
have coffee. She tells me

a secret, pressing
on my mind like a nose against glass.

The secret has nothing
to do with her case.

I keep it.

I keep it here.

We each
live elsewhere
but not

at this moment we
tell

a single
story

C'est pas
possible It's not
possible
and yet

each of us
a deer
stepping

carefully through woods,
sounding the half-dark

ears alert,
nostrils open

breathing what may come
she

pauses I
pause
she

bows I
bow

our heads bending
low

drink from the same
water

flowing