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A Connecticut Professor in Kurdistan

Cover Page Footnote

Robin McAllister is Associate Professor of English at Sacred Heart University. This is an edited version of a journal he kept during a project for a non-governmental organization working in Northern Iraq under NATO and U.N. protection.

ROBIN McALLISTER

A Connecticut Professor in Kurdistan

On the morning of June 6, 1996, as I pass through the final police check and metal detector at the domestic terminal of Ataturk Airport in Istanbul, Turkey, to board my flight for Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey, one entire counter is reserved for checking guns on the flight. I am passing through the gates of my ordinary academic world into another world, conflicted by war, where the traces and ruins of ancient cultures persist alongside modern gas stations and shopping towers. I am traveling into Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the cradle of the Cradle of Civilization, a cradle endlessly rocking.

A French NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), DIA (for Dialogue), has invited me to come to Kurdistan in northern Iraq to help Kurdish teachers of English improve their English. DIA (or TDC, its consortium acronym in alliance with another aid group) builds youth centers and provide educational and social services for young people enduring life in conflicted, war-ravaged societies like Kurdistan, Bosnia, and the Gaza Strip. It may be too late to change the attitudes of the older generation at war with each other, but perhaps young people can begin to learn to resolve the conflicts their parents cannot.

I've never felt farther from home as I climb down the plane steps onto the tarmac. From the door of the plane I can see bunkers, gun emplacements, tanks, and armored personnel carriers everywhere. There are even dummy soldiers, similar to scarecrows, set up along the runways and the perimeter fences to give the illusion of troops on constant patrol. I see plenty of troops already, lined up along our path into the terminal with automatic rifles. I feel strangely at home, though, as if I have seen these baked plains, _____

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intensely blue sky, and mountains in the distance before. Southeastern Turkey, Turkish Kurdistan, resembles my childhood home in eastern

Colorado – high plains, mesas, gulches, mountains on the horizon, high, empty sky. For some, this and eastern Colorado are God-forsaken landscapes, but I find reassurance in these wide open frontier places. Already my trip to Kurdistan is assuming a new dimension. In traveling here I am in some ways traveling back into my own past to a childhood in the American West left far behind me in my urban life as a professor in Connecticut. Perhaps I can empathize more with the people I meet or visualize better the events that have happened here – from the Bible through the Gulf War – as a result of having grown up in the rural high plains of the West.

Outside an ancient city gate, we stop to fill the taxi up with gas. I get out of the car to look at a huge stone caravansary, wondering when the last camel caravan passed through here. Little boys come up to look at the stranger as I stretch my legs and gaze around at the huge crumbling Roman walls that flank the road. We bounce down a narrow dirt road heavily rutted and full of pot-holes. We are following a river, the Tigris, crossed by an arched Roman bridge. It is still early enough in the morning for swallows to be working the river meadows, circling and swooping.

My driver pulls around tractors, donkeys drawing wagons. I've left the urban Istanbul of early morning Ataturk airport far behind me. We have to drive off on the shoulder every time a huge cargo truck comes toward us. Now we slow down for a flock of geese in the road, and suddenly we're in a village. Someone has stacked cattle dung on the top of the stone walls to dry. The cattle turn their skinny flanks away and stare at us as we nose the car around a cow and calf sunning themselves on the road. In these rolling hills and ravines the only sign of man's presence are the huge electrical towers, lines stretched between them, marching over the sunburned hillsides. On top of one platform a large, white stork with black markings, is feeding her fledglings at the huge stick nest she has built.

I open a bottle of water, purchased hours ago in Istanbul, and offer my driver a drink; he waves it away. I'm suffering already from the dry heat blowing through the car. The hills appear to be deeply eroded layers of sandstone and limestone. As I look down into the dry bed of an arroyo, I see two little boys herding a flock of turkeys back up toward the road, and now we are passing their village down in a stream valley, a small mosque without a minaret, a ``zigguret" is the

word I seem to hear the driver say, which reminds me of the ancient religious structures built by the Akadians and Babylonians. If this river valley were in Colorado, it would be lined with cottonwoods and willows; here there are dense stands of poplars, crowded in close to each other so they will grow straight to be cut and used for framing roofs and other construction. Fields have been planted with what look like thick bushes, but are grapes, grown not for wine, but for raisins. A tiny black donkey foal, all by himself apparently, waits motionless against an embankment off the road. Another army checkpoint. I reach my passport through the window to a young soldier, who flips through it, hands it back, and motions us past the armored personnel carriers parked along the side of the road.

Now the mountains are closer. We wind up and down hills alongside the river. From here the mountains look as barren as those in the California desert or Baja California. In the intense heat of this summer afternoon it is hard to picture the scenes of Kurds fleeing through snow-covered mountain passes toward Turkey. We are skirting long lines of trucks, driving fast to get to the border crossing, passing a procession of trucks which is moving into a new position closer to the border. All of a sudden we have caught up with a truck full of soldiers; they stare at our car as they sit in the back holding their rifles. We are entering another town, Cisre: some ancient walls along the road among the shops, cans of gasoline for sale, cargo trucks, cattle lying down in the divider strips in the middle of the road. With trucks, spare parts, tires everywhere, this small town revolves around the truck as it once revolved around the camel caravans crossing the borders.

The border crossing is a no-man's-land of asphalt, parked trucks and taxis, police with automatic rifles, Kurdish, Turkish, and Iraqi drivers in soiled slacks and long sleeved shirts, a few families waiting to cross into Kurdistan, even three or four other Westerners, Italian NGO workers trying to get back from Iraq to catch a plane from Diyarbakir. There is a jumble of small shops and kiosks providing snacks, telephone, and copy service, but my destination for the next few hours is a long stucco building with a crowd of men around a small window surrounded by a metal railing: "Visa Check." It is so hot that even the drivers are draping newspapers and towels over their heads to provide some shade. I need to hand in my passport and "ordre de mission" before I can cross the border. It is first come, first served, and

I am not shy about elbowing my way through the grinning truck drivers to finally squirm in close enough to the window rail to pass in my documents to the anonymous hand that reaches out through a dirty white brocade curtain to pick passports off the window sill.

