

Bloodroot
Literary
Magazine

Volume 12
5th Digital Edition



CONTENTS

Note on Type	viii
Introductory Remarks	ix
<i>Maya Ribault</i>	
A Breton Wife	1
A Breton Ghazal	3
<i>Sara Biggs Chaney</i>	
St. Agatha and the False Spring	4
Internet Quiz	5
<i>Keiselim Alfredo Montás</i>	
Seven Haiku	6
<i>Adella-Marie Cloutier</i>	
A Night in August	13
Winter	14
<i>James Napoli</i>	
Three Photographs	15
<i>Ivy Schweitzer</i>	
The Play I will Never Watch Again	18
Four and a Half	19
<i>Matthew Groner</i>	
I Want to Tell You About the Park	20
<i>William Doreski</i>	
Nihombashi	22
Fujikawa	23

<i>Rebecca Siegel</i>	
Saw-whet	24
120 miles	25
<i>Dave Celone</i>	
Coming Out	26
<i>Charleigh Robillard</i>	
Northfield	27
<i>Cara Losier Chanoine</i>	
Tracey: An Elegy	29
<i>Sean J. Mahoney</i>	
My fingers are like candles	30
<i>Davey Ozahowski</i>	
The Snow Maker	32
<i>Paul Lamar</i>	
Ginger Snapz	33
<i>Bridget Gage-Dixon</i>	
Bitter Harvest	38
<i>Louis A. Renza</i>	
The Humming Birds	39
<i>A. Jay Dubberly</i>	
A Lesson	40
<i>Mohan Pandey</i>	
Escape from Baghdad	41

Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Bloodroot is a nonprofit literary magazine dedicated to publishing diverse voices through the adventure of poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction. Our aim is to provide a platform for the free-spirited emerging and established writer.

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Bloodroot Literary Magazine

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Note on Type

This book is set in 12 point ET Bembo, a modern face designed for the web and print by Edward Tufte and based on the Bembo family of typeface. ET Bembo is a freely available open-source font. The text was typeset using xelatex, an updated \LaTeX typesetting package, along with several other free packages, including poemscol.

Introductory Remarks

Welcome to volume 12, *Bloodroot's* fifth digital edition. We have some exciting news! First, after producing four digital editions with rotating editors, Rena J. Mosteirín welcomes James E. Dobson as permanent co-editor. Dobson teaches at Dartmouth College and directs the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric. He is the author of two academic books: *Modernity and Autobiography in Nineteenth Century America* (Palgrave, 2017) and *Critical Digital Humanities: The Search for a Methodology* (Univ. of Illinois, 2019). He is the co-author, with Rena J. Mosteirín, of the creative/critical hybrid book *Moonbit* (punctum books, 2019) and is presently completing a book manuscript on the history of computer vision algorithms and their applications.

The second big announcement is that we aim to get a print anthology out within the upcoming year that highlights five years of *Bloodroot's* best online work. We belong to the community of writers working in the Upper Valley and we envision *Bloodroot Literary Magazine* and the *Bloodroot* anthology as ways to encourage and support this community.

Bloodroot thrives when dedicated writers send us their best new work. Our next open reading period will begin on September 15th. We have our own online submissions manager, so there is no fee to submit. If you're an established writer looking to expand your readership, or a new writer for whom publishing seems impossible, we're glad you found us and we look forward to reading your work in the future. We have a large audience through the website and have heard from readers around the world.

Receiving submissions from far and wide has become one of the most exciting aspects of running this literary magazine. Some of the work in this volume of *Bloodroot* celebrates the Upper Valley, while other pieces extend outside the edges of this region, and even beyond the borders of this country.

Right now, social isolation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is taking its toll on all of us. Connect with the people you care about by sharing a poem or story. This issue is full of gorgeous work. We are so grateful to the authors who chose to share this work with us, and now we present them to you, our cherished readers.

The Editors,

RENA J. MOSTEIRÍN & JAMES E. DOBSON

A Breton Wife

While you pretended to be a pirate
 or a soldier and collected tadpoles in jars,
 I played *marelle* and threaded daisies into crowns.
 I wore my hair in two thick tresses down my back.
 Remember when *le maître* caught you speaking Breton
 and punished you to fifty courtyard laps
 with that silly cowbell tied round your neck?
 So we both grew up in Treguier,
 I with my seamstress grandmother,
 you with your nine sisters and brothers.

At sixteen, at the close of the St. Yves pardon,
 your stocky silhouette burned a quiet
 shape into the cathedral's altar.
 For almost a year, I feigned not knowing you.
 When you stopped by with daffodils,
 I hid in the outhouse until you'd left.

Off you sailed to Newfoundland!
 Your first cod-fishing expedition,
 like your father and grandfather before you.
 Each Sunday I allowed myself one mark
 in the back of my missal.
 Thirty-three penciled sticks accumulated there
 while I passed my brevet exam,
 picked blackberries for jam,
 and sewed a dress for the new doctor's wife.

By Christmas we were married.
 Little Annick held my train down the aisle
 and all the way to our wedding feast.
 At first I missed Grandmother like rain
 after too many days of sunshine,
 even though we visited her often for a *pot-au-feu*.
 But I knew I was a lucky wife.
 You didn't take to cider like other Breton men.
 Instead you savored your paper with a pipe

and the clickety-clack of my needles
knitting a small blanket by the fire.

This year you sailed out before the daffodils could bloom.
On our last morning together, you asked me
to refill your bowl until the coffee carafe was empty.
The lilacs have since come and gone
and the frogs croak painfully into the night.
Soon the ferns will invade our side path to the river
and I will have gathered mushrooms in the woods
more times than I care to recall.
When Annick and I walked past those two
entwined pines today, how I envied them!
Grandmother says the baby will arrive before you do.

MAYA RIBAUT

A Breton Ghazal

Pour Anatole Le Braz (1859–1926)

Tonight the Ankou, a draped skeleton with a scythe, rimes in a hurry.
Unless ready for his cart, steer clear of him amid the pines of Brittany.

Some possess the gift of sight; they can reach beyond what's visible. Anatole
and his friends pointed them out with dread in the once-upon times of
Brittany.

Have you ever glimpsed the Bag-Noz, the phantom boat, floating, roaming
the waters around Ile de Sein, avoiding the rugged shorelines of Brittany?

For one gold ring, Mona trespassed upon a sandy tomb, bit off a finger.
Puss ravaged her pretty face. She used to sew hemlines in Brittany.

Someone was nearing death: the carpenters never mistook the boards'
rattle in the attic at night, anticipating the next coffin of Brittany.

The shady parish girl birthed seven babies who all disappeared.
Spot her now near the Calvary, suckling her seven little swine in Brittany.

The melodic bells you sometimes hear far off the coast in the distance—
how can you resurrect what's left of Ys? The lost chimes of Brittany.

Maïa, what returns to you now, so far from your homeland? An afternoon
at Trestrignel; sand, rocks, and sea; the taste of nectarines in Brittany.

MAYA RIBAUT

St. Agatha and the False Spring

Central to our hope is a girl, her fist gripping an egg. There has been a recent thaw. A change of state that can be verified. The girl dances a little, cuts deep grooves in mud, laughs at such sweet sinking. From the newly breathing branches, water falls down over her upturned face. She feels, that is her tendency. Her other fist is open like a book, speaking. The light falls first to the earth, then back to her body, a gilt-edged page. Elsewhere, pundits are claiming a false spring. They call us to consider the hand that stuck those plastic grasses in the painted basket, straining to make them stand just so. The egg isn't real, everyone knows that, but the forecast still calls for naïve uptopianism. Does spring really come back? & the past? Are we so much in debt to seeds as we have always claimed? The girl roughs up her knuckles while climbing an elm tree, tries to make off with the nest but breaks it instead, her fingers wet and sticky with filament.

