TRANSMOGRIFICATION

>> KUSAY HUSSAIN AND SUE REID SEXTON

Kusay Hussain is from Baghdad, Iraq. While working as a civil engineer for the US and UK authorities helping rebuild the country, Kusay was captured by unknown insurgent forces and held for several months until a ransom could be raised for his release. He then came across Europe to join his wife and young children who had fled to Glasgow, Scotland. He has been here since 2007. The family have now been granted 'leave to remain indefinitely'.

Kusay and I have been working together for eighteen months putting his stories into English. These stories are almost all about life in Iraq during and after Saddam, and before, during and after the allied occupation. They are about ordinary people in the distorted world that has become ordinary for many Iraqis. I believe these stories need to be heard, in part because they are a close look at the effects of perpetual war on a traumatised and brutalised, and re-traumatised, re-brutalised population. They are also crucial to our understanding of the various other war-torn peoples around the world.

I like to call the process we work by 'transmogrification' ie a transformation with a little added magic. He writes his stories in the best English he can and I smarten them up into readable prose keeping as close to his original words and imagery as possible.

My starting point is his intended meaning. When I receive a new piece of work, I check each line and paragraph, sometimes seeking out a central revealing word or phrase that tells me what image Kusay has inside his head. Then I adjust any obvious spelling, punctuation and grammar accordingly. Next, we meet to discuss anything that is not clear and check my work so far. There are usually several similar drafts not least because as I understand Kusay more, or the stylistic differences between Arabic and English writing, so the process changes and becomes easier. For instance, speech in Arabic prose is written like that in a play, with the name of the speaker, then a colon, followed by what is said. For a long time I understood this as Kusay's own style, rather than that of Arabic, and left it as it stood. After discussion we have decided to change it to the more typically English language way of writing speech with indents and speech marks and so on.

Sometimes his spelling catches me out and I have to imagine how Kusay hears the colloquial English spoken here and the heavy Scottish accents by which he is surrounded. If he hasn't seen the word written, he often writes phonetically. 'Dragged' becomes 'drugged', 'kneeled' becomes 'nailed' and so on.

For some phrases there is no straight equivalent. '… [the tree] branches swaying in all directions like Arabic women mourning someone dear …' is a case in point. In Iraq women in mourning wave their arms about like trees in a high wind. Much would be lost to the story without this image, indeed the flavour of Arabia would be weakened, as would its contrast with Scotland. A vast part of what we do is about meeting and discussing our two cultures and experiences, in other words 'translating' those experiences and ideas for our mutual understanding.

We have begun a novel-length project, which we will both be writing. We are also trying to bring the music and rhythm of Kusay's Arabic poetry into English and he is translating some of my work into Arabic for the first time.

The process of transmogrification is infinitely enjoyable, enriching and vital, something I would recommend to anyone.

Please check my website for the full length version of 'The Forbidden Areas' at www.suereidsexton.com. You can also find further details of similar translation/transmogrification activities on the Scottish PEN website: www.scottishpen.org

THE FORBIDDEN AREAS

Nobody would have believed me if I'd told them I was spending my military service in a luxury resort, nobody at all, especially my old comrades in arms.

The blue of Al-Tharthar Lake seemed to be darker than the Tigris River or the Euphrates which both link to it. It was almost like a sea but in the middle of the desert. The amber hills surrounded it like they still did not accept the new visitor; they couldn't cope with the fact that there was water near them, in their sight, as there was no sign of green at all. It was the second time I had seen that lake. The first time was more than 20 years earlier in an atlas in a geography lesson.

I filled my chest with the lake-fresh air which was blowing towards me. Two hours ago, in the early morning in Baghdad, I couldn't have done that. The weather is different in Baghdad; it seemed that the sun had lost its ability to burn there.

I looked around; the view was enchanting. The hill I was standing on was divided by a small artificial river which branched from the lake. There was a small building, probably a guest house, down the hill on one side of the river. There were also five other buildings of a similar design spread on top of the hills on both sides of it. I remembered another river which was parallel to the road used by the jeep which brought me here. They call it the 'Tigris Arm' and it may be the same small river which branches off from there.

I closed my eyes and forgot everything about my current military service and the pain which was in all the muscles of my body but especially in my right thigh where there were still three pieces of shrapnel left from my last military service in the north war in 1974. I imagined myself as one of the seagulls flying away over the lake where there was nothing but blue to surround me in all directions.

'Are you the new pipefitter?' A voice came from behind.

I turned round with an automatic answer: 'Yes.'

There was no comparison between my military suit and his. Mine was an ugly, un-ironed pale green one, usually used for the ordinary Iraqi soldiers. His was the well-designed, ironed, dark green suit usually worn by high military ranks and special troops. In my current service I had learned a new fact which didn't exist in my last one which was that I must be careful of people in such suits; sometimes they are more than just high ranking. The man was very young and too short to be one of Saddam's special guards, but that was what he was.

I walked towards him after he gestured to me. He was too slim and his beret was lower than my shoulder by about a foot. I shouldn't have been surprised. I thought, This is the normal situation nowadays: the wrong man in the wrong place.

'Why are you still wearing a military suit?' he said. 'You should wear your work boiler suit.'

'Nobody gave me one,' I said.

'I think I can get you a temporary one,' he said, 'but let's go to the tool store first.'

It's another unbelievable advantage, being away a little bit from the humiliation, the feelings of slavery in which we are all submerged in the name of 'flag service,' the other name for military service.

I remembered that moment two weeks earlier when we were standing in a long line waiting to receive our placement letters which would send us all to various combat units in the brigades that either belong to the seventh corps or support it, except me of course. The seventh corps was at the front line engaged in a running battle against the Iranian army which had been occupying Al-Faw city, south of Basra, for two months. The soldiers' facial expressions suggested they were receiving their death certificates.