I walk back to the taxi, open my bag, and give the driver some packs of cigarettes, one farewell present I know he will enjoy on his drive back since he has chain-smoked Marlboros since we left Diyarbakir. We drive down the tarmac past concrete pylons to a check point. I feel a moment of sadness and abandonment as he opens the back of the car, takes out my bags, and motions me to walk by myself from this point. I pick up the bags and start to walk ahead to where I see a structure like a toll booth.

I feel light-headed, self-conscious, slightly guilty, though I carry nothing more lethal than textbooks. Soldiers are lounging around with their rifles leaning against their legs while they light cigarettes. Before I take three steps, a sharp, alarmed whistle brings me to a startled halt. Turkish border police in light blue shirts signal me over to where they sit in the shade for a last check of my luggage. A soldier asks me to raise my arms and frisks me. They wonder about an office envelope of faxes from DIA, but then wave me through to the edge of a bridge across the river. It's a long walk over the bridge. A seedy-looking driver gestures to me to put my bags in his car. I ask if anyone speaks English. An older man with a military moustache asks me where I am from. The tension of crossing the border has made me feel weak, and I cannot resist getting into the car. I don't know who will be picking me up or how they will know me. I write "DIA" on a piece of paper in case the driver recognizes it.

We ride across the bridge. I wonder how I'll pay my fare with no currency on me except for some Turkish lira. The grey-haired man with the moustache asks me if I am French or British. "No," I say, "American, a teacher," I add, not knowing how an American will be received. "Welcome to Iraq," he says. The car stops at a concrete building housing the Kurdish border check. As I get out and look around questioningly, a nice looking man in a very clean white shirt, obviously not a truck driver, gets up from a bench and approaches me. He has a moustache like my own and the kind, thoughtful eyes of someone in his middle age who has already witnessed the pain of those he loves. He asks me if I am the professor.

Ali, the Kurdish coordinator of TDC in Dohuk, will become a close friend before my trip is over. He tells me he was prepared to wait until 9 o'clock that night, an hour after the border closes, to see if I would make it across. We get into a Land Rover flying a white flag on the front fender and begin driving down the road from Zakho, the town on the Iraqi side of the border. Next to me is a young driver, Mahmut, with a fierce, piercing glance and a short-cropped beard, carefully trimmed around his cheek bones and jaw in a style I shall come to associate with the Kurdish "peshmerga" or guerrilla fighters. He's young, speaks English, though not with ease, and will accompany me as a driver and guard throughout my travels. His gentle, soft-spoken manner contrasts completely with his fierce, dark appearance, made more militant by his grey or black trousers and shirts in the traditional Kurdish style. Behind me, in the back seat with Ali, another young guard in black shirt and trousers sits watchfully holding a kalashnikov rifle.

The Kurdistan side of the border through the outskirts of Zakho is a wasteland of jumbled concrete block sheds and houses along the side of the highway. Some have corrugated iron roofs but most are covered with a thatch of leaves or foliage that I later learn is foliage from grape vineyards. Harsh ravines and dry plateaus rush past the open truck windows as we pick up speed, then stop at military checkpoints manned by Kurdish KDP soldiers. By now the late afternoon sun fills the dry valley leading to Dohuk with deep shadows. The huge, pale mountain ranges on either side remind me of Dinosaur National Monument in Utah, not the pine and aspen covered slopes of the Rockies. Azad names them for me, the White Mountain to the northwest and the Black to the east. We drive up and around streets and down a narrow alley to the walls of the TDC building, a plaster and brick building surrounded by walls with a small guardpost at the gate leading in, manned by armed guards like Mahmut and the young peshmerga behind me.

My room has a large ceiling fan, linoleum floor, a small formica covered table, a small mattress on a firm wooden frame built into the wall, and a huge plywood closet or armoire with shelves and space to hang clothes. I feel back in graduate school again. I arrange the table and chair so I can look out a window; through the heavy branches, huge, dark green leaves, and tiny green fruit of a fig tree, I look out on

the back courtyard roof of the neighboring house. A matronly woman with many scurrying children hangs up clothes to dry by stacks of firewood, propane gas tanks, and an outdoor clay oven or incinerator.

Walking out of my room I pass through a door onto the flat roof of our building, stroll over to the small wall surrounding the edge, and look past a grape arbor on the neighboring roof toward the mountains now beginning to glow rose and purple as the sun sets toward dusk. Down in the front yard of the neighboring house a little girl of three or four runs back and forth, all dressed up in a beautiful white frock. Her black hair, cut short around her face, contrasts sharply with her pale, fair skin. Her father unrolls a white and grey rug onto the lawn and begins the prescribed prostrations and gestures of prayer, and I turn away, a bit embarrassed to be overlooking this private scene. I'm all alone, except for the guards outside the compound, and as I await Ali's return to take us to supper, I listen to the sounds of the alley outside and the houses around me as families awaken to activity in the cool of the evening. Little boys begin playing soccer in a field near the guard house. Little girls in long dresses walk down the road with their older sisters. I listen to the call for evening prayer broadcast from a loudspeaker at a mosque a few streets away. Distance mellows and smoothes the harsh electronic tone to a remote, official voice. It is now dark, and I can barely make out the small green fruit and foliage of the orange trees planted inside the surrounding wall of our compound.

Ali returns to take me out to dinner, and we drive down into Dohuk, past lots filled with deteriorated high rise buildings, formerly military housing, now occupied by homeless people tethering the goats from their villages under the windows of their apartments; others, less fortunate have pitched weathered tents in the dirt. We drive through the suq and up a dirt road away from downtown to the Dohuk Palace Hotel, a large stucco building set by itself against a hill. Grassy, spacious grounds spread in front of a building with portico, columns, arches, and balconies that remind me of an M.C. Escher drawing. Armed guards sit in the lit portico watching a huge television set facing out toward our tables; the European soccer championships are on.

Ali and I are quickly into deep conversation as skewers of grilled chicken and mutton arrive at the table with Pepsis, plates of sliced peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes. I have hardly talked to anyone since I left New York days ago. I talk about the border crossing

difficulties: what if he had not waited for me on the Iraqi side, what if I hadn't gotten the number right, what I should or should not have done. Ali asks me if I am a religious person. "I was raised a Christian, though I go to church infrequently," I reply. "I am religious," he tells me, "and from my point of view as a Muslim, your getting across the border was not so much a matter of what you did or didn't do, but a matter of Allah's will, a sign that your trip was meant to be. Allah had an intention or lesson in sending you." I tell Ali that before I came I started to read the Koran as a way to understand the people and culture I would meet in Kurdistan. I remember the verses in the first chapter about praying to Allah, the Compassionate, to guide me on the straight path, the path of those you have blessed, not those who have gone astray. So far my path to Kurdistan by air, taxi, and foot has been blocked, doubled back, and repeated itself, but I have not been astray. Alone in the darkness driving back down the hill, through the streets of shuttered shops, up and around to the streets and alleys where the TDC compounds awaits me, I feel a need for compassion, a need to seek comfort in these ancient words.