SARA BIGGS CHANEY

Internet Quiz

What percentage Putin are you
 What percentage mob rule
 Are you more Martha Stewart before or after the inquisition
 What broken American post-industrial wasteland most resembles your
 personal fashion cents
 Do you see the lamb's blood first or the licentious Are you afraid it's more
 than just a birthmark
 Can you recognize Macaulay Culkin with five layers of fast-hardening
 cement on his face
 Which threat to our security should you buy next
 Raisin Bran or Rwandan Chic
 Prayer in the schools or Pussy Riot
 How many people pretending to be dead can you see in this picture of people
 who are actually dead
 Can you run faster than liquid capital
 What percentage Grape nuts
 What percentage Fascism in France
 Who has a better ass than North Africa
 What's the longest river on Roger Ailes' forehead
 Can you recite the capitals of your Myers-Briggs type
 Can you remember the zodiac sign of our accelerating decline
 Do you know the three best life hacks for terminal cancer
 Have you counted your curses
 Is this really your third rodeo
 Did you really think it wasn't always serious

SARA BIGGS CHANEY

Yesterday, also,
it dressed up in snow showers.
And, it sleeps today.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Winter isn't leaving;
yet Spring -while coming- it's not
asking permission.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Hence we have the egg,
with the cracking of the shell:
here comes the chicken.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Quite quiet morning:
five just came and went; as I,
didn't hear my alarm.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Very long seconds
that go by flying —so fast!
just like a haiku.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Today, finally,
this December has come to
pay us a visit.

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

Seeing some red leaves
on a tree line of maples.
It's August, barely!

KEISELIM ALFREDO MONTÁS

A Night in August

the night is alive
with sapphires in the sky
and beetles beneath

ADELLA-MARIE CLOUTIER

Winter

it comes, *I am here.*
then frost from the night before
creeps into my bones.

ADELLA-MARIE CLOUTIER



JAMES NAPOLI



JAMES NAPOLI



JAMES NAPOLI

The Play I will Never Watch Again

At the bridge across the placid Avon
 we meet Othello and Desdemona
 on bikes, only moments after
 the performance, smiling,
 breathful. They seem like an item.

My gut still clenched,
 throat choked,
 white feminist mind hoarse from howling
Isn't it time for a different ending?

— You see, I'd forgotten she is killed
 twice, first smothered, while his macho fear
 swears he will love her "after,"
 (they like us best defunct)
 then strangled with her own sheets,
 a candle refusing to be snuffed,
 forgiveness staining her lips —
 hard to kill love.

*How do you do it? I croak. Swans
 litter the river path with feathers and tang
 the August air with guano.
 The audience, she says. That you get it.
 How he resists the white patriarchy,
 loving her, killing her out of a world
 where men are all but stomachs and we
 all but food,
 a world neither can survive in—*

They ride off tickled by my declaration
 never to watch again,
 proclaiming theirs the defining rendition,
 but the hollow in my gut sucks
 all light from the day.

IVY SCHWEITZER

Four and a Half

Catching the phrase on the news
 I think, so brief
 and innocuous, really,
 phrase of a melody you snatch
 in drifts
 or the in-between age
 of an adorable child,
 well past toddlerhood
 but still needing a nap. I tumble
 it around my mind,
 feeling the not quite fiveness of it,
 five a lovely uneven strangeness
 in the middle of ten,
 five fingers, five toes, times two, all the
 little piggies, little Indians, cutting
 white fears of darkness down to child's play.

But the news said hours,
 told how a couple traveled to Ferguson,
 met a man living there who said—
 hours, he lay
 in the street, just down from my door,
 four and a half
 bloody hours, covered and cordoned
 off, his mother, his people at bay
 and what that means, that the authorities left him—
 the couple heard it
 differently
 when they saw the place,
 took the four and a half from warm lips,
 acrid and sharp like outrage,
 with a lingering tinge of despair.

IVY SCHWEITZER

I Want to Tell You About the Park

for Bryan Brower

I walked into it today as I always do. I love to walk, you know that. My girlfriend used to say I was like a dog. If walked, and petted, I'm fine. But she was not with me and I was not on drugs and the park was strange. And I've been on drugs. I dropped acid and rode the Ferris wheel in Seattle; I snorted coke all night and went to work in the morning and was accused of being a morning person; I ate mushrooms before I saw a therapist and laughed about death and he couldn't fathom me behind his bottle-thick glasses any more than I can fathom the park today.

I want to say the persimmons trees were bending toward me, all sunset and leaf, even as the fruit had fallen, bursted-ripe on the ground. But it was not that. Even though the air was still juicy, the fruit had long since vanished, leaving its stain on the sidewalk. Nor was it the willow by the lake that some industrious city worker had shorn straight off, without even asking me, as if to give the tree the appearance of having bangs. No. That wasn't it. But, still, they could have asked.

For a moment, I thought it might have been the squirrels, little terracotta warriors sentinelled in rows, protecting some invisible emperor, chewing on acorns and hiding them. Probably not the squirrels, but, as they chewed, I saw men walking with headphones on, humming tunes, clipping along, not even knowing they were in a park. Lines of men wearing black. Serious men. Beautiful men. It was somewhat them. And the cars were all backed up at a traffic light. Rows of cars. Rows and rows of cars and cars and cars. They let them drive through the park. They let them. The men I could stand, and squirrels too, but the cars?

It was also the lack of geese, flown away but not yet south for the winter, and lack of women, where were all the women? They had flown somewhere too. The park showed me its own weird syllogism—the women had left and therefore the geese had gone too. Or the geese had flown, each one clutching a woman in its webbed feet. And the park was so empty, and I was full of you.

I stood, a type of not walking, to which I've never grown accustomed, and watched the boat house's stillness, all of the boats covered in cloth and lined in rows with no oarsmen to sing to the lovers skimming across the surface. The whole scene of the sadness of not boating. No boats, no lovers. You said we might have been lovers once, had we not been ourselves and also because we were ourselves.

I tell you this because I want you to have the park. I want to imagine you imagining me imagining it. Is that too much? But how do we know that we aren't only imagination anyway? It doesn't matter. I only want you to have the park. To sing it to you. To lap up the still autumn air with my tongue and let the words tell me what I am telling you: I will never let go of the park, where there is a nothing and a joy. You were here with me today, even if you didn't know it.

MATTHEW GRONER

Nihombashi

At the Bridge of Japan two men
with shaven heads and short pants tote
huge square chests with handles,
while behind them the retinue
of a daimyo, flanked with tall lances,
slogs in green robes and conical hats.

In the distance a fringe of sky
tinted familiar pale flamingo.
Gray rooftops ribbed like shipwrecks,
a latticework tower stabbing
a soup of cream cloud and turquoise.

Fishmongers make way, their baskets
empty after deliveries, while
off to the onlooker's right
the rumps of two dogs disregard
the procession with pert disdain.

WILLIAM DORESKE

Fujikawa

Three commoners bow as a daimyu
and his procession creep along.

I stand aside, averting my gaze,
as horses with paper ornaments

trot past, tossing their barbered manes.
These are gifts to the emperor

for first day of the eighth
lunar month, a little holiday

to honor the harvest of rice.
A good place to pause, the signposts

directing us toward Kyoto,
the sea view from this wooden deck

almost as broad as the universe
seen from the emperor's perch.

WILLIAM DORESKI

Saw-whet

I can't remember which January you went
out in the coldest night of the winter frost

blooming out of your breath goats tucked
into loaves eyes closed against the wind's

teeth perched inside a corner of the dark
barn on icicle claws a Saw-whet no taller

than your hand all eyes and feathers and
glass blown little beating heart taking

respite from the night's bright darkness
you came running back to the house I

saw in your hurry a light and precious
excitement carrying the sighting between

your breaths by the time my boots and
gloves were on the owl had flown I

saw the miracle in the circle of ice
around the moon still see it now down

the column of years we keep a weather
eye out for small feathered things we sit

inside on the first night of a new year
swirling the tare in warm bowls of ramen

the grass beneath the snow lies gently
folded not sleeping not waiting not

making plans the bowls warm in our
hands the moon hidden and biding time

REBECCA SIEGEL

120 miles

What are highways and snowy fields
when your tide is mine? I was once
a moon inside my mother as she was
in hers and so it goes. That summer
you made me gibbous, waxing warm
as a monarch. August and the river's
soft eddies made way for our flood.
Tonight we've left you and the string
pulls taught, daughter crescent. From
this dark highway the headlights light
the fogged circle around my missing
you. Again missing you. Have you
noticed how the thinnest skein of light
around the moon reveals the entire
sphere, absence outlined in shine.

