Refuge

Stories of Survival & Escape

The Migrant English Project at The Cowley Club

Queen Spark Books

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at
The Cowley Club

QueenSpark Publishers

Contents

The names or initials of some of the contributors have been changed.

First Published 2007

QueenSpark Publishers is a non-profit community publishing and writing organisation which, for over thirty years, has helped the people of Brighton & Hove tell their stories.

Find out more about QueenSpark at **www.queensparkbooks.org.uk**

QueenSpark Publishers, 49 Grand Parade, Brighton, BN2 9QA
Tel. 01273 571710

ISBN 0-904733-77-7

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Edited and designed by Peter Oakes

Introduction

Every Monday, for the last few months, I've spent the afternoons at The Cowley Club on Brighton's London Road. On Mondays this place is an open house for the migrant population of the city - those who have come to Brighton for whatever reason and who need support and need to learn English. These are people who are seeking asylum; refugees for whom going 'home' would pose a serious threat to their safety. There are a thousand reasons why these people are here and a thousand stories behind their journeys.

It's a hive of activity here. It's warm. There is the smell of cooking... rice, vegetables, bread. Cartons of fruit juice sit on the bar next to a plate of biscuits and bowls of fruit. Behind the bar is an urn that has a stream of people coming to it for cups of tea. Tables are crammed with students and volunteer teachers, their heads bowed over text books and there's a constant buzz of tongues