The day had begun for me in Diyarbakir uncertain whether DIA would be able to help me get across the border and ended outside on the lawn of the Dohuk Palace deep in conversation about religion, politics, families, and married life. Ali's perspective on the events of the day makes me look in them for a message or meaning rather than wonder and worry whether I could have controlled or foreseen them better. Instead of seeing in them signs of personal neglect or lack of foresight, Azad's religious perspective suggests that I interpret them like passages from sacred scripture that can be read for a sign of my mission.

I get up during the night unable to sleep. The room is hot and still. I watch the moon through the leaves of the fig tree, then go out onto the roof and lie down on a cot under the laundry lines and electrical wires. I watch wisps of cloud moving fast over the setting moon, but the rest of the sky is dense with clusters of stars, familiar constellations spinning in a black dome, Orion's belt, the Great Bear, as they call the Big Dipper, pointing to the North Star. Every few moments my eyes are involuntarily snatched from the stars by a ghostly flapping and fluttering just at the periphery of vision. Small grey bats, almost impossible to follow with the eye in their twisting and turning flights,

sweep over and around me, protecting me as much as possible from the mosquitoes buzzing uncomfortably close to my face. The faint light reflecting up from the street makes the bats look like suddenly detached pieces of sky emerging and suddenly returning back to constellations. As I lie on my back looking up they cross my field of vision, predictable yet impossible to predict, like actors weaving deliriously across the stage from one wing to another, or like subatomic particles shooting over a physicist's black plate. Occasionally a pair of bats, mating or courting, fly closely together exactly duplicating each other's erratic paths. It must be near dawn, roosters crow far down in the town, and now I hear the sound of prayer through the mosque loudspeaker.

By four o'clock the next day I am meeting my class of high school teachers in a tiny, paint-chipped classroom in Dohuk. There is a dusty blackboard and rows of wooden desks. The heat is intense. The late afternoon sun is shaded by the thick plaster walls of the school. My students have been administering tests to their students all morning long, and, before my session ends at seven P.M., the older women in class are begging me to end the session and let them return home to make supper. Everyone wants to get home before dark, when security becomes very doubtful. Mahmut, my driver and guard, accompanies me everywhere and drives me back to TDC.

In the morning one of the teachers, Hakim, tells me about the events that brought the Kurds to the attention of the world after the Gulf War. As I look out over the roof at Dohuk spreading down the valley to the south between the steep flanks of the mountains, I can picture what Hakim tells me in a quiet voice. He was in Dohuk when the uprising began. He drove his family up north out of the city, then returned alone to protect his house and see how events played out. First he heard reports on the radio. Saddam had retaken Kirkuk, then other cities. Soon artillery shells started landing in Dohuk, and then tanks and infantry entered. Most people had already started to flee out of fear from previous poison gas attacks.

Hakim and his family start fleeing toward the mountain passes to Turkey. All along the road people are dead or dying. Hakim's father collapses and starts to die in front of him at the side of the road, but, as he tries to help his father, he realizes that his sister has started to die. While the rest of the family hover around his father, Hakim tries to

carry his sister to a first aid station. Before he gets his sister to help, she dies. When he returns to his father, he is already dead.

Hakim has invited Ali and me to lunch at his house. Mahmut drives us through a neighborhood of dirt streets and small, one-story houses. I take off my shoes to enter a large room with blue plaster walls, windows along the street side, and a blue floor. The only furniture in the room is a television set on a small table. The picture tube is covered with a scarf. On the wall on either side of the set are two pictures, one, a Chinese peacock flying through a turquoise sky and the other, a formal portrait of Hakim in his graduation robes with diploma. We sit on mats placed around the other three sides of the room and rest against cushions, legs crossed, or one knee up. In the next room the voices of women busy in the kitchen. Little girls and a boy keep peeking in from the hall. Hakim calls his little daughter in to meet the guests. Nijim, "new life," is a smiling, dark-eyed three-year-old. I asked whether she had a favorite doll, and she returns in a few moments to show me a large blond doll that closes and opens her blue eyes.

Hakim's brothers come in and spread a cloth on the floor in front of us. They begin bringing in plates of food and placing them in front of us on the cloth. A huge bowl of rice and chicken; a chopped green bean, tomato, and chicken soup; olives, pickles, peppers; a bowl of chicken broth; flat bread; bowls of chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions; yogurt mixed in water with dill and chopped onions, drunk from glasses; fresh parsley. After lunch I take photographs for Hakim of all the children and the rest of his family, an extended family of brothers living with wives and children and parents in the same house, as is customary among Kurdish families.

That afternoon some of the students ask me what I will say about the Kurds when I get back to America. I had come to Kurdistan with images of turbaned tribesmen with kalashnikov rifles, but the Kurds I meet are teachers like myself, writers and poets like Hakim, university graduates like Hakim's wife and Ali's. Educated, thoughtful people trying to live as normal a life as possible under conditions that make the normal impossible. Tonight in the darkness of Dohuk Palace's courtyard, with conversations half in French, English, and Kurdish, all of us, drivers, directors, mission chiefs, and staff from TDC and Pharmacies Without Borders, share a table covered with plates of

humus, yogurt and cucumbers, olives, Scotch, and Pepsis. But out of the darkness in the town come gunshots and tracer bullets. Azad mentions that often children are injured by bullets falling back to the ground, after someone has fired off rounds in celebration. A child's skull is thinner and weaker than an adult's.

The next day Jean Luc, my French mission chief, drives me to the school. I've been pleased and honored that the students, high school teachers of English, all adults, many my age or older, have asked me to teach an extra session beyond the series of lessons I had been asked to prepare. I walk from the Jeep down steps, around buckets, drills, and ladders as construction workers put the finishing touches on a youth center TDC is opening at the school. Ali has been working feverishly, inspecting the materials, supervising the progress. I pass the students standing out on the lawn near the classrooms in small groups, chatting, as I make my way to the school office to sit with the officials, drinking tea, waiting for the students to assemble. We make polite conversation, go over the business of the day.