REBECCA SIEGEL

Coming Out

Two nested vessels
Hide inside one
Another on the dark
Shelf gathering the
Dust of a former
Generation.

Their stems, broken
Away, yearn to be
Joined, end to end.
Heated. Fused. So
They can roll like
A glass axle
Out of the cabinet
And into the light.

DAVE CELONE

Northfield

I drive the dirt track along Bull Run, slipping on
ice and silently praying the studs are enough
to keep me from the fourteen foot drop,
because the metal reflector stakes surely are not.
We've had about nine feet of snow so far this season,
muffling the woods and stone walls like the fur ruff on a lynx.
I am three miles from the University, in the absolute
middle of nowhere, or so it feels, having the
only active mailbox on this section of road.
Road's become a dead end, even the four
wheel drives won't make the ridge hill after December.

I stopped by the Brown Library, where
the stacks were a field of flannel, and I thought of old Leon
Leonwood, who ought to be proud of his legacy to all of us
here and Down East. These marvelous plaids keep us from
losing our minds in the oceans of gray and white
swirling outside the window & down the chimneys.
You can bet none of us have white shoes, either!
I left with 3 books and a movie, storm tonight calling
for 20 inches, which likely means the full two feet.
Curl up and read by the fire 'til it's over. No sense in
fighting against the weather. Let her blow through,
then go out when she's done and clean up.
I should get my hike in tonight before dark, check
the gas in chainsaw and snow thrower, fill the lamps.

I love the wild peace of the fallow winter months.
Even friend's horses are down Florida way, basking
In the unnatural warmth; yet I am here, wandering
the cold woods up where the summer brush tipis
lie swathed in their snow blankets.
Firewood is stacked between two trees, I could
be warm and snug here overnight.
My cat, Baxter, follows my trail, then breaks off to
charge up a naked birch, getting the distance view.
Mine are the only human tracks, if my snowshoe webs

can be called that. Deer tracks and scat are everywhere,
coyotes hope for an early fawn, singing their delirious
demonic dance of notes under the Long Nights Moon.
That moon is sailing over the ridge, so we turn back
briskly, to return to the warmth of our hearth.
Soup, wine, and kitty crunchies are calling.

CHARLEIGH ROBILLARD

Tracey: An Elegy

This morning,
he told me
that you had died.
Your life had been
relapse and remission
for seven years,
so it shouldn't have been a surprise,
but somehow it still felt sudden.
Your being gone
was still a shock.

Time eroded our friendship
as unceremoniously as it does
so many others,
but this morning
I thought of you:
dyeing your hair red
in your boyfriend's dorm room,
and listening to *Scarlet's Walk*
in our basement apartment,
and wearing my pirate shirt.
I can't stop believing
that I might still find you
at these intersecting points of time and space.

CARA LOSIER CHANOINE

My fingers are like candles

My fingers are like candles:

on hearing the news that you
may leave someday they cannot
type the word 'no', they cannot
sign *emptiness* in binary...

...ang pangalan ko ay electricity.
My name is electricity.

Tell me you are scared and why
you may fall into a vat of cranberry
wine, of complex passions.

There will come a time when you
may return home. Ang pangalan ko
ay please, please do not go from me...

...though you carry me in your chest
I need you biting my lip to know I have
survived soul cakes on all saint's day.

Set your feet now; you belong to hallways
of wind, held aloft by effortless perfumes.

My fingers are like candles, burned free
of prints. My fingers with the pink tooth-
brush I picked up for you with living ache –
for I yearn you in the morning readying
yourself for news and tiny artifacts.

You may not leave. Crocodiles mount,
floods occur and the earth moves.
Please remain poised, poised
stretching with sleep beside me, spooning
into the fruit of sleep, spooning as though
tomorrow...just a penny to pocket.

Ang pangalan ko ay next week,

and I shock myself with wit
when I fail to connect your dots
because my fingers are like candles,
the remaining carbons my ink. My fingers
wait. My mouth waits for...
child's play, this coyness with words
and phone. Yet I toy with a pencil
without bite marks. You are not here
inflicting incisor, canine, the molars...
My fingers are like candles;
waxy soft, malleable, subject
to heat and teeth.

Ang pangalan ko ay
a simple truth.

There will come a time
where you must
leave no traces of
where you have been
carried, living.

SEAN J. MAHONEY

The Snow Maker

Up, up, up to the apex, toward the silver candles
 On high, cold darkness squeaking strained spinning
 Wheels. Chairlift floating forty feet above; below the
 Snow sleeps, soundly; breathe too deep and it tickles the lungs.

“On down the trail boys, and we’ll make it wet,
 let the snow pile up high till sunset.”

Sure thing Captain, I’ll carry the propane.
 The metal tank ain’t meant for walking down a
 Black diamond, but pipes demand flame in ten below,
 And there’s only one way to battle lodged mountain ice.

“Be careful boys, and stick right close together,
 I don’t want any of you left on the mountain in this weather.”

Sure thing Captain, but these shoulders are strained and tender.
 Ah, but it’s a realm of glistening glory when illumined by the helmet’s headlamp.
 Kick in the boots ‘cause the slope and life fall away to cake frosted
 Trees. Keep moving, stop shivering, the good light will come.

“Get the flame going boys, no time to waste,
 And move the snow guns, get them in the right place.”

Sure thing Captain, the blue flame ignites. Torch
 Hissing with smitten vengeance upon rusty pipe. Ping, ping,
 Clangs the hammer against each silver valve. Open,
 There goes the snow gun—water and air tango in love.

“Great job boys, but wet it up some,
 We got a lot of snow to make before the day is done.”

Sure thing Captain; more hissing cannons send crystal pellets aloft.
 O! welcome grand orange ball rolling over the eastern chain.
 Silver candles blow out with morning’s dear wishes.
 Providence be good and lead us the way.
 And may the day be wonderful —
 And I, did I?, yes I, I made the snow.

DAVEY OZAHOWSKI

Ginger Snapz

Probably the most unusually named child in the history of Dakota Junior High School was enrolled on September 25, 15 days after school had started. As we learned later about Ginger, it was not strange that she came in two weeks late or that the reason she was late was because her entire family (including their dog) had been kidnapped and held for a \$5,000 ransom.

Mrs. Worth seated the girl behind Jeffrey Smoot, and that bumped me, Laura Tilling, to the last seat in the row, and everyone else up and down like so many dominoes being knocked over. Her name was Ginger Snapz, and she was everything her name implied: spicy, soft, golden, sugary sweet, and all I can say is, if she had been kidnapped they sure had fed her well. She wasn't overweight, but she was no bundle of sticks that had been locked up in a closet either. In fact, she was the only one among us in seventh grade with thick, lustrous hair; pierced ears through which she wore large spangly earrings, each with the outline of a different state (she said she had been in every state except Alaska, and she'd only missed that state because the plane had crashed just before they had left the state of Washington); and eyeshadow, which changed with the color of the turtleneck tops and sweaters she wore.

When Mrs. Worth told Ginger to take that seat behind Jeffrey Smoot, she pointed with her fountain pen, from which a drop of peacock blue ink fell onto the family picture of Mr. Worth and Tommy that had sat on Mrs. Worth's desk since my brother Jake had had her 11 years before. Mr. Worth was bald now, and Tommy had already been in and out of college, the Marines, and jail, and was currently going to chef's school.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Ginger picked up her chartreuse binder and the math book Mrs. Worth had just given her and walked to the back of the room. She held out her hand to me and said quietly, "My name is Ginger and I'm sorry to be pushing you out of your seat."

"Oh, that's OK," I said, my hand in her firm grasp, which was accented by three large stone rings on her thumb, middle, and pinky fingers.

She winked and slid into the seat.

I was 12 that year, the youngest of five children and the only girl. For most of my life I had almost been the fifth son, so adored was I by my brothers, who taught me four sports, spitting, and the possibilities of mud. But when I moved to the junior high, with its entrances for BOYS and GIRLS, and when we had gym uniforms that we had to change into, and when Mrs. Worth began calling us either by Mr. or Miss—well, I realized I was different from my brothers. In fact, within about a week of starting seventh grade, I was beginning to think of myself as a female creature, a fact that my poor, beleaguered mother had not been able to drum into my head, despite daily efforts, for the past two years.