It was only me who survived, maybe because I knew how to follow that new common rule: the wrong person in the wrong position.

I looked very funny in the blue jump suit, I guess. It wasn't my size, too small, but even so I felt

calmed and soothed, because of the non-military colour, like a flying seagull.

I was following Saddam's special guard, carrying the tools, when he asked me, without turning back, 'How long have you been in this job?'

'Since childhood,' I said.

To lie in such a situation is more than normal, to prevent others from putting their noses into other people's business. I wouldn't be in such a place without their completing an accurate security information request. They must know everything, not just my real job as a chemistry teacher.

'You need to be an expert here more than in any other place,' he said. 'Any mistake will cost you so much more than you expect, get it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Thank you for this advice.'

'Which uncles are you from?' he said, Meaning which tribe do you belong to?

Now, this is a normal field security question for which I was well-prepared.

'Shammar,' I said.

To say Shammar is like throwing a defensive smoke grenade in your enemy's face. In other words Shammar is one of the huge tribes which are spread all over the country. It includes many smaller tribes, some of them Sunni, others Shi-ite.

'Which part of Shammar?' he said.

'Shammar, Al-Jarba.' I gave him the Sunni part of my tribe. 'And you?'

Then he turned to me, looked directly into my face and said, 'Al-Baijat.'

I do not know why he was provoked by my question. Maybe he wasn't. It's just a stupid question because all the first line of Saddam's guards must belong to Saddam's own tribe.

When we returned to the same point on the hill he said, 'The maintenance order today is out of the guest house down there.' We started to go down by the long stone stairway. 'You must not leave your work area for any reason. Theoretically I can shoot you for this.'

When we reached the work site it was just a simple leakage from the main water pipe.

'Just this?' I said.

'Yes, for now,' he said. 'Finish your work and stay here till I come back.'

I sat cross-legged and checked the leak point of the pipe which was lying on the concrete ground. It was the joint. Then I untied it slightly, put on some sealing tape and tied it again. It was not a bad performance at all for a couple of weeks' training.

The fresh air was blowing slightly harder than up the hill. I looked at the guest house which was empty as if it had been deserted. I reclined my back against one of the stones that covered the foot of the hill and looked at the static lake and running river behind the guest house. The river was heading south towards Baghdad where the colours turned less dark more pale like the old soldiers' faces heading to the battlefield for their unexpected second or maybe third military service, with no chance to say farewell to their families. On the opposite side of the road they might see the constant flow of coffins on car tops covered with the Iraqi flag, heading back to their families.

Why am I still not feeling good? I asked myself. I should be dying now of happiness. People are fighting and dying on the battlefield while I am saved. Maybe I was losing some of my ability to be happy as I got older, but I don't think so. It was something inside me that I still couldn't define. I had started to feel it recently. Something seemed to be hidden somewhere that I couldn't locate. I didn't expect to find a banned zone inside me after all.

I closed my eyes, trying to escape like a seagull from there, from everywhere, and from myself, but it was like crying to the moon; I was totally surrounded by my thoughts and memories.

I looked down at my black military boots. The pale grass around them was covered by a thin layer of snowy dew. The exercise ground of the

military training centre was huge. We used only a small percentage of its area even though we were more than a thousand training soldiers distributed in groups of twenty-five. The boring morning presentation ceremony was the same that day as the last forty-five days of the essential training course. I had done it before in my last service just like many of the other old soldiers who were mandatorily joining this course prior to being sent to the battlefield. The attendance paper was travelling through many hands with the familiar, mechanical, military movements, from sergeants to higher ranks then to the head officer.

I glanced at my watch; it was 7:30. I was thinking: My kids will be having breakfast now before heading to school.

As usual, the morning exercises should have started by the time the head officer began to walk back to his luxury office at the end of the ceremony.

Captain Kamal, who was responsible for the fitness sessions, took the commanding position for the whole camp. He used to hit his red boots with his swagger stick while walking, like a shepherd in a flock of sheep. His eyes were always watching us thirstily, looking for some kind of revenge, maybe because we had spent the last five years of the war wandering the streets of Baghdad in our civilian suits when we should have been there from the beginning.

I do not know why it was that day, and not one of the last forty-five, but his eyes pulled the trigger of some odd feelings which were hiding inside me. They attacked my soul like thousands of black knights coming out suddenly from the protection of their forts and occupying my soul, filling it with a strange anger and a feeling of hopelessness at the same time.

He stood in the middle of the groups, shouting the same ridiculous joke: 'Please, if there is anyone sick or who feels that he is not well, do not hesitate to tell me now. Please, is there any one sick? Here is Sergeant Saffah. He will take care of you.' Then he laughed loudly. Saffah was one of the training sergeants who was responsible for punishments. He was very talented at his job.

Then Captain Kamal shouted, 'All the sergeants: stand to one side. All groups: take off your upper clothes.'

Unlike other days and unlike other soldiers who started to take off their clothes slowly and reluctantly, I undressed quickly and without care for the shock of the cold weather.

Then he shouted again, 'All groups gather into one.'

Everyone ran to re-form a huge group in front of him and kept their hands gathered on their chests to avoid shocking their warm bodies. That was our tradition that we had learned there forty-five days before.

But this day I didn't follow it. I didn't care about some soldiers swearing at me for touching them with my cold hands. I was heading towards the Captain, but I couldn't get to him as many lines of the soldiers were in front of me.

When he gave the order, we started to run slowly together, our feet beating in the same rhythm. He was trying to show his excellent skills to the head officer who was already in his luxury room by then, eating his breakfast and watching the same show for forty-five days.