When Hamid, the supervisor of the teachers arrives, I put down my tea glass, get up, lead us all out the office, down a corridor, crossing outside into the sun, and enter our classroom in another building. I open my suitcase on one of the plastic chairs, get out my xerox handouts to the class, place my notebook on the chalk-covered wooden desk next to the small, freestanding blackboard. I make sure I have kept the nub of chalk from yesterday's session. The classroom filled with grown men in white shirts and Western-style trousers and women, matrons, and younger girls in various head scarfs and voluminous dresses, looks incongruously like my own Ramah primary school in 1950s dustbowl Colorado; only the basics, wooden desks in rows, plaster walls, blackboards. We have gotten to know each other over the many sessions and many conversations during breaks in the class. I have practiced their English with articles written on the Kurdish struggle I have copied from the *National Geographic* and the *New Yorker*, so they will know how some Americans already perceive them. Now I have asked them to write me their own messages to bring back to America. Hamid, Fatma, and others have written thoughtful, moving essays.

I have decided to conclude our farewell session with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. No longer just words made invisible and empty by

too much patriotic recitation, Lincoln's words in a classroom in Kurdistan have special meaning for a people who, like Americans in the 1860s are living through a civil war, remembering the dead who have fallen and are falling, asking whether a government by, for, and of the people can ever take root in this part of the world. Neither the US nor any government has been able to fully live up to the standard of democracy summarized in Lincoln's words, but they characterize the spirit of NGOs like TDC/DIA which try to rebuild community in conflicted, wounded societies.

Class comes to an end. After a short, impromptu farewell speech, I start to leave, but Hamid motions me to wait. School personnel arrive at the door with Pepsis for a final celebration. One of the women, Juwayra, produces a plate of cookies. We enjoy refreshments, and, when we finish, I step into the hallway so everyone will feel free to leave. Students here wait for their professor to leave before getting up to go out. These students, really colleagues, fellow teachers, have now become friends. I turn to shake hands with each one. Very formally, each man takes my hand, then leans forward and kisses me three times, first on one cheek, then the other, then back again. At first I'm startled, then feel honored to be accepted by these Kurdish teachers. Othman unwinds his beads from his hand, very unusual horn beads in the form of a snake, and gives them to me, a very personal gift. The women mutter goodbye but politely avoid contact, as is proper, as I say farewell.

The European soccer championship, between Spain and France, dominates the Dohuk Palace courtyard from the giant television set out on the porch. In the darkness we find cheer in the noise of the game, a delicious, oily humus, olives, bread, chicken shish kebab, washed down with Grant's whiskey, or a reasonable smuggled substitute. Tomorrow I leave Dohuk, now no longer an alien, exotic town, wasted by war and embargoes, but, after the intensity of teaching and talking far into the night with such good friends, almost my hometown in Kurdistan, where I already recognize the streets and shops and think fondly of the friendly bats of Dohuk who have kept the mosquitoes away from my face as I've slept out on the roof each night. Tomorrow I travel across Kurdistan from Dohuk to Sulaymania with Jean Luc. Not only will we wind up mountains, cross arid plains, rivers, and lakes traveling from the border near Turkey to the border

near Iran, but we must cross the ``border" between KDP and PUK factions in plenty of time to arrive before night sets in.

* * * * *

By nine o'clock in the morning staff, guards, and drivers are assembled outside our compound loading water, supplies, flak jackets, and luggage into a Toyota pickup and a Range Rover. Jean Luc, usually relaxed, soft spoken, a wry smile preceding a request or reply, has been transformed into a very serious, no-nonsense leader this morning, all business. Faraidoon and Bayan will ride in the Toyota pickup with two armed peshmerga guards; Yann, Francoise, another guard, and I will follow a few car lengths behind in the Range Rover. The barren slopes of the hills are darkened in early morning shadows, but the heat is already building. At the stop lights little boys run up to the cars with boxes of gum they want to sell us. ``Khara!" — Beat it! — the guard commands one little boy who is a bit too aggressive. We pull up to some tanks down the road, fill up with gasoline, exchange last-minute instructions, and head out of Dohuk along a highway full of people and vehicles moving in all directions and paces. Temporary sheds covered with dry grape foliage line the sides and median. Now there are cattle crossing, groups of peshmerga in baggy trousers, kalashnikovs. Old men wearing black and white checked kafirahs, small encampments of displaced villagers, cars and tents jumbled together among trees or between the desolate buildings of former Iraqi troop housing-complexes. We pass an enormous Iraqi fort and prison, brooding and ominous, tall grey walls, turrets at the corners, tiny round windows along the top of the walls. Fields of grapes stretch away from the prison — rows of what look like bushes instead of the typical vineyard of France or California.

We come to our first military checkpoint, manned by KDP peshmerga, who chat briefly and wave us through past unluckier minibuses and pickups full of civilians milling about, waiting. We pull away in convoy, driving fast, white flags flying from the fenders of the vehicles, constant hand-radio contact between the Kurdish guards in the Toyota ahead and us in the Range Rover. Jean Luc leans over to put a cassette in the player, French rhythm and blues, a kind of French Bob Dylan, and the soundtrack intensifies my fantasy of riding shotgun in an old Western, perhaps *Stagecoach*, as we make the perilous run

through hostile territory toward Sulaymania. The Wild West analogy, though a falsification and romanticization of what is after all a routine trip for my TDC colleagues, recurs to me throughout the trip; it helps me notice and sort out abrupt contrasts and juxtapositions of people, culture, and stages of society that appear around every bend of the road.

The Kurdistan I travel through today bears some resemblance to what I might have encountered traveling through the American West of the 1870s. Custer and the U.S. Cavalry have temporarily been driven out of the territory, leaving behind the remnants and wounds of the former occupying army of an industrializing nation driven by a nineteenth-century concept of Manifest Destiny. Our twentieth-century Toyotas, kalashnikovs, and cassette tapes roar past shepherd boys, village women in the fields, and old men on donkeys whose lives still follow patterns of time and necessities of life from a mesolithic agricultural way of life dating back to the Old Testament.