Whatever degree of femaleness I had suddenly acquired, though without any effort on my part, didn't really compare to the femaleness of Ginger Snapz. Immediately, she raised the bar of what it meant to be a girl, and in the first couple of weeks, she might have even been raising the bar of what it meant to be a woman. Word got around to the eighth-grade girls on the second floor and the ninth-grade girls on the first floor that floating above their heads was a 13-year-old (Ginger had taken a year off gliding down the Mississippi River on a houseboat with her parents, which allowed her to visit quite a number of states, so she had lost a year of formal education) with such a sense of style and noticeable bosom that she might as well go directly to 10th grade.

The effect on Mrs. Worth was evident, too. A couple of weeks after Ginger's arrival, Mrs. Worth got her hair colored. The gray suddenly became a light peach, and instead of hanging past her shoulders, it was cut and waved. She also began wearing glasses with rhinestone frames. About three weeks later, Ginger asked if she could read a poem that she had written. It was called "Ode to Mrs. Worth." We didn't know what an ode was, but, with a touch of embarrassment, Mrs. Worth said that it was a tribute to someone or something.

There once was a gal named Mrs. Worth
 Who was heaven sent to this old earth.
 She betrayed not her age
 This lovely, fair sage,
 To fashion she had a rebirth!

Mrs. Worth sat dumbstruck. We didn't know what to do because Mrs. Worth was usually talking most of the class. So much silence was frightening. Burt Barrett clapped once, but Mrs. Worth held up her hand.

"Not yet, Mr. Barrett. Class, as you know, poems should be read aloud, and at least twice, so we may ascertain their meaning fully. Miss Snapz, will you please recite it again in order that we may appreciate the subtle rhyme scheme, rhythm, and meaning? Commence."

Mrs. Worth's slightly bewildering behavior—in fact, we didn't know anything about poetry and certainly not the idea that poems should be read aloud—and twice, at that!—was imitated by most of the older girls—those who knew themselves to be female—as they attempted to compete with Ginger, if only abstractly, from the other floors. Mackenzie Serena Chapman, who was the editor of the school newspaper, did an interview with Ginger, who explained that Snapz was a shortened form of the Polish word Snapzuski. Was the plane crash real? It was. It was a private plane, being flown by her father, Victor Snapz, who managed to land it in a field in Washington, near the Canadian border. Everyone survived, though Ginger had a steel rod in her leg. She showed the incision scar to Mackenzie Serena in gym class. The interview came off as a sincere piece of writing, for which Mackenzie Serena was commended, despite the fact that we had been told by the assistant editor,

Gretchen Deland, that Mackenzie Serena had really been trying to put newcomer Ginger in her place.

The steel rod notwithstanding, Ginger worked up the choreography for the seventh grade production of "Sugar Babies" in February. For two months she assisted Mrs. Pryor in preparing the cast of 28 in tap, jazz, and modern. Mrs. Pryor was the chorus teacher, so in previous musicals, which we all had been going to for years, the kids had sounded pretty strong, but they didn't move very effectively. Mrs. Pryor tended to simple steps, like circles going in opposite directions, kneeling, and, while facing the audience, making arches under which couple after couple could pass. Often, these moves didn't make sense in the story. Ginger, however, came up with solos, duets, and trios, and used the stairs from the stage into the auditorium. The results were electrifying. The audience was thrilled, like they were part of the show.

When she wasn't rehearsing the dancers, Ginger was teaching about 15 boys and girls after school how to knit caps and mittens for needy people at Christmas, a charity coordinated by her parents, both of whom were traveling preachers. In the spring Ginger won the Ray-Anne P. Stark Memorial Poetry Prize with a group of poems about people in our town that had made a difference in her life, including four about Mrs. Worth's ascension to the statewide presidency of Daughters of the Eastern Star.

Perhaps the most memorable contribution that Ginger made to us that year involved us girls in Mrs. Worth's class. Like me some of us didn't have much of an idea about being a girl, but Ginger took care of that. We began having slumber parties. We took turns hosting, but before each one, the hostess would talk to Ginger about unique experiences at her party. For example, Mary Jane Ingalls was going to have a pumpkin carving party at Halloween, which we did, but Ginger suggested that we all paint our fingernails black. The effect was staggering. None of us had ever worn nail polish period, but going directly to black put the wind in our sails.

At Betsy Bushmiller's party, which featured her dad's 8 millimeter movie projector, we happily watched a number of cartoons until Betsy (at Ginger's prompting) told us to lie on the hassocks and the couch with our heads hanging over, so we could watch them upside down. Then Betsy played the movie backwards! This proved to be too much for Diana Dailey, who, after laughing nonstop, peed her pants, which caused the rest of us to lose complete control. In fact, I had to admit I had never used the word "pee" because at our house we called it "tinkle," and that led to everyone else's confession of what they called things at their houses. Diana came back, having changed into dry shorts, but when Lucy LaRonde mentioned that she called number two "grunt," Diana wet her pants again and had to borrow Betsy's clothes.

For Cinco de Mayo at Arabella's house, Ginger gave us Spanish lessons. Ginger was fluent in Spanish, having lived in Texas and Arizona for two years. She and Arabella labelled everything in the Smiths' house and led us throughout, pronouncing the words and then making us say them.

We made salsa, learning the differences among various peppers and being introduced to cilantro, which was completely unknown to us, even to Mrs. Smith. And to top it off, each of us had to bring a white blouse, so we could sew, in green and red thread, the Mexican flag onto the breast pocket. When Mrs. Worth saw us the next day, all of us in our embroidered shirts, she said that she wished she could go to our slumber parties, too, but “those days are over, I’m afraid. Particularly when Mr. Worth snores,” she said, chuckling.

But just as quickly as Ginger arrived and captured the hearts of even the most suspicious of the older Dakota Junior High crowd that initially said that Ginger was a “gold digger” (a word that MaryBeth Phinney came up with, though what Ginger might have imagined she could have gotten out of MaryBeth’s brother, Carl, a sophomore, given that the Phinneys were in the middle of the pack of poor families in town and Carl was going to a BOCES program and barely knew Ginger, was impossible to imagine); a “liar” (Mackenzie Serena Chapman, the journalist, went to our town library to look for information about the plane crash in Washington, couldn’t find any, but vowed to write to “local officials” in Spokane to get “the full story”); and a “suck-up” (Jerrilyn Vogel, who had been the best student since first grade, who would graduate as valedictorian of our class of 39 a few years later, and who seemed to the rest of us to be a huge “suck up” herself, was worried that Ginger, an A+ student as well as a “glamor puss,” would win the Breckinridge Academic Gold Medal three previous Vogels had won at graduation)—as quickly as Ginger arrived in September, the Snapzes were gone by the end of June.

We knew Ginger was going to move when we overheard Ginger telling Mrs. Worth that she didn’t have to find an eighth-grade homeroom teacher for her because the Snapzes were moving to Ocala, Florida, to temporarily take over another church.

“Lutheran this time. My parents are versatile. Baptist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran. Sometimes we stay for two years, but not here, Mrs. Worth. Not even a full year.”

Mrs. Worth shook her head, and the long, spangly earrings (she’d had her ears pierced during Christmas break) tinkled lightly.

“Oh, Ginger, what a shame. You have been such a delight this year. You have brought to our school a cosmopolitan touch, a gracious verve, and a sweet reminder of the arts of the East Coast, hasn’t she, class?”

“You’re moving?” asked Burt, and he burst into tears.

There was silence in the class (except for Burt’s sniffing) just as there had been months before when Ginger read the Mrs. Worth poem, which we all knew by heart now, except Christopher Cash had substituted the word “girth” for “birth” and had also used the word “mirth” sarcastically when he declaimed it from time to time on the playground.

“May I?” asked Ginger, taking the box of tissues from Mrs. Worth’s desk and handing them to Burt, who then passed them around the room.

The truth was that Ginger, by the sheer force of her abilities and sincerity, had become a favorite person in the school, from the ladies in the lunch line in the cafeteria; to Marie, the crossing guard, who, in a ceremonious display of affection, let Ginger hold the STOP

paddle on the school's last day; to the ninth-graders, who, without condescension, gave her an honorary T-shirt in garnet and grey, their class colors. Mackenzie Serena Chapman noted Ginger's unexpected departure in a farewell column of bequests to the lower grades, wishing "all good luck to Ginger, the girl who spiced up our lives here at good ol' Dakota Junior High."