I started to run faster, passing the soldier's lines one by one, until I reached the front. I kept looking directly into his eyes, but he didn't care.

He shouted, 'Somebody chant.'

Then I started to chant, but with an old one, deliberately not mentioning Saddam's name.

- Up the hill.
- Down the hill.
- Ask for us.
- The wind will tell.
- Ask for us.
- The hill of fire.

- Ask and ask.
- In the valleys.

But I didn't say it all. I stuck at 'up the hill, down the hill'.

After a while all the soldiers started to laugh.

He shouted, 'Silence! and looked at me with the sparks flying from his eyes.' He couldn't do anything; the head officer was watching.

Then he gave us an order to run fast to the end of the exercise ground and back. The last ten soldiers would be jailed.

We all run every day when he gives such an order but not now, not at the end of training. I tried my best to run fast in order not to be one of the last ten soldiers. I'm not afraid of punishment, but to be punished by a person such as him was the second worst thing that could occur in my life. The first one was the arm to arm combat in the last war. Suddenly I felt a huge pain while I was running back. Somebody hit me from behind on my injured leg. I fell down and rolled on the frozen grass, watching him run away like a bandit.

Then I stood up; my head was almost exploding with the pain. I walked slowly, trying not to limp. When I reached the group, I joined the last nine soldiers who were standing to one side. Captain Kamal headed towards us slowly, smiling, waving the stick. His eyes avoided my gaze. I didn't care about the soldier's glances towards me with their enquiring eyes. I was still looking directly into his eyes when he gave Sergeant Saffah the order to punish us then put us in jail.

Saffah means butcher. His name corresponded to his actions, as we all knew. He had given us the order to creep on the asphalt road, still half naked, as a first step of the punishment, when somebody called him. He left us for a few seconds. When he returned he said, 'You are so lucky. You have to return to the group. It time for your placement. It should have been tomorrow, but they came a little bit early. Ha ha! There must be a shortage of soldiers in the battlefield.'

We took our place on the grass beside the other soldiers who were squatting. The officers of the republic guard were the first arrivals. They took their share of us, but from the younger soldiers. Our number started to decrease after each visit of these officers.

Captain Kamal was standing aside watching the whole process without any interference. Then a man with an elegant appearance arrived followed by two armed soldiers. The man was like a soldier without any rank on his shoulders so we all thought that he was no more than a well-dressed soldier. He stood in front of us without saluting the Captain and said, 'Who was working as a pipefit ...?'

He was interrupted by the Captain, who was provoked. 'Identify yourself. Which combat unit do you belong to and where is your officer?'

The man without rank continued talking to us. 'Who was working as a pipefitter before?'

'Nobody will answer you until you identify yourself,' said the Captain

The rankless man turned to the Captain, pointing to the main office and shouted loudly, 'I think that the idiots in the office should have told you who we are.' He turned to us with indifference, leaving the Captain frozen in shock as if he had stepped on a mine.

'Again, who was working as a pipefitter before?' he said.

The Captain walked towards him, his face taking on a miserable appearance. He whispered to the rankless man as if he was apologizing, then he took a piece of paper from his pocket, showed it to him and said out loud, 'This is the roster for the pipefitters. I made a test for them.'

The rankless man took the paper from his hand, threw it away and said, 'No thanks. I only need one and I just chose him.'

The Captain turned towards us immediately. He saw just one hand raised, and it was mine.

I went with the rankless officer to the main office. He took my full name and other IDs and entered the office. When he came out he pointed to a window.

'Wait here,' he said. 'They will shout your name and give you your placement letter from this window in about ten minutes. This is our office address in Baghdad. You must show up there tomorrow morning. Cheer up! This is your lucky day. You were accepted even if you didn't do the necessary test.' Then he left.

I was thinking, There is no such thing as a lucky day if you are still wearing a green suit, when I saw the Captain walking quickly into the main office. I felt that he was trying to arrange some malignant thing against me. I wasn't wrong when I saw Saffah heading towards me.

'Are you an insane?' he said. 'You are like someone sleeping on the railway track waiting for the train to trample and smash him.'

The window opened; a soldier waved to me. I walked towards him, he said, 'You will receive your letter tomorrow morning because you are jailed today. You must hand yourself over to the sergeant immediately.'

I went with Saffah towards the jail. It was an odd feeling. I felt calm when I shouldn't be. It seemed that the black knights had gone back to where they came from.

'Saffah!' The Captain shouted from behind. The Sergeant turned towards the sound and saluted the Captain.

The Captain said to Saffah, 'I do not want him to get any rest in the jail. Start with your military punishment immediately and go on until the morning. I want him to be a remnant of a human being but without a scratch. I will give you one week's holiday as a reward.'

Then I turned towards him and looked into Captain Kamal's face with a big smile.

Other soldiers in the military training camp started to gather to watch me being punished. They started clapping, encouraging me to keep on and not to give up.

I looked at the parallel lines of the tall old eucalyptus trees. There was a line of them on each side of the road. They almost gathered at the top as if they were consoling one another; they are the mandatory witnesses for all that had happened in that camp for a long time.

The silence, the darkness was everywhere. I couldn't even see the trees or Saffah's ugly face where he was squatting a few yards in front of me while I sat in the irrigational channel partly submerged in its freezing water. I could hardly recognize his lips, only when he took a breath making the cigarette end glow in front of his mouth. It kept moving from his mouth to his hand for a long time.

He blew out his cigarette smoke and said, 'Do you know what the time is now, you bastard? Half past two. Do you know something? This is not courage; this is pure madness.' He threw the end of his cigarette into the water beside me after he finished it and lit another one.