We're driving fast, keeping in convoy. The countryside reminds me of Grand Junction, Colorado — incredible sandstone ridges scalloped out by erosion; sparse cedars and scrub oak along the slopes. Another tan stone fortress with its turrets looms above a village. To settle this land and subdue its indigenous Kurdish people the Iraqis must set down forts and garrisons first, settlers second, and anything or anyone who stands in the way of progress toward the Greater Arab Nation must either be assimilated, placed in "relocation centers," or killed. This fort is manned by KDP fighters. We arrive at another checkpoint. Women in tribal dress, some in blue or red, almost invisible in their stillness, rest under the shade of a tree by the road. Their sons might be the peshmerga guards I spent an afternoon with last week watching Bruce Willis action movies on Kurdish TV.

We're moving up the high ridges now. Down below on the valley floor I make out the thin line of road we have come up. In the far distance I can see the mountain gateway into Dohuk, the slopes of the Black Mountain and White, already hazy blue in the dusty, sunbaked air. Everything is big sweeping vistas now, hair-pin curves, switchbacks. Little boys have placed stones across the road to slow the trucks. As we approach they scurry out to move some stone away. Do they expect a tip? Others show their daring by leaning out into our oncoming path, then dodging back at the last minute. Passing trucks and cars must

break the monotony of watching the goats cropping grass among the rocks all day long. Ridge after ridge of mountains march toward the horizon.

Now we've descended again. We pass small villages on the sides of hills, all one or two room houses, stone from the hills and fields themselves, thatched with stone or sod. Always they are close to a river bottom, startlingly lush and green against the baked, barren hills, each square inch of river bottom divided into irrigated fields, often planted in rice, with flocks of ducks and geese on the dikes. Along the side of the road I see thistles, a wild hollyhock, a dead snake in the road. Suddenly outlined against a ridge of saw-toothed mountains yet another battered military fort, a sinister and deserted-looking trapezoid with only two diagonal turrets, dominating the road and the pass over this range of mountains we're traveling. Another village; someone is building a house, stone walls, poplar poles laid end to end to support sheets of tin or thatch. Another fort with its turrets, loop-holes, small windows. Another stop at a military checkpoint. As we climb back up the ridges, down on a valley floor I see a huge tent camp spreading for a mile or so along the river banks. Little boys stand on the side of the road holding out objects for sale, bunches of carrots, fresh chickpeas, shepherds' crooks. Every few miles, on every available hill, a former Iraqi garrison fortress.

Observing the rapidly passing scenes through the windshield of the truck puts me in a detached, analytic mood. I scan the surroundings like a primitive hunter and gatherer, not for food, but for new experiences to encounter and understand. My mind wanders to how, as an American academician traveling through Kurdistan, I cannot help but apply the techniques of research and hermeneutics I've acquired in earlier years as a research scholar in university libraries to the entirely different "text" of a foreign culture. My literary training has conditioned me to search the appearance of events or places not for a single underlying pattern or structure, but several co-existing patterns and stages of development interacting with one another; conflict often arises from the interaction of cultures or people at different stages of development forced to share the same space or moment in history. Consequently both ancient and post-industrialist societies alike in our world are both under stress.

To work for an NGO a person needs a number of apparently

contradictory qualities, which the study of literature teaches us – both compassion and detachment, both the ability to respond deeply but also withhold or delay that response in order to understand the situation or person better. One needs historical perspective, the teacher's ability to cross barriers of age or culture to relate to his or her students, the ability to adapt to other people and situations one is not used to. Otherwise you may only encounter another people or another society in a superficial, one-dimensional way – as merely a tourist, or a soldier. Of course, the roles are not mutually exclusive in those colleagues I find here in Kurdistan. The soldiers are also teachers and writers, and, as an NGO teacher myself, I often live like a soldier and gaze in wonder like a tourist.

Now a high-plains area, stretching wheat fields, just coming into harvest. One story tan, stucco, cinderblock buildings, some long-walled sheep corrals. We're back in a mesolithic village of tents, herds of sheep, small irrigated fields, women and girls in long black dresses wading through the water, bending in a crooked line as they weed the paddies, small donkeys, a tiny white-washed mosque with painted trim, green and blue along the walls, arches, and windows. Scarcely any dogs; some cats. A scattering of color at the dun edge of a wheat field; some red and blue dresses among a staggered black line of women harvesting by hand. Little boys along the road eating green chickpeas off the plants they've just pulled up out of the field.

We slow down. Flocks of geese cross the road. An encampment of black tent nomads. Flocks of sheep crowding over the highway or resting in the shadows of ravines. A young woman in tribal head scarf and long black dress with her husband herding the sheep away from our passing cars might be looking at us out of the Old Testament. The dry heat like a furnace rolls through our open car windows. Someone passes up a plastic bottle of water from the back. This land is the Fiery Furnace where the Children of God are burned but not annihilated. The children seem neither young, nor old, but ageless, as if their rural existence tied to the cycle of the seasons is atemporal, a repetition that erases the distinction of past or future. These traditional people have survived the interventions of armies, men on horseback, and pickup trucks, while the cycle of their existence continues. Their time cannot always co-exist with the time of the Nation State that demands progress and uniformity or annihilation. They exist at the mercy of an army that

hovers at their borders like a sword of Damocles. Inside our Toyota time is linear, relentless, passing, irrecoverable.

Occasionally a stork wheels high in the sky where I would ordinarily expect to see vultures in the updrafts of the American or Mexican plains. Nowhere do I see the raven suddenly slanting across a field and clattering to rest in a tree. We're passing through eroded, arid hills that resemble sand dunes swept and sculpted by the wind. Geologic forces have folded and faulted the land into huge ridges of sandstone eroded out of the rocky soil in long, slanting shelves. Certain slopes, pitted with caves, look black with shale or coal, ocher with iron oxide. Tucked within this geology of oil are green river bottoms with checkered fields and dense stands of poplars, cultivated for use in constructing village houses. The village appears around the bend. Little girls in long dresses hold out bowls of apricots, bags of apples, as we pass. The blue mountain ranges on the horizon have been violently uplifted, then eroded down until they resemble sharpened knife blades buried hilt down in the sand.