In the following fall, Principal Platt received a letter from Ginger, from Ocala, which he posted on the bulletin board.

"It's hot here, y'all," she wrote. "But I shall get used to it, as I try my best to do wherever my tumbleweed life takes me. I was well prepared at Dakota Junior High, but my natural inabilities with math—no offense to you, Mr. Davenport, kind sir, who probably passed me on effort alone out of seventh-grade math—have made me realize that this algebra thing may, as they say down here, be the death of me yet. But I shall give it my best shot! And I shall try to find, as they also say down here, 'prosperity's path through prayer and perseverance.'

The other day I wore my Dakota Junior High shirt, and when Mrs. Flack, my homeroom teacher asked me to stand and introduce myself, one of my new classmates asked me where Dakota was. I almost burst into tears! But I, as they say here, 'grabbed my feelings by the hitch-me-up' and calmly replied that's the home I had most recently come from, where the people are as friendly as the Munchkins in Oz.

I wish y'all the very best.

Yours most sincerely, and with gratitude,

Ginger Snapz(uski)

To us in the frozen north, Ocala sounded like the most exotic city in the most exotic state. When it came time for us eighth-graders to do our project on the states, 11 of us chose Florida, which was too many because there weren't enough books about Florida in our library, so we had to pick numbers out of Principal Platt's humidor to see who could get Florida. I wasn't one of the lucky three, but I suddenly became curious about New Mexico, and I have been here ever since.

And I half expect some day to run into Ginger in Albuquerque or Santa Fe.

PAUL LAMAR

Bitter Harvest

You have slipped off center again.
A landslide of nerve and muscle collapsing
as you drag them along beside you
painfully ploughing the earth.

This is the ground you dwell on,
however unsteady the land you inhabit now
you have nowhere else to go.
So you sow in this soil, a handful here
a fistful there.

Your nails break.
Your leg a weary mule,
ploughs a row for what you'll plant.
The storm beneath your skin sends
bolts of lightning from shin to thigh.

You learn to cultivate through thunder,
through cyclone, and through blight
a body is a farm you bought before birth
you own every acre.

BRIDGET GAGE-DIXON

The Humming Birds

They live to eat and eat to live
on and on they go
the close-to invisible flash
of disappearing wings
They just keep pressing to find
insects in the passing air
So we think at best they stalk
but never know

It's not like the quick glance
at someone's walk
that afterwards reminds us
of a portrait's intricate viscera
Our muscles want to hold down
such suave seductions
Too soon we accept the urge to
celebrate reproduction

When do they sleep and not feed
therefore hang near
the nearest tree to spot the next
repast of unseen, minuscule mites
Myself, I try not
to ravish the sight that almost
never was, just leave it as a pang
or a thin glass of being

LOUIS A. RENZA

A Lesson

a prose poem

&— I've been teaching my pet (a parrot) to talk. I want it to say, "feed me, Seymour, feed me," but the parrot tells me it is too smart—it knows my name is not Seymour. I want to tell the parrot if it is so smart it should feed itself but then I think of our future together. Chess stratagems on display in parks & coffeeshops & how the crowds will gather for my smart parrot who knows my real name & refuses to call me Seymour.

&— One night, after a hard August rain my parrot begins to wilt. One petal falls & another & another & soon a whole wing composts on the bottom of its cage. I want to help it, to nurse my beloved pet back to health & beauty, but the bird taunted me so after our Public Access chess-match & I am human—therefore I am stubborn. I will not help the parrot & soon it is begging me for assistance. It goes on & on as leprosy takes hold & the decaying wing beneath its roost has taken on new growth— "I want to fly o'er this world, to exist in all its hemispheres & see the blueness of its seas, the greyness of its mountains." I listen intently waiting for the sweet mercy of time; "& I want to see all the things I haven't seen."

&— Finally, I am yelling at the wingless bird, screaming at it, "what do you want, WHAT DO YOU WANT!?" & its twitching eye hangs loose & it calls back, "I want to but first I must be back in health. I am hungry & I want to live!" I castle my king, forming my last-ditch line of defense & the bird, defeated, whispers through its beak, "feed me. I want to see more. Feed me. See more. Feed me."

A. JAY DUBBERLY

Escape from Baghdad

“Yet again?” Sophie was shocked when her friend Rene Pierre called from Jordan and advised her to get ready to leave Iraq. Sophie couldn’t imagine that after the 1980–88 war with Iran and the 1991–92 war with Kuwait, there was any appetite left in the country for warmongering.

“There is a strong buzz here of an immediate strike by the American-led forces against Iraq,” Rene cautioned.

Sophie was the widow of General Jamal Hasan, who was killed in the eight-year Iraq-Iran war in 1987. As junior officer, he had been sent to Toulouse in France to train on military equipment that the French had been contracted to supply. He fell in love with pretty Sophie who worked at the training center. She accompanied Jamal back to Baghdad. After his promotion, she enjoyed the privileges and comforts of a General’s wife. Now she lived alone with her 11-year old son Ayyubi on her husband’s pension.

The privileged army generals had the choice of the best residential lots in the country. General Hasan opted for a lot in Adhamia, a predominantly Sunni district in central Baghdad, close to the bank of Tigres river, and next to the big office complex of Al Mukhadirat Trading (AMT) International. Their son Ayyubi often jumped over the fence to retrieve his soccer ball from the AMT lawn when playing with the neighborhood children. Whenever Sophie was keeping an eye on her son playing outside, Yousuf, the owner, would wave. Their good neighborliness of over thirteen years was marked by frequent cordial exchanges. Often Sophie would shout for Ayyubi to come home from the AMT office where Yousuf’s staff treated him with candies and enjoyed his unstoppable chatter.

The AMT company was set up by Yousuf Ghilani in 1986. The sprawling single-storied complex housed an office in the front, and two three-bedroom units in the back. Yousuf lived in one of them. The soft sun-warmed grass of early summer and the flower beds that lined the boundary wall were well tended. A large green patch with a few brown spots in the backyard separated the office and the living quarters.

Yousuf hailed from Basrah in the south where he had left his wife and two children with their grandparents as soon as the rumors of imminent war gained currency. He looked smart, with his round face, thick hair, and pointed nose under a pair of large observant eyes. He and his co-workers made a good team. Yousuf paid them well and never put pressure on them to work harder or aim at higher sales.

Yousuf travelled frequently to Amman and Damascus for the shipment of consignments and for banking transactions. After flights from Iraq were banned under the UN sanctions and Iraqi banks were not permitted to carry out foreign transactions, the cash dollar became the currency for doing business in Iraq.

After the death of her husband, Sophie realized that while society was warm to her, it hadn't accepted her, nor had she developed a bond with the people or the place. She wasn't strikingly attractive, but still in her early forties, her average height, slim shape, smooth skin, brown eyes and blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders gave her an elegant persona. Seeing no end to her loneliness, and a bleak future for Ayyubi in Iraq, she had decided to leave the country. Ayyubi was adorable. He inherited the handsome features of his parents, but his schooling had suffered in the outmoded state-controlled educational system. He was playful and friendly to Yousuf in whom he sensed a comforting fatherly affection. Yousuf empathized with him and his mother, often giving medicines when she needed them, bringing her dollars from her bank in Amman, and getting occasional plumbing or odd jobs done at her house through the handyman employed by his company.

Sophie put her house on the market, but no buyers turned up. The prices were depressed because the rich Iraqis and businessmen, fearful of war clouds again, were uncertain of the future.

After the news trickled down from the autonomous Kurdish region in the north that the special American forces had landed for launching a military action, Yousuf told his deputy, "I must make a quick trip to Amman to store ordered supplies in Jordan. Foreign radio channels report the gathering of foreign troops in the neighboring countries as part of a huge military build-up."

###

"Heavy Bombing Over Iraq" screamed the newspaper headlines when Yousuf got up in his hotel in Amman on the morning of March 21. The telephone lines were down. Mobile phones had been banned by the Iraqi government, ostensibly to insulate its people from any outside influence. He decided to return to Iraq immediately.