'Fuck the army,' he said, 'all the ranks, the red boots. Look what they make us do to ourselves.' Then I felt his hands pulling me from the channel. While he was covering me with his suit, he said, 'I think he won't come again. He must be in bed now. By the way, fuck you too!'

At that moment I remembered that I had forgotten to think about what my children were doing that day; I had forgotten them totally since the morning, when I decided to look into the Captain's eyes.

I woke up from sleep and found myself lying on the pipe. There was somebody kicking me on my feet when I turned round and saw another well-dressed, rankless person.

'Is this your mother's house to sleep in?' he said. 'Who are you, you bastard?'

'I'm the new pipefitter,' I said. 'I finished my work order a long time ago, I guess. Nobody came for me and I was told not to leave my workplace for any reason.'

'And instead of shouting for someone you slept, idiot. Let me tell you something: you are in huge trouble.' Then he stopped talking and touched his chin by his fingers tips, thinking. After a while he said, 'The rule here is clear: all the maintenance staff must leave the place two hours prior to the Sheikh's arrival.' (The Sheikh meant Saddam.) 'Any breach of such a rule will expose you to one of two certainties: either getting killed immediately or two to four weeks in a special punishment camp. Believe me the first option is much better than the second. I know it's somehow not your fault, but you will still be held responsible because nobody will own the courage to say, 'this is my fault'. But I will try to help. The Sheikh is sitting in the front yard just now, so there is a good chance to walk away without being noticed. You have to follow me without looking in any direction except down. I will lead you out of here, but if anything happens, keep your mouth shut. I will talk on your behalf.'

I followed him, looking at the concrete ground. When we heard a shout, the man froze. I bumped into him from behind.

'Come here!' It was Saddam himself who was shouting.

Then the man turned and whispered quickly in my ear, 'If you want to die, look into his eyes.'

He ran towards Saddam and saluted him with a huge stamp on the ground with his boot heel. He started to talk to him, but I couldn't hear anything.

Saddam was sitting about two yards from the riverbank, wearing a white T shirt, white shorts and a white cowboy hat, and smoking a Cuban cigar. There were three armed guards standing behind him, looking all around. Then their faces turned towards me.

The man returned to me, dragged me by the arm and put me in front of Saddam, then left.

Thoughts crowded into my head at that moment. I remembered my childhood, my kid's faces, the soldiers' faces when receiving their death letters. The slow drops leaking from the pipe. The red boots, swagger stick, the darkness of the green suit. I felt my soul was full of blackness.

I glanced at him. He was smoking slowly and looking into the clear ripples of the river. Then he suddenly turned to me as if he had remembered something. He repeated this two or three times.

At that moment there was one thought which invaded my head suddenly and started to hammer my head. Something made all the last memories fade and disappear. Something louder than drum beats came, which was to attack him with my naked hands and save the country from his evil. But I kept still, frozen, while he watched the river currents moving towards Baghdad, one by one, soul by soul. At that moment I stood naked in front of myself without any excuses. I discovered how cowardly I was. I felt a great shame, that I did not deserve the air that I'm breathing now. I told myself: Yes, I do not deserve life. I have to look into his eyes now. This is the least punishment for someone like me.

Like a mule throwing itself from a mountain to put an end to its miserable life, I raised my face, started to look towards his eyes. When he turned to me for the fourth time, he found that I was looking at him with fully opened eyes directly towards his own. He stopped turning so that he could watch the dancing fishes in the clear water.

'Where are you from?' he asked me.

'Alexandria, south of Baghdad' I said.

'Sit down,' he said.

Then he pointed his finger towards his guards without turning his face and said, 'Bring him something.'

In less than a couple of minutes I saw a meal of

a grilled fish in front of me on the concrete ground. 'Eat,' he said.

He was watching me all the time like he had nothing to do, like a cat enjoys watching her own mouse. When I finished, he ordered his guards to take me away.

After one week, I received an annual salary as a reward for some reason, I still really do not know why, and a yellow badge. My picture, name and rank was printed on one side. When I turned it over I found one sentence:

'This person is allowed to move and carry weapons in all forbidden areas.'

THE LOVE BUS

SUE REID SEXTON

Joe and Marion call it the love bus. Love. And me with no hijab. 'Farah from far away,' they said and laughed and showed me where to hide. My quarters are not comfortable, but I do have facilities so it's better than the back of a lorry and I don't have to climb any more mountains.

I watched them across the campsite from my tent to make sure they were alright. The love bus has an awning with yellow and red stripes down it like a fruit-merchant's, a sliding door at the side and inside a bench and table. They have folding chairs for outside too. There's a cooker and a sink, blinds over all the windows at night and a radio that plays western music. There's a TV; I could tell by the blue light that jumped across the trees above their skylight, which is how I knew about the skylight too.

I think it's a hire-van. When I hurried through it, everything had been put away for the journey home, clean and tidy, not what I'd glimpsed over the few days before. The plastic garlands were gone, the shell ashtrays, the rugs and cushions hidden and everything gleaming. No dirty cups or dishes, no bottles. The rugs and cushions are in the toilet. With me. Can you believe it? A toilet. And not only that, a shower, which surely must be for show? Or at least only for kids. Or maybe only for adults. No, just for show; they've hung the flowers from it. And who cares anyway? I've got a toilet and blankets and cushions, albeit in a small space. There's another skylight in here too. I want one of these vans. I could live in something like this no problem. I bet it locks from the inside too. But how silly! All vehicles lock from the inside. Must be the nerves. Need to 'go' already. That must be the nerves too. I'll wait. I'll have to. I don't know where we are. I don't know whether I can do it without making noise. We've been stationary for a while now. Not sure how long. Too long.