We're at the confluence of two rivers. Our lead pickup pulls over suddenly and stops, the driver comes back to talk to Jean Luc. They are hearing reports over the hand-radios that there is shooting in the frontier area just ahead of us that separates the KDP and PUK peshmerga factions. We drive on a little further to a Kurdish checkpoint and stop by a barrier flying a yellow and green flag. The soldiers wave us through cautiously. Jean Luc doesn't take his eyes off the road as he keeps up a conversation on the hand-radio with the guards in the pickup ahead. For the moment we seem completely alone climbing a winding road in the middle of nowhere surrounded in all directions by a sky burning white in the glare of midday sun. I think of Jean Luc's remarks a few days earlier that you have to stay absolutely neutral politically in your dealings with the factions if you want to operate as an NGO. I wonder if the white flags flying on our fenders will confer a certain immunity from violence on us. A pickup passes us from behind, the men in cummerbunds and loose blouses waving us back; we pull over and stop, then proceed. Our white flags are a safe conduct through the lines.

As we grind our way up the mountain switchbacks, pickups full of armed men and boys are coming down past us from over the top of the pass. We pass another car like our own flying white flags. More

pickups with guns mounted on the cab, trucks full of men, jeeps. Off in a field to the right I see smoke as if the wheat is on fire. Up at the summit we drive slowly past a fort and military encampment. The rumor over the radios is that KDP soldiers have attacked a PUK village. We come up fast on a pickup, pull out into the other lane, and pass. The men in the truck are holding tires, chairs, kitchen utensils in their laps. We're passing piles of carpets, brass lamps, TV's, furniture on the side of the road. Groups of soldiers stand around waiting for a taxi or pickup to transport some poor family's looted belongings back to their camp. Some soldiers are filing into the backs of trucks and buses to move to the conflict. Coming back down the road someone is waving a rifle as if intoxicated or exalted with the momentary feeling of having won the big game. I'm taking photographs through the windshield of the Range Rover as we slip past the groups of soldiers caught up in their own world for the moment, ignoring us after a quick glance at our white flags and the logos on the vehicle doors proclaiming our neutrality.

We have to detour around this conflict by turning off the main road onto a single-lane dirt road past purple thistles, white hollyhocks, and ``reels," wild oleander growing wherever there are wetlands — clusters of pink blossoms against dark, glossy leaves — and stop at a crude checkpoint, rocks laid across the road. Jean Luc and the guards in the pickup ahead talk to the peshmerga soldiers at the barricade. We wait; the sun beats down on the cab of the Range Rover. Little boys have come up to the side of the road from a few stone houses on the other side of the small river that runs along the road. They dare each other to get closer to our vehicles. Like most combatants I've seen so far, the young men in cummerbunds, baggy brown trousers, and kalashnikov rifles looking us over appear bored, tired, and dusty. I make eye contact with a rumpled, pleasant looking peshmerga boy, open the car door, and step out to stretch my legs. I tell the soldiers I'm an American professor come to teach English. The boy speaks English: ``America good. Democracy good. Germany, France, America. Democracy." We smile and shake hands all around.

The boy speaks tells me that he had been studying at the university at Mosul before the war broke out. I tell him I hope he'll be able to resume his studies again, but, looking resigned and noncommittal, he doesn't reply. He invites me into the tent next to the road where they

are quartered and offers me a Pepsi, water, and a cigarette. We sit and make conversation in simple English phrases. For a moment I've brought back memories of an earlier time, carrying books, being a student, that must seem very unreal at this moment inside a guard tent smelling of hot canvas and cigarette smoke, canisters of ammunition, bags of rice. His blond, smaller friend with a sad face has sat down on a bunk bed with his rifle between his knees. Francoise, the French midwife, and Bayan have joined us from the Range Rover while Jean Luc awaits radio reports from ahead on the road. Bayan is a city woman and university graduate with a keen analytic mind. She looks at me as if I'm very naive striking up a conversation with these country rednecks in uniform out here in the middle of no man's land.

Taped on the inside of the tent is a photograph of the local warlord and a poster commemorating the execution of a beautiful young university student, a woman, Laila, arrested by Iraqi police in Kirkut in 1974 for her political activity. In one corner she looks out at us from her student ID photograph. Below, the poster artist has told the rest of her story with two black silhouetted scenes that to me convey the starkness of sacrifice more emotionally than a photograph of the actual event. In one the Iraqi gallows stands open, an efficiently designed machine looking a little like a construction crane, while a soldier with a rifle prods along a woman in a long dress and kerchief, her hands tied behind her, her head bowed to look down on the steps she mounts. In the next she sways from the gallows, her full skirt riding the air, her head gently bowed, as if consenting to her martyrdom. I ask the Kurdish soldiers if I can take a photograph. At first they say no; then, after removing the photograph of the clan leader, they let me take the shot.

Outside the tent the day is even hotter. I walk across the road and wash my face and hands in the river. Little boys are swimming next to the bank. Frogs leap into the water, minnows swarm, as I pick my way along stones of a country creek that again reminds me of childhood days in Ramah, Colorado. A little girl — already a miniature adult village woman at six or seven — hops from stone to stone to cross the creek balancing a pail of bread and food for her brothers in the tent up on the road I've just left. Most of the village women wear black, but a few, like this little girl, wear red dresses, full length to her hands and bare feet, trousers underneath covering her ankles, a black headcover

extending over her shoulders.

Finally we receive permission to proceed. A few miles later we reach a more official checkpoint, the de facto "border" crossing between territory controlled by the KDP and that controlled by the PUK, a heavily guarded gap in a stone wall cut by the road. It's two o'clock in the afternoon; we've been on the road for five hours. We drive through one of Saddam's resettlement camps, cinder block houses without mortar, desolate. Ahead of us a big lake or reservoir shimmers in the heat; its turquoise hue looks unreal. In the heat out here anything could be a mirage. The nomads have pitched circular, brown tents out in the stubble of the harvested fields. Suddenly as we pass rice fields, I see water buffalo immersed in water up to their backs and horns. The land away from the river is lunar, gray, smoothed by erosion. We stop at another checkpoint before crossing a bridge.