Leaving his medical supplies stored in Amman, Yousuf hired a taxi to reach the Iraqi border near Rutba, 390 km to the east of Jordan. He was confident that from the border he would be able to manage a ride to Baghdad, another 520 km.

It was early afternoon when he crossed into the no man's land and saw the effects of war. The check-post was deserted and the border crossing unguarded. The vast complex had been ransacked, the furniture and fixtures in the immigration and customs halls had been looted, and what couldn't be taken away stood damaged. The huge mandatory portraits of a smiling Saddam Hussein, his right hand raised to greet the visitors, were torn apart. Sporadic gangs of looters could still be seen in the scattered buildings, scouting for anything still worth carrying away.

Yousuf noticed a mini truck, perhaps waiting to cart away something of value.

Greeting the driver, he asked, "Heading toward Baghdad, or Ramadi?"

After replying to his greetings, the driver said, "All the towns in the Anbar province, on the highway to Baghdad have fallen to the rebel control, fierce fighting is spreading."

"I just arrived from Jordan to attend a family emergency in Baghdad, don't know how to go from here, it's all deserted."

"Yes, no taxi or transport because they cannot drive through Ramadi and Falluja," the driver explained, and, after a pause, added, "I can take you up to Haditha, keeping away from the fighting areas. The old country road, which is abandoned, is safer. From Haditha, you will get more choice for heading to Baghdad."

There was no other choice. "How much?"

"Six hundred dollars." Yousuf noticed the tendency to fleece the travelers in such times was not uncommon and cursed him for demanding six times the normal fare, but with no chance to bargain, he agreed.

###

Reaching the AMT office in Baghdad in the late afternoon the next day, he saw nobody around. Due to the street clashes and the cross fires, very few ventured to come out. No office staff dared to come except Qarim Jaffer, the company driver, who lived only two streets away.

"Welcome," said a happy Qarim opening the gate for him.

"How is everything?" he asked.

"With the grace of God, we survived the dreadful bombings for several nights. The army has melted away. The American soldiers have taken over Saddam's palaces, offices and the strategic places. But the city is in chaos; roaming gangs looting the shops and damaging the showrooms. The leaders of the ousted government have gone underground to wage guerilla attacks," Qarim took a breath as Yousuf kept listening.

"Lack of security has become a big problem. Powerful resistance groups have surfaced now. They need money to fight and threaten businesses and rich families for extortion. Those who could, have already fled the country. The banks have been emptied out of all the money by the looters. The government soldiers have taken away truckloads of cash from the central bank," Qarim paused, staring at him with a blank look.

Yousuf's face turned grim. He had not expected such mayhem. He went to knock at the door of Sophie's house. Her face looked troubled when she answered the bell.

"Your dollars from the bank," Yousuf said after the usual greeting.

While sipping tea with him, she said, "The bombing raids were deafening, the deadliest explosions I've ever heard. The billowing black smoke rose from the burning buildings; the streets were deserted. We huddled inside and prayed. And now comes the news of the looting and kidnapping. I'm worrying for Ayyubi all the time. I've lost sleep."

Yousuf saw the dark circles under her eyes. The lines on her forehead were deeper. He comforted her, "I can understand. This will pass, just calm down. I'm so close here. Do not feel despondent."

"Thank you; don't know how we can endure it," Sophie said.

"Insha'a Allah, we'll overcome this."

###

Qarim would open the office every morning and take over when Yousuf had to go out. In his mid-fifties, average height, muscular body, almost bald and sporting a small moustache, Qarim had been in Yousuf's employ ever since he set up his business fourteen years ago. Married with four adult sons, he was comfortably settled with his carefree routine. But one morning, not finding Qarim around, Yousuf himself had to open the office. When Qarim came late, Yousuf looked at him askance. He took a seat holding his head in both hands. He looked upset.

"My youngest son Abbas spends more time with his friends, sometime disappearing for days. When he came last night, he told us that he had joined the main resistance, the al-Ansar group, which is fighting the American-led forces. He left this morning," Qarim fell silent for a moment, and then, in a slow voice, added, "He is also spying on the people suspected of collaborating with the occupation forces. I'm worried, so many people are getting killed and going missing."

Yousuf knew Abbas as a schoolboy. He might learn of the huge cash dealings in my business, Yousuf thought. But he merely remarked, "He got himself trapped in a dangerous situation. There was no reason for him to do that."

"My whole family is upset. I never thought he'd be brainwashed in the company of his misguided friends."

"Now listen Qarim, it's going to be dangerous. I don't want to alarm you more, but you need to be vigilant, especially when bringing money from the customers. People known to you can also harm you."

"Please do not be worried. I'm careful. Abbas, or his people, will never know about my travel or my business," Qarim tried to reassure him.

But Yousuf saw every reason to feel otherwise.

###

Weeks passed in the prevailing chaos. Total insecurity reigned. Daily roadside bomb explosions, mortar shelling and suicide bombings killed hundreds. There was no one to enforce the curfew. With the TV stations damaged and the newspapers closed, one didn't know how the interim government was re-establishing control. The previous government had banned foreign TV transmissions in order to dish out a sanitized version of the news. Thus, everyone was at the mercy of the thriving rumor mill.

Qarim appeared in a bright mood one day. "Abbas returned home on Friday evening, cheerful and in good spirits."

"What is he up to now?" Yousuf asked.

"Collecting information on people," lowering his voice, and looking around to make sure there was no one listening in, he whispered, "Abbas was curious if our neighbor was still there, he meant Sophie. And, when I told him yes, he said nothing further."

Yousuf was shocked. He would never imagine Sophie to be on the radar of the kidnapers, but his cautious face betrayed no sign of alarm.

Qarim added, "He talked of other activities, but I didn't like his checking on our neighbor."

Yousuf's mind went in overdrive. What Qarim had confided to him was more upsetting than the reports of fresh explosions and the fierce clashes in the central district. Sophie's pale face popped up before his eyes again and again. He shuddered to picture her falling victim to a kidnapping plan. No, I need to act fast, he realized. He closed the office hurriedly and headed to meet Rashid, one of his distant cousins.

###

"Everything okay?" Rashid was surprised when Yousuf knocked at his door.

"Yes, all grace of God. Is driver Abdul free tomorrow? Something urgent has come up."

"Yes, he is free," Rashid replied, "I'll send him. Business is slow anyway. Have your work done, no hurry to send him back."

"Thanks. See you later," Yousuf turned and took leave.

The dusk had set in when he was back at his office. He headed to Sophie's house, though knowing well that it was not appropriate to knock at her door in the falling darkness when she wouldn't be able to see who stood there. But he did and waited. After a few moments, he knocked again and heard the light footsteps. He immediately whispered, "It's me, Yousuf! There's something serious."

Hesitant, she opened the door. Her eyes peered out through a wild tangle of disheveled hair. She asked, "Can't we talk in the morning?"

"No, Sophie, no. There is a problem."

After she let him in, and watched his raised and arched eyebrows, she asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"Let me explain, you have heard how the resistance groups are fighting back against the occupation forces and raising money for their operations. After looting the banks, they have now turned to kidnapping the rich and the foreigners for ransom. Fearing this, many of them have fled the country. This afternoon, I got a tip-off that a rebel group is checking on you," Yousuf paused and looked at Sophie.

"What? I've heard about the kidnappings, but can't believe this can happen to me, the widow of an Iraqi general!"

"Sophie, it's chaos, mob rule everywhere. The government machinery is broken. Everyone is fighting for survival."

"Yes, I can see. What should I do now?" Her voice was shaking. She turned pale.

"Our guest house is safe to move to immediately, just take your valuables, there isn't more time. Criminal gangs are on the prowl after the dark," he said in hushed tone.

I've no choice but to trust him, she thought. When she left, she had a bag hanging from her shoulder, and she was holding Ayyubi by the hand. She switched off all the lights and locked the main door and the gate.

###

After escorting them to his guest house, Yousuf said, "It's safe here for tonight. I'll see you in the morning and tell you what we need to do next."

Yousuf went to his living quarters after ensuring the iron gate and every door was locked. He had lost sleep and spent hours weighing different options and the risks. Sipping cups of tea, he deliberated again and again, debating with himself. Am I getting sucked into danger? Yes, but how heavily it will weigh on me if I ignore it, his inner voice countered. He dozed off for two hours.