There's a squeak and a crunch; the whole van

rocks when they open the driver's door, worse when they shut it. I'm holding the shower rail, my breath, my stomach. Their voices are muffled. The van rocks again and there's a click and the side door rolls open. I have to breathe, so I let the air ooze out and in, moving my lips like a fish so there's no sound. The van sways and settles. Their voices are loud now.

'What a pain!' he says. 'You want tea? Make us some tea, will you? I'll go and see how long it's going to be.'

'Doesn't really matter, does it?'

'Well …' A pause. If I can hear this so could anyone. I'm trying to see it too in my mind's eye. Is he nodding in my direction? Mouthing 'What about her?'? Holding a finger to his lips? My legs are already crossed; I cross my fingers too, pull in my lips.

She's making tea now. 'You want tea?' she whispers at the door. I squeeze my eyes in frustration. Don't speak. I'm not here. I told you … I don't say this, I will it through the door and into her head which is down at the door handle. 'Sorry,' she whispers then, a foot higher. The van shivers as she moves away, rinses out cups, makes tea. I tweak the blanket across my head, fix it with the lid of the toilet.

'You've got the right idea there!' says a voice I don't know.

'What?' she says, still busy. 'Oh, yes.'

'Great size. How many does it sleep?'

'Four, at a pinch.'

Four? Did I miss something? Someone? Does that include stowaways?

'Do you mind my asking how much you paid for this?'

The pause tells me she does. I don't catch the figure.

'It's a strike, you know. We could be here for days. Happened to us a few years ago. The frogs are always at it, lazy bastards! We were here for days sitting in this yard. You can't go back out because of security and you can't board until departure time. Fucking crisps, filthy toilets and no information for two whole days. And a carload of Jack Russells behind us.'

'Really?' she says. She sounds worried but not as worried as me.

'Yeah,' he says. 'And not a hint of an apology.'

'Oh, dear. Maybe they had a good reason to strike. Maybe …'

'There's no reason good enough to keep innocent travellers cooped up on a dockside in the rain. It was raining the whole time.'

'Well, at least it's sunny today,' she says.

Yeah, and I'm roasting already. Cooking. What if I cook? What if the skylight is sealed and the heat swells the door and I suffocate or roast? I'm trussed up like a chicken as it is, trying to keep breathing. I've wedged my bag against the door and stuffed cushions round myself so nothing can move if I fall asleep or get thrown. Only my arms and head are free. There's a blanket over the top of me.

He's still moaning but he's not official. That's good. She should make him go away.

'It's broken,' she says. Something slides across outside the door.

'Come on, darling,' he says. 'Save an old man a walk.'

'No, honestly, the toilet's broken.'

'I see.' The van shakes as if in a wind. 'I could fix it.'

'No. Thank you. It really doesn't matter. It's full anyway.'

My mouth is dry. I need water. I should have kept the bottle out when we were driving. It's in my bag on the other side in a pocket. So near so far. And I'm sweating. Wrapped in cushions and scared. Terrified. Fearing for my life, by which I mean the pumping of my heart, but also my proximity to freedom. This is the final stage of a long journey.

A month ago I was dumped at a roadside. They didn't even stop. A month before that, or maybe

longer, I was with twenty other kids in a disused mansion full of rats and dogs. I know why they let me go. Because I wouldn't hold a gun and because there was no-one to pay ransom. I know why that is too. They killed my parents, probably, but you never know. Maybe they escaped. We have a rendezvous point for just in case. They'll be amazed when I get there. And I will get there.

Most people think I'm a tourist, a backpacker in walking boots. The truth is it's someone else's pack. She looked like me, same size, same age, eighteen, same short dark hair like a man, same room in the hostel. We laughed about that and she said the only thing I didn't have was a pack. She drank alcohol that night and fell asleep so I took it. I feel bad about that. She let me try her alcohol (It was horrible!) and I stole her pack, tent and all. But she has a home to go to and I don't, she chose her short hair, mine was camouflage as a man, so it didn't seem so very unfair. I left her diary and her credit cards. There was no passport.

It's gone very quiet here. I wonder where they are. Perhaps they've gone to report me. They should wait until the other side, after I've given them the money. I'm buying a service here. Half up front, half on arrival.

The van's shaking so they're here but hiding, whispering, plotting to shop me. How stupid of me to get smart and risk strangers! Everyone else was part of the chain.

Bang! What a fright! Only a door but so loud! And gasping is dangerous!

'Thank God for that!' Marion says. 'Two days indeed! What an arse! Give me your cup and let's go!'

'Where's the key?' says Joe.

Go, go, go! is what I'm thinking. GO!

The whole thing rocks as they shut cupboards again, put things away. The engine shakes into life. We're off! We're off! But we're not moving. We're idling. I feel sick with fright. Let's go! I wonder where the exhaust is and whether it's safe here. I've heard stories. Is that poison-fume sickness or just fear? There's a knock, hollow, like on glass. There's someone outside. I can't hear what's being said. This is it; this is when they confess I'm in here. Now is when it happens. I'm squeezing my eyes tight again. Ok, I'm not eighteen, I'm fifteen, but I look like that girl with the pack and she was nineteen. I feel like my wee sister, Sanaa, but I can't think about her. I won't allow it. I'm doing my fish breathing again. That seems to work, that and irregular verbs: Begin began begun. Choose chose chosen. Swim swam swum.

'Thank you!' says Marion. The door slams.