Around three we pull over at an open-air restaurant. A bowl of water mixed with yogurt and ice is wonderfully refreshing. I'm sick of sweet drinks, tea or Pepsis. The owner is keeping two white doves in a cage, a tame quail in another. He brings out rice with raisins, a tomato and bean soup. Back on the road I'm playing a Jackson Browne album from the '70s: "I was lying in a burned out basement with the full moon in my eyes, hoping for a replacement when the sun burst through the skies." A jagged mountain rises up ahead of us very blue in the late afternoon haze. We are near Sulaymania now. One of the guards tells me the mountain is named Sarah. Checkpoints, resettlement ghettos, men walking with kalashnikovs along the side of the highway. I see what looks like the ruins of a very ancient fortress on top of a hill across the river.

Now the late afternoon sun is turning the mountains into huge gray blades of stone jutting into the air. The villages are almost invisible, lost in big, empty valleys; only a few horizontal shadows mark them off against the earth from which their stone walls have been taken. Sunflowers planted in the fields. A gigantic, grey Iraqi army fortress, backdropped by grey mountains, stands all alone in the empty plains. We pass a large artillery gun being carried in the bed of a truck. "Doctor, my eyes can't see the sky. Is this the price for having learned how not to cry?" Jackson Browne sings. A cement plant off to the right. Sulaymania ahead, a city on the plain. The Assyrians, Alexander the Great, and many others before him and after, have passed this way

before. The outskirts of town are the usual pre-fab concrete military housing, now occupied by refugees displaced by a genocidal campaign to destroy systematically the villages and people close to Saddam's Iranian enemy. Among the buildings deteriorating in the sun, shanties, tents, goats, patient sheep, old men, and children crowd up against the walls.

We pull up to TDC headquarters in Sulaymania. Jean Luc's Kurdish sheep dog, Lola, runs out to us and jumps into the Land Rover with us. Less than a year old, she looks like a large German shepherd with a curled, bushy tail. There is staff to meet. Knowing my love for watermelon above all other sources for quenching thirst, Françoise is kind enough to tell me there is some cut up already in the refrigerator. Lola may still smell traces of my own golden retrievers on my boots. She sniffs them very thoroughly, and, when I sit down, rubs her flanks and back against the foot of my crossed leg. Now she rolls over on her side, reaches up from underneath and begins chewing and mouthing the sole of my boot. I begin teaching her simple commands by taking a piece of watermelon out of my mouth, walking off, then calling to her, "Come!" The happy omnivore eats the watermelon with no hesitation. Many of the staff are indifferent, hostile, or afraid of Lola, who is considered an unclean, forbidden animal by many Muslims. The Kurdish cook has learned to love her, however, much to his credit and her benefit.

This morning I'm sick, listless, but I keep it a secret from everyone but Lola. I accompany Bayan, Faraidoon's wife, out to Qardagh, a village outside of Sulaymania being rebuilt in an area previously targeted by Saddam for complete depopulation in the "anfal," the genocidal campaign involving even poison gas, of 1986. The countryside is the same steep hills, dry sandstone cliffs, and winding roads I'm familiar with from the drive from Dohuk to Sulaymania. Farmers are threshing their wheat right on the asphalt surface of the road. We slow down and drive cautiously around the sheaves. It is hard to picture villages in huge, dry valleys and steep ridges of sand and limestone.

The Iraqi government declared this a military area, moved women and children to "collective towns," detained and "disappeared" men and boys, poisoned wells, and dynamited the houses. There are stories about mass graves in Hafer Albatan, a place in southern Iraq near the

Saudi border. You could not escape by leaving your village for the city; the police know the identity of each and every person in a city neighborhood, and you could not find or forge identity papers. In the euphemistically named "collective towns" you see only very old men, children, and many, many women. They cannot remarry because their husbands have "disappeared," but cannot be proved dead. Some children, some say, were just taken by the Iraqis; some sold in Kuwait and the Gulf States. There is no closure for anyone's life, just a feeling of suspense as the genocide has been arrested for the moment, but may resume again.

As I listen to Bayan explaining the TDC project in the village, she realizes I'm sick. I have to lie down. In a few moments we're retracing the country roads back to our headquarters in Sulaymania. It feels like the result of bad water. I lie down and sleep from midday through an evening and night until eight o'clock the next morning. I remember friends and staff coming up frequently to ask if I want anything or offer water or food. I remember Lola jumping on the bed, standing over me, and licking my face. Now the fever has broken, the nausea gone, and I'm feeling weak but normal again. I don't want to think about what my doctor might say about the medicine I took, but at least it worked fast. Amoebas, adios. I sit downstairs and copy my Kurdish students' essays into my journal in case they need disguising as personal journal rather than political essays to get past the Turkish checkpoints in a few days. Tomorrow I must leave Sulaymania to return to Dohuk and then — homeward bound through Zahko, Diyarbakir, and Istanbul.

I shall miss the long conversations with writers, archaeologists, artists, and others whom Faraidoon has arranged for me to meet. Most I shall miss his analysis of the educational system, philosophy of teaching, and analysis of the conflicts which create the needs that he and the other staff at TDC are trying to fulfill. I feel humbled to have so many hopes for rebuilding lives placed in the hands of teachers like myself. The teachers I meet understand the political conflicts around them with a mentality completely different from the tribalistic thinking of their leadership, who draw their strength from the displaced villagers more than the urban intellectuals and students. Earlier I had gotten out of bed to meet with an official from the PUK, who had "requested" an interview, under the impression I was the same person as an

American journalist who had passed through the city a few days earlier. He had lived in California for many years and knew how Americans think. I had been impressed by how much everything and everyone was known in Sulaymania to all authorities. I wasn't surprised when a UN person told me that anything said or done was quickly reported to any of a number of security agencies operating everywhere, including the Iraqi.

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I say good-bye to Sulaymania. Jean Luc, Saran, our driver, an older peshmerga guard, and I are passing once again what I call the ``blade" mountain outside Sulaymania. The Toyota pickup leads the way in convoy again, flags flying. In the early morning flocks of geese and ducks start across the road in straggly lines, flocks of sheep spill over from the hills. I notice a big stork riding the thermals, two others perch on a power pylon, and – quite unexpectedly – a fourth lifts off from the ground with clumsy, slow wing beats as we pass. We're climbing the side of a layered, tilted ridge, looking down into the dry valley below. The logic of the landscape is dictated by the harder limestone or sandstone ridge with softer layers, often shale, between them, eroding, shifting, sliding. We ride the switchbacks down the other side of the ridges into an ancient town, Kuya, in a broad, flat valley. Cypress trees, olives, pines, ancient mud brick walls, an old fortress on a hill. It is difficult to distinguish ancient ruins from modern walls among the low, flat roofed, one-story houses stacked on top of each other in tiers up the hills. Men with rifles in dark brown peshmerga attire; crowds of women in black dresses.