When he got up, the black sky was fading into gray. The fresh cool wind in the quiet summer morning was crisp. Yousuf went to the office kitchen to prepare the coffee before knocking at the guest quarter.

Sophie opened the door instantly. With anxiety writ large on her face, her eyes red and moist and lips extremely dry, she mumbled, "Just can't sleep... I'm very worried."

"Don't please. No time for that," he said, and asked her to join him for coffee.

As she clutched her cup, he said, "You can slip into your house this morning. I'm contacting some people straightaway to find out the safe way for you to reach Jordan. I'll see you as soon as I'm back."

###

Abdul Wahid, the driver working with Rashid for more than ten years, occasionally took Yousuf's medicine packages to customers in the provinces when he was headed in the same direction. He was in his late fifties, sloping shoulders, and in good shape. More importantly for Yousuf, he came from the Dulaymi tribe of the Anbar province and was familiar with the area that bordered Jordan. He found Yousuf waiting for him in his office.

After taking tea, Yousuf began, "Abdul, there is a family that must reach Jordan immediately."

Abdul interrupted, "You know how dangerous the highway to Amman is, the rebel groups control it!"

"Yes, I know," Yousuf said in a grave tone, "but is there any other safe way you can think of?"

Trashing the half-burnt cigarette in a rusty old ash tray, Abdul said, "A few business people have taken their families to Jordan by travelling through the winding country roads away from the areas of fighting in Falujah and Ramadi. It's circuitous and tiring, and, of course, costs more dollars."

“Do you know from where in Baghdad?”

“You can find cars moving around in the empty bus terminal at Tahrir Square when the darkness falls. They are on the look-out for someone willing to pay good money to travel to the border. There is haggling on the price. The desperate families agree to pay, even extra for the empty return trip.”

Yousuf knew how the taxis and cars were cashing in on the rising fears of the people, demanding up to ten times the normal fare.

“Has it been safe?”

“No one safe in these times.” Abdul’s tone was brusque.

Yousuf didn’t like it but persisted, “Any report of danger on the country roads?”

“Haven’t heard any, at least not so far. But you know how uncertain it is: no security, no police.”

“Yes, but my passenger and her child have to leave.”

“They can also wait at the Tahrir Square and try,” Abdul said, and cautioned, “but remember, Yousuf, some evenings no car turns up.”

“Either way, take us there in the evening.”

“I’ll come before the night curfew. Be ready.” Abdul rose to leave.

###

Yousuf headed quietly to the neighboring house. Sophie opened the door at the first knock. All the blood had drained from her face.

“Sophie, I understand some families have left the country by taking a ride with private taxis at night. They drive on the dirt roads, avoiding the highway that passes through the trouble spots of Fallujah and Ramadi.”

“We can follow then,” she said without a second thought.

“My friend Abdul will take us to the Tahrir Square as soon as the darkness falls. Carry your valuables, passport, ID and whatever money you have. After my office people leave in the evening, I will bring you and Ayyubi to my place where we’ll wait for Abdul.”

Abdul turned up with his GMC Suburban in the evening. They were ready and boarded quickly. Wearing an abaya (a long black robe for native women), Sophie had only a shoulder bag and a handbag. Ayyubi carried another. Abdul cautioned, “Remember, we don’t know when a car will come, so be prepared for any scenario.” Nearer to Tahrir Square, he suddenly approached an alleyway and stopped. The street lights didn’t work. “Hear the gun shots?” he whispered looking out in the darkness. The shots became louder, and continued intermittently for half an hour. After waiting for a long silence, he drove again and parked the vehicle in a back street at Tahrir Square. The four of them slipped out of the GMC and crept into a broken shed to look for any roaming car or taxi.

The eerie silence of the night was a stark contrast to the daytime hustle and bustle of the bus terminus. During the day, the buses in varying colors roared and belched smoke,

the waiting passengers eager to leave the city huddled up on a few wooden benches and remained focused on their destinations, indifferent to the shouts of the conductors.

Looking at his watch, Abdul said, "No car so far, we wait more."

An hour passed, still they had hope; two hours and they got worried. "I fear no car tonight," Abdul said. He looked at Yousuf.

Yousuf's anxiety grew with every passing minute. He said, "My passengers need to leave tonight." Abdul stared blankly in silence. Suddenly they heard heavy gun fire, coming from a dark corner in the nearby empty street.

"It's no longer safe here!" Abdul turned to leave.

Holding his arm, Yousuf pleaded, "Abdul, can't you take us on with your GMC?"

"No, no. Very difficult. Rashid may not like it, and then I can't go beyond Haditha, not enough gas," Abdul said.

"You can at least take us to Haditha."

Before he could make another effort to resist, Yousuf urged, "Listen up, it is very serious. A rebel group has plans for their kidnapping. I pay you more this time." Tipping always helped, he knew.

Abdul thought for a moment and said, "Let's go."

They got back to the GMC. Sophie and Ayyubi were stunned. The gun fire had scared everyone. Yousuf opened the door for her and said, "There is no ride from here, not safe tonight. So, we now move quickly to another town on the way, Haditha, about 350 miles from here. God willing, we should get a safe ride from there."

She sighed deeply and had nothing to say.

###

The GMC went into high gear, and quickly turned onto a country road that Yousuf had never seen. Abdul's tone became thoughtful, "The shortage of gas is everywhere. In Haditha, I'll search for the gas, but you better don't wait, hire another car and drive straight-away to the border, still more than five hours from there."

Yousuf, weighing his choices, said, "I'm worried that on our way, any unknown car or taxi we hire might be tempted to deliver us straight to a criminal gang. When I returned last month, I learned that many taxi drivers and cars are suspected to be in collusion with the criminals. They were monitoring the movement of passengers whom they thought to be rich."

The long overnight drive to Haditha through the unpaved road tired them. Ayyubi was asleep most of the time, his head on Sophie's lap. The narrow road, no more than a dusty trail without any road sign, could be navigated in the dark only by a native driver like Abdul. Nearing the city, they saw the gray sky turning radiant in the distant horizon. The dull morning was changing colors with the rising sun. The air became cooler. They stopped at a restaurant on the outskirts.

Sophie in her abaya and heavy-eyed Ayyubi followed Yousuf to the restaurant where they posed as a family. Yousuf ordered the breakfast. After the exchange of greetings with the owner, he talked about his GMC running low on fuel, forcing him to stop at Haditha.

“The whole province is on fire, do not turn on to the main highway,” the owner sounded sympathetic and added, “Very few cars dare to head toward Jordan now, but you can go to Qaim also, 150 km to the north, there’s a better chance you’ll get a taxi from there. But people now ask for more dollars everywhere.”

From the spot the owner had advised, they flagged many cars, but most were unwilling to go toward the border. After half an hour, a small beat-up, old-fashioned, nondescript white pick-up van stopped. It was unmarked and empty, the engine made a rough noise, belching black smoke from the exhaust. The driver was an elderly man in a dark blue long thawb (cloak), a long gray beard on his weather-beaten wrinkled face and a loose white turban that half-covered his head. After Yousuf pointed to ‘sick’ Sophie, waiting with Ayyubi at the curb, the driver agreed to take them with an atrocious demand of 500 dollars, finally agreeing to 450. Yousuf sat with the driver and Abdul wished them well.

###

Crisscrossing the indistinct country roads, the van moved on. They faced no traffic, nor any Bedouin or shepherd. The driver kept to himself and drove on the dusty roads, fully acquainted with the topography of the place. After about two hours, he stopped at a decrepit kiosk to buy cigarettes. A few primitive sun-dried mud dwellings lined up behind it. Yousuf got out to buy bottled water. It was high noon and they were thirsty. The ferocious mid-day desert sun was blinding.

Suddenly, a Brasilia, an old orange taxi, came to a sudden halt. Two youths, unshaven and loosely dressed, got down, AK-47s hanging by the shoulders, and approached them. The driver of the van murmured to Yousuf to remain calm in the van, while he greeted the young men. A tense Yousuf listened to the pleading and the explanation of the driver while the young men shouted. They seemed to belong to a splinter group.