We're on the move, I can feel it. I lean forward on the pack and breathe. We rock and twist and rumble onto the ship. The doors bang, clang and whump, like others further away. Invisible shoulders rub close to mine on the van-metal, voices echo from unnameable distances then, after a million years, a noise shakes me like tanks running too close. This is the time to move. I release myself from the cushions, tear my clothes undone and sit on the toilet. Circumstances allow no dignity. This is the safest I can be. I'm glugging back the water too. Outside a low rattle sets in. I stand and stretch and turn my neck. I do this slowly so the van doesn't move. You never know when someone's watching silently from a distance or close by, tiptoeing up to you ready to grab you and end it.

I'm doing my clothes up, folding myself back into the cushions, holding my nose against the smell of my own pee, closing my eyes against it, draping the blanket across my head. Waiting.

The rattle is more of a hum now. We're rocking sideways, slow and slower, so I put my head back again, a pillow on the toilet, and try to sleep.

Sanaa comes to me.

I chase her away.

But she sneaks into my crowded dreams, hiding amongst the rubble of the old mansion's wash-house. She has a gun. She's practicing on the

rats. I told her not to take the gun but she took it anyway. She cries and points the thing at me. They gave her food if she learnt to shoot, better food, and it stopped her crying of hunger, she said. She was eleven, too young to know strength. But the day she grew up and gave the gun back was the same day we fell from the car. Sanaa first, suddenly. Then me. Her neck broke. I took the biggest rock I could lift, raised it high and while she lay sideways, trembling, twitching, feet jumping, blood oozing through her clothes, I dropped it on her head. She's dead now; I saved her.

But in my dream she rose and hid in my coat and I carried her across the desert, took the clothes from some dead warriors, cut our hair with their knives and sang songs with her through the mountains. I heard her whispering: We're not here, as we crossed another border, sighing on the other side. In my dream I can't find her and though I search everywhere, she's lost.

I'm cold, now that I'm awake, and dizzy and I start to pull the straps of my bag and hunt around inside. 'Sanaa!' I whisper. But all I find is water, someone else's clothes, makeup and towel and these things fill the little cubicle.

The ship's engines are growling again. Voices are swimming around me, shivering through the walls of the van, muffled and indistinguishable. We've arrived. I pull the money bag from my pocket and count what I owe. The scrape of door tells me they've come. I crouch, cover my head. The door thuds shut and we rock again.

I'm not breathing, I'm foetal, tight; eyes, bum, fists, stomach.

There's a click, plastic rustling. Something's fallen. The pressure outside has eased, noises are different.

'Shit,' says Marion. 'The door won't shut.' I told her not to open it. I told her I wasn't there. She smiles uncertainly at me. 'You're ok. Thank God. I brought you some food.'

'Thank you!' I mouth. 'I'm not here,' I whisper. Her eyes go to little circles and she stuffs everything back in, door bumping, her feet shaking the van and she's gone. I can't hear what they're saying. Perhaps they're not saying anything.

We drive. Clank, clank, up a steep hill, then the hum of the engine, the music of its gearshifts and we drive and drive and I sleep again and Sanaa tells me she's free and she'll meet me at Buckingham Palace like we agreed, but when I wake again we've stopped and there's no sound at all.

Except a bird singing on the skylight.

THISTLES IN THE BACK YARD

I turned to my left, to the biggest window in the classroom. The strong Scottish wind was slapping the tall proud trees and leaving them reeling, their branches swaying in all directions like Arabic women mourning someone dear. The panicked birds were drifting at random in the middle of the cruel gusts, struggling to fly away from their threatened nests.

'Who can give me an example about how psychological trauma affects a person's health in terms of health models?' the teacher said. Nobody answered. 'OK, I'll give you an example. One day when I returned home from college, my mum told me that she was worried about my little brother. She was not sure that he had spent the previous night in his bed. When I entered his room later, I discovered that he had hung himself in his cupboard.'

He continued, ignoring the students' astonished sighs; I kept crying for days, staying in bed, avoiding my friends and missing college, and so, such trauma led to a nervous breakdown or collapse and affected my behaviour, in other words, my behaviour model.

I felt that everything stopped at that moment, even the storm, and that another storm had broken inside me. There was something stronger than a rope around my neck, choking me, pulling me far back to Baghdad.

I woke up early that morning with a strange taste in my mouth. The dust was everywhere inside the house, on the floor, the furniture and the beds, as it was one of the many dusty days of summer. Footprints were everywhere on the floor. I didn't find any water in the tap to wash my face, as usual, so I took a plastic bucket and went out to the old reserve water tank in the back yard. I walked to it down the narrow path formed amongst the thistles that grew there and opened the lid, but I didn't find any water there either. I returned with my empty bucket and some injuries on my naked calves. When I entered, I saw my mother carrying a small bowl of water. I followed her to the kitchen and washed my face in the kitchen sink. I reached for the towel but she was faster. She took it from the hanger and handed it to me. I stared at her in surprise.

'Your wife told me yesterday,' she said.

'I don't have any choice, Mum,' I said. 'I've been jobless for two years.'

'This does not mean that you must expose yourself to the risk of working in the US bases. Be patient: you may find a job in the near future.'

'I'm not going to lose the chance this time,' I said, 'even if the workplace is hell. And I'm not going to participate in any of the new political parties of today in order to get an official job.'

'You have a son, a family,' she said. 'You must take care of yourself because of them.'

'There isn't a single Dinar in the house today,' I told her. (2000 Dinar = 1 pound) 'How can I take care of you or my family?'

She removed the gold ring from her finger and gave it to me.

'Mum,' I said. 'That will not solve the problem.'

'You are going to create a worse problem, son. I prefer to die starving than you hurt yourself.'

At that moment my 3 year-old son, Omar, entered the kitchen, running to his grandmother. She held him, kissed him and lifted him up while still looking at me. I avoided her eye and left to get dressed. I hurried to avoid further discussion. When I reached the main gate I saw my wife carrying our son. Her eyes were begging me. I took my son from her, kissed him and opened the main gate. I took two steps and stood on the walkway. I was very confused.