Today we are skirting the area of fighting we drove through a few days earlier by driving further south almost to Erbil. Toyota pickups are everywhere; one passes us loaded down with truck tires. Against a red hillside a black tent, sides rolled up for ventilation. Women in black. An old man walking with a huge bundle on his back. Donkeys with red and black wool saddle blankets. A young girl pulls her tan head covering back from her face. Our first checkpoint, like a construction site full of sandbags. Soldiers patrolling.

Now we've passed the ``border" from PUK territory to KDP country. Way up on a hill on the horizon is the KDP leader Barzani's house, a large gray structure surrounded by a wall that I first mistake

for one of the ubiquitous Iraqi fortresses. We stop in the next town, Sulachkim. One of the vehicles is overheating; water boils and steams from the radiator before we get parked off the street. We have lunch while the drivers work on the Toyota. At last I discover that "lady fingers," as my French friends call them, are okra. Jean Luc and I say goodbye. He'll return to Sulaymania and send me along with a guard and Saran driving. It is hard to say goodbye to someone I've come to respect and like so much over the last few weeks. Here on an NGO project the sense of mission and the intense conditions forge friendships that in normal conditions might take years of acquaintance. Jean Luc gives me some last words of advice, some personal letters to friends in France to be mailed after I get back, money and documents for other TDC staff in Dohuk and Diyarbakir, and we shake hands farewell.

Saran with his professional, almost military manner, muscular build, and serious driving inspires complete confidence as I set out into the hills again, chasing the afternoon sun toward Dohuk. A little girl helping her brother herd sheep. Long blue-green print dress, cotton trousers, bare feet. A cemetery outside a village on a rocky hillside. Tall, thin stones at the foot and head of the graves, tilted, hard to see against the other stones of the ground itself. Smaller stones under two huge old trees with lopped branches. By now, two o'clock in the afternoon, the drinking water in my bottle is warm enough for a teabag, unappetizing. We're coming to a river, incredibly blue as it flows between hills yellowed by the descending sun. The sky is cloudless. The mountain ridge against the horizon looks like an open mouth about to take a bite out of the sky.

We're playing Joan Baez on the cassette player now, and "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz" makes me homesick for my wife. Out to the right, cliffs with houses built into caves. More small cemeteries, the graves laid in the direction of Mecca, Saran tells me. Off in the distance farmers are throwing huge forkfuls of wheat into the air to let the wind blow the chaff away in long, smoky-looking puffs. White tent nomads with a herd of sheep, their tents pitched in a field next to the road with big cargo trucks going by. Did William Henry Jackson see a similar juxtaposition of tribal and urbanized culture in Wyoming in 1896? Then, too, frontier forts dominated the settlements, and remnants of tribal people, some still nomads, pitched tents near towns

and railtracks. Manifest Destiny is transformed into an historical determinism that seems obligated to repeat the crimes as well as the stages of development of earlier national states. Faraidoon calls this "old thinking," his most severe criticism of political problems in Kurdistan.

A large jay, striking with blue and black wings, flies across the road. Now what looks like chaos, a moment of dread for me, as we get close to the outskirts of Dohuk. At first I think it is factional fighting again, but it is only a wedding party. Taxis, pickups, buses, trucks full of young people hanging out the windows, sitting on the roofs, waving scarves, weaving in and out of traffic and across the lanes. Saran drives ahead steadily, and, as we pass through the wedding party, I realize that this is a rare occasion for these young men and girls to flirt and show off to each other.

I feel as if I am coming back to a home rather than an office as I unpack in the upstairs bedroom at the TDC headquarters and walk out onto the roof to look over the neighborhood of Dohuk spread out below. Dohuk is a small town, not a city like Sulaymania. Everything is more traditional, less developed. No air conditioning here; toilet paper only for Europeans and Americans. As we unload the Range Rover, Azad has welcome news for me. We're on our way to Amadia, an old city with walls and fortress from Roman times through Byzantine to Muslim. It's late in the afternoon. We'll only have a few minutes of twilight, but Azad knows how much I love the traces of ancient civilizations to be found everywhere in Kurdistan. The archaeological sites, ranging from Neanderthal caves to the ruins of Ninevah are being looted by soldiers, officials, anyone who needs to raise cash quickly. An archaeologist in Sulaymania pleaded with me to tell the outside world that not just Kurdistan's past but the world's heritage is rapidly disappearing at the hands of looters. We drive through Barushkia, a northern slum growing out of control along the road north of Dohuk. We wind over hills toward a range of mountains, now remote and mysterious in a setting sun that leaves some things in dark shadow and others bathed in golden light. We drive by a casualty of war, a resort town in the mountains, its replicas of Swiss chalets ruined, shelled, occupied by refugee families.

Mountain ranges converge from all directions now. I follow the ridge of one range until I see a building rising up from Mount Gara,

the highest point in Kurdistan. Here Saddam had built a palace for himself, like Hitler's Bavarian Eagle's Nest, one of two enormous palaces I'll pass between Dohuk and Amadia this last evening in Dohuk. Saddam's palace wall snakes for miles along the highway and over the hills like a sinister Great Wall of China. We drive into the palace grounds at Ashawa, the palace, aside from Dracula's fortress on the top of the mountain, is not just one palace, but several, connected by canals, artificial waterfalls, miles of roads, and garrison buildings for the guards. These have been exploded and toppled; only the palace itself still stands, stripped of its marble facing, windows out, wiring gone, occupied by squatters. Already it looks like the ruins of Shelley's "Ozymandias" or the desert scene in Yeats's "The Second Coming." Hitler, defeated by the Allies, lost his mountain hideaway, now beautifully preserved as a monument to his folly and cruelty as the man who brought the techniques of industrialized production to the Holocaust. The Iraqi Hitler has been defeated by the Allies, too, who have inexcusably left him in power. What will he do to avenge the sacking and looting of his palaces when NATO relaxes its attention and allows him to reoccupy Kurdistan? The Kurds are living under the sword of Damocles. The last chapter of the campaign of genocide against them remains to be written.