“Keep your head covered with the abaya,” Yousuf whispered to Sophie.

Suddenly the driver brought one of the young men to the van who noticed Sophie, head bent, covered in her abaya from head to toe. He discourteously asked Yousuf, “Wife sick?” Yousuf nodded piteously. The driver and the young man went back to the Brasilia.

“My heart is racing with fear,” Sophie said.

“God willing, it should be over soon. I heard them talking of some settlement,” Yousuf told Sophie.

Yousuf saw money exchanging hands between three of them. The driver returned and asked Yousuf to give some medicines to their men. They would contact him in Baghdad. “Of course,” Yousuf replied instantly, taking out his business card. He felt relieved when the young man waved to let them move on.

“Thank God!” Yousuf said, though the driver didn’t care to respond as he was negotiating a bend in the road. He simply remarked, “We have crossed the khatar (danger), no more al-mujrimins (criminals).” He fell silent again, driving coolly.

“Were they gang members?” a tense Sophie softly whispered. “I understood nothing of the exchange. But watching your tense face worried me.”

“Yes, one of the many criminal groups, a law unto themselves,” Yousuf said. “But we’re past the danger now. The driver says so, though we’ll not be certain until we reach the border.” Sophie pressed back into her seat, alert and frightened. They had no appetite. The strong winds blew the fine dust in the desert terrain. The blinding noon sun and unpaved bumpy road added to their woes. The van kept moving on with the nonchalant driver at the wheel, his gaze fixed on the long distance ahead.

###

It was late afternoon when they made it to the border. Amid the heavy US army presence with Humvees, lined up on the wide highway, armed soldiers were watchful of any suspicious movement. Their wireless communications buzzed ceaselessly. Yousuf, Sophie and Ayyubi walked toward a queue that had no more than ten families waiting before a make-shift exit point. “In normal times, we’d see thousands of families lining up for hours in front of dozens of immigration windows,” Yousuf said. His remark didn’t register with Sophie. She had left behind her abaya in the van and, holding Ayyubi’s hand, stood waiting for her turn.

The queue moved slowly because everyone faced meticulous questioning by the army officer while he scrutinized their passports and travel documents. Yousuf couldn’t help remarking to Sophie in front of him, “Only a month back, I saw this check post deserted and plundered.”

Noticing some Iraqis turned back after their questioning made Sophie tense again. She feared her French and Iraqi passports might create doubt in the mind of the guards.

“Hey, you got two passports?” the guard asked.

“Yes, officer, the French one is expired,” she replied softly.

“Why are you leaving the country?” he continued.

“No longer safe, too dangerous for me.”

“So, where are you headed to?”

“My home, near Toulouse in France.”

“Alone? Married?”

“I’m the widow of General Jamal Hasan. He was martyred in the war in 1987.”

“Travelling alone from Baghdad?” he probed cautiously.

“My neighbor has escorted me and my son,” her voice turned shaky.

“Call him.”

Yousuf came forward, taking out the passport from his bag.

“What do you do in Baghdad?”

“I run a small business providing medicines and hospital supplies,” Yousuf said.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“More than 14 years.”

“Where do you live?”

“My house is next to madame Sophie’s in Adhamia district in Baghdad.”

The officer kept shuffling the passport pages as the lines on his forehead grew deeper and his brows contracted. Suddenly, he left the booth with their passports, asking them to wait.

“I thought seeing my French passport, he’d quickly clear me,” Sophie muttered.

Yousuf pressed her arm gently in self-assurance, “It’s just because the wife of an Iraqi General leaving the country might be looking suspicious to them.”

The officer returned but asked them to accompany him to another cabin. There they had to wait more. The officer went in and came out after a few minutes.

“Go inside, and wait for the colonel,” he said and left. They were the only ones called to present themselves before a senior army officer.

They stood near a colonel’s table who was busy scrutinizing their passports and ID cards. He asked them to sit down in the waiting area, and recognizing Yousuf from his passport photo, called him.

“You’ve been traveling so often to Amman and Damascus,” he said to Yousuf.

“Sir, I have a small business of distribution of medicines in Baghdad,” Yousuf presented his business card and, searching for any company papers he might have on him. He got hold of crumpled copies of two old invoices and showed him.

“These are in Arabic, but the name of my company and address is in English,” he said.

“I’m asking why do you travel to Jordan so often?”

“Sir, I have to visit there for getting the import consignments and sending the payments; no remittance is allowed through the Iraqi banks because of UN sanctions. Also, I have a representative in Amman who works on commission, his name is....”

The colonel raised his hand to stop him. He began shuffling his passport, his card and the invoice copies. Yousuf felt the questioning rather unusual.

“Your wife?”

“No, Sir. I can explain.”

“Go ahead,” the officer nodded, his face remained expressionless.

It took half an hour for Yousuf to brief him about Sophie, Ayyubi and the late General Hasan. More questions followed. Yousuf answered them all.

The officer became pensive and reviewed his papers. Asking him to go back to the waiting area, he called Sophie. After confirming the particulars, he cross-checked what Yousuf had said. He spent more time in looking at her French passport. A tired and tense Sophie burst into tears when he asked to tell her story. It was the same story that Yousuf had told.

“You seem to be disturbed. Are you okay?” The officer said without caring to wait for a reply. Asking her to resume her seat with Ayyubi, he called for Yousuf again. His tone

was mellowed now, eyes glued to Yousuf's face. "Can you tell more about the source of this threat, or these suspected militants in your neighborhood?"

"It was a forewarning that I got through the father of a young man who has recently joined the ranks of the rebels," Yousuf felt uneasy in saying all this. Back in Baghdad, I have to live and survive among the very people they are chasing, he thought.

"Follow me," the colonel took him to a backroom where the monitor of a laptop showed many pictures.

"Now, take a look at the pictures you see here, tell me if you recognize any of them," he said, moving the monitor toward Yousuf.

The colonel kept looking at Yousuf who glanced through the photographs.

Shaking his head, he said, "No, haven't seen any of them."

"That's alright."

The colonel looked at Yousuf's business card again and said, "I hope you'll cooperate when we approach you to nab the criminals. Some of these jihadis are fleeing out of Iraq now."

"Sure," Yousuf nodded.

Back at his desk, the colonel said to Sophie, "You're safe now. If you're traveling alone to Amman with your kid then speak to Sergeant Taylor outside. He's heading to Amman and can follow your taxi, it will be midnight when you reach there. Collect your passports from the next cabin," he waved them toward the exit.

Sophie was moved, the color of her face changed, her eyes moist. They collected the passports and approached the roadside barrier. Sergeant Taylor was loading bags in his jeep. When Yousuf told him about the Colonel's advice, he replied quickly, "That's right man, I follow you until Circle Six in Amman, and then will turn toward the airport."

They thanked him. A bit confused, Yousuf asked, "But don't they need to go to the Jordanian passport control now?"

"No, that's okay, this special zone is controlling both sides for operational reasons. Your passports have been stamped."

An overwhelmed Sophie wept tears of relief. She waited as Yousuf went across the road to settle with a Jordanian taxi which was about to return to Amman. He bought water bottles and biscuit packets from the roadside vendor.

"It's another five hours to Amman, but not very tiring now. Ayyubi will feel hungry, I suspect. Please keep my business card. You know Rene Pierre's house?" Yousuf was talking non-stop while he put their bags in the taxi. He did not expect Sophie to reply.

"Yes..." her voice was choked. She hugged Yousuf and sobbed without restraint. Yousuf was unable to look into her eyes and tenderly patted her on the back as he gently nudged her toward the taxi. He felt a mounting pressure in his chest as he slowly shut the door. Once more he raised his hand to wave, bending his head for a last glimpse at Sophie and Ayyubi. The pain grew deeper draining his energies. The taxi began to move, the army jeep waited to follow.

Both vehicles soon picked up speed on the long desert highway, a straight black track that receded and faded away in the distant horizon. Keeping his gaze fixed at the two dots racing down into the vast desert, a disoriented Yousuf lost his sense of time. His eyes remained fixed on the dots until the desert swallowed them. Only the pain in his heart lingered. Gently wiping his moist eyes, he cried within himself and turned back. He had to look for a taxi to take him back to his land of war and chaos.

MOHAN PANDEY