I was sinking into my thoughts when a voice lifted me up. It was my neighbour's voice.

'Good morning, Abu Umar,' said Sadik, waving.

'Good morning, Sadik.'

Just like me he was carrying his son, Montathar. He put him in the front seat of his official minibus then he got in and drove the short distance between our houses. He stopped beside me. The bus window

was open, maybe since the day before, and dust had filled the inside of the bus. Our kids were smiling at each other.

'I couldn't sleep yesterday at all,' he said, 'either choking or sneezing all night. You know about my chronic sinusitis. I don't think I can go to my office today but I have to drop Montathar at his nursery now. Are you going anywhere?'

'I have to go to the city centre to do some shopping,' I said.

'You don't need to go this early. Get in. I will drop you at the main road.'

I returned my son to his mum, closed the door and took my place behind the driver's seat.

'Did you find a job yet?' he said.

'Not yet.'

'As I told you, there's no need to bother yourself by going on searching with no result. My offer still stands. Remember: such chances will not last forever.'

'You mean by joining one of parties?' I said.

'Like thousands of people who are doing it now,' he said. 'You don't have to do anything. I can help you to join the same party I joined. Then you will receive a letter confirming that you were persecuted or discriminated against by Saddam's regime. You will get a job the week after. So simple, isn't it?'

'You know that I never joined the only party that was allowed before,' I said, 'and I cannot join any party now. Believe me, I cannot.'

'I understand you, but such a decision will not feed your family. You can't even pay the nursery fees for your son. That's why you kept him at home this month too.'

'Thank you for your advice. It's not a decision. I'm just not able to.'

'Well, I didn't expect that I would ever join a party. It has become one of the necessities of life now. This is what I call 'riding the wave'. Remember, the vacancies are decreasing day by day and soon my advice won't be worth anything.' Then he turned to me for two seconds and said: 'We didn't have any choices before; we don't have any now either.' I couldn't see the expression in his eyes through his old thick rectangular glasses, but his smile was pale like the dust on his face.

I took a deep breath, filled my chest with the dusty air and raised my face to the sky, the pale deprived sky, searching for the face of the defeated sun which was shamed and hidden. Who could believe that its wild burning whips could disappear just like that because of tiny grains raised by strangers' feet?

The slow old minibus stopped near the nursery. We couldn't get any closer because a lot of concrete barriers had been put randomly about.

Suddenly: we were shocked by a number of masked armed men who surrounded the minibus and pointed their guns at us. I turned back quickly and saw two new grey BMW cars stopping behind our minibus and cutting off the road. The bus door was kicked open by one of the gunmen. He put a gun to Sadik's head, pulled out the car keys and shouted, 'Get out now, traitors!'

Montathar started to cry, jumped into his dad's arms and hid his face in his chest. I couldn't stand up; my feet were nailed to the floor. Then the gunman pulled me by my shirt and kicked me towards the door, and then did the same to Sadik. They dragged us towards one of the barriers that formed a half circle around us and kept looking in all directions. I started to feel dizzy when one of them searched Sadik's pockets. He took Sadik's mobile. When he turned to me, one of them said from behind, 'He is his neighbour, Abu Umar. I thought I'd heard this voice before.'

They tore Montathar from his dad's arms and threw him to me. I held his small shaking body. He started shouting to his dad. Sadik and I stared at each other. His eyes, hidden behind the thick, wet and dirty glasses, expressed something I couldn't understand. His trembling lips whispered something

I couldn't hear. The grains of dust became another concrete barrier, but between us. Time cracked into many fragments and stopped moving.

I was kicked from behind by one of the masked men. He said, 'Take this dirty pimp away.'

My feet started to run fast towards the nursery. I heard Sadik shouting, 'Somebody help me! They will kill me, Abu Umar! Abu Umar!'

I didn't answer him but entered by the nursery's main door and threw myself on the floor, still holding his screaming kid.

Then I heard two gun shots.

Time, which had stopped, began to move again, in circles, repeating to me what had happened. I was wondering how to escape such a world, even how I could lose consciousness, but no, it was not the time.

I saw hands approaching Montathar's body and raised my face. They were the teacher's hands, her face amongst several of the other silent, distraught and drawn faces of the female nursery staff.

She said, 'Give me the poor child.'

She took him immediately while I was still holding him. She was trying to do something to help but I felt like I had lost the excuse or justification to be there. I stood up, supporting my back against the wall, then walked slowly to the main gate where one of the staff gave me an old piece of cloth and said, 'Cover him.'

When I was on the road I turned right towards the concrete barriers, to Sadik or to his body. I saw my footprints on the dusty pavement. I went to him slowly on the same footprints as if walking in a minefield, or amongst thistles. I looked at him: there were two shots, one in his heart and the other in his head. He was still wearing his dirty glasses. There was a long line of blood which was mixed with the grains of dust and starting to dry. I touched his wrist. There was no pulse. I covered him with the piece of cloth but left his face exposed. I was trying to say something to him but I remembered that the time for words was over. I thought, maybe now is the time to cry, but I couldn't. There was something inside myself strangling it.

His brother appeared suddenly from behind the concrete barriers. It seems that he came running from his house using the short cut. He threw himself on his brother's body, yelling and crying. Then the rest of his family came, running, breathing fast. They gathered around his body, checking him, crying and slapping their faces. His mother fell to the ground. She started to put the dust from the ground onto her head and said to Sadik in a loud crying voice, 'Am I your enemy? I'm your mother, Sadik! I'm your mother! When I told you to return this piece of junk,' (she meant the minibus) 'you didn't pay attention. This is what you get for helping people. Where were they when you were lying on the road? Who protected you? I'm your mother, Sadik .....'

At that, my thoughts took me back like a wild horse.

As usual: We started to collect the many empty gas cylinders. Sadik had told our neighbours to put them in front of their gates in the morning and I was helping him to roll them and put them inside his minibus in order to exchange them for filled cylinders at the fuel station. Omar and Montathar were sitting in the first seat playing together with their toys. Sadik and I kept talking and laughing while the steel cylinders kept knocking each other, making a noise like a Chinese festival.

Then he said, joking, 'What if a fake police control stopped us now? What should we do?'

'Pray our last prayers!' I said, laughing.

'Come on,' he said. 'Guess.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'If they are a Shiite military group they will leave us because I will give them my ID. And if they are Sunni they will leave us because you will give them yours.' He laughed.

'But how will you know whether they are Sunni

or Shiite?' I said. 'Sadik, you are pure stupid.'

But I laughed too.

Our frantic neighbours started to appear one by one. Someone who had arrived by car went quickly to the mosque and brought the old white-wood coffin which was used for everyone for free. When his family saw the coffin they started to cry with one loud voice. We helped each other to put him in the coffin. His drops of red blood merged with the dry black ones on the bottom of the coffin, then we raised it up and put it on top of one of the neighbour's cars. We headed to Yarmuk hospital to get a death certificate.

There were two long parallel barriers in front of the main entrance. The policemen asked us to unload the coffin and take the car back because there was no place inside for it. They searched the coffin for bombs, then allowed us to enter.

There was a great mass of blood and a bad smell, and uncovered bodies were everywhere on the floor in the emergency waiting hall. Sadik's brother and I left to find someone for information. We found a nurse in the corridor.

'My brother has just been killed,' said Sadik's brother.

He couldn't go on because he had started crying. I began to talk on his behalf about how to issue a death certificate.

'You have to go first to the police department,' said the nurse, 'to determine the cause of death, then to the morgue and then come back tomorrow to …'

She was interrupted by Sadik's brother who was shouting: 'I'm not going to leave him here …'

'Why?' said the nurse. 'The electricity is one hundred percent, twenty-four hours in the morgue. He will be safe.

'I want my brother now. Tomorrow means one month …'

'He will not be killed again,' said the nurse.

Then I interrupted, saying to the nurse, 'Please, we have a long journey to Al Najaf. We don't have time and you know the roads will close at 6 clock, so …how much?'

'How much what?' she said.

'How much will it cost us to have the death certificate now?'

'One hundred Dollars,' she said. 'I have to pay many people. You will see everything. But you will be lucky if we can make it in one hour.'

I was thinking it would be a much better way than someone who is killed far from his family, spends couple of weeks in the morgue, then gets buried in an unknown grave with many of the bodies that surrounded us.

When we got out of the hospital carrying the coffin, there were several of the neighbour's cars waiting. The sad procession moved to Sadik's house for the final farewell.

We took the same road as in the morning. I remembered our conversation and looked at the car roof where Sadik's new place now was. How could I tell him that we were the same now, no longer taking care of our children, but were we the same? I felt a couple of tears on my cheek, so I wiped them fast because it was not a suitable time to break down.

There were many people standing in front of Sadik's house, the rest of his family, his parents, relatives and neighbours. Many hands reached for the coffin before the car had even stopped. They untied the rope and carried the coffin inside the house in only seconds. The people stood handing the coffin from one to another; there was no space to walk. The women started to yell with such loud voices! I felt very tired so I sat on the curb stone. There were many armed men amongst his relatives.

One of his brothers started to yell in the middle of the road. 'What did we do? Did we hurt any one here? Tell me!'

There was a silence as if we were afraid to disturb the birds.

He went on: 'They phoned us now to tell us

to leave the house, like they're not satisfied with killing my brother. Did we hurt anybody? Please, somebody, tell me! We don't know where to go!'

He was talking to the Sunni majority in our neighbourhood. Then they gathered around him and tried to calm him with promises of protection. They started immediately to bring out their old barrels, cut tree trunks and big stones to put as barriers in the middle of the roads leading to our neighbourhood.

The mosque was calling for the noon prayer as the coffin was put back on top of one of cars; the women's voices had dried in their throats and they cried, then, without a voice. I was trying to get into one of the cars when his brother told me: 'We may stay the night in Najaf. The road will be cut off soon and we need you here to help with setting up the condolences tent.' The procession left in a hurry because they had to travel about seventy miles from Baghdad to reach the Najaf cemetery, the biggest cemetery in the world.

I thought that it was better for me to pray in the mosque then. At least there was a chance of finding some water.

I was coming back after the prayer ended when a brand new car stopped beside me. It was X's car.

'Get in,' said X. 'I will drop you near your home.'

When I got in beside him I started to feel very tired.

'I have to help Sadik's family,' I said. 'Poor Sadik. I think you heard.'

'You are the poor one,' he said. 'You don't know anything. You were two feet from death because of a person like Sadik. You don't know anything about Sadik's participation in one of the parties, one which is a creature of the occupation.'

I felt like my tongue was freezing in my mouth. I couldn't say anything to him.

When we reached my home he said, 'Our neighbourhood will be safe, don't worry.'

I was confused and trembling in such dusty roasting weather. I asked myself, 'Who is killing the people when everyone claims protection? I think that Sadik's mistake was to work for someone who works for the occupation, but for me, I will work for the occupation itself and, of course, I will keep my own secret. My mouth will shut tight and my tongue will freeze over.'

The strong, Scottish wind still blew the birds about. Some of the students started to yawn when the teacher said, 'The last subject now, before we leave, is the religious model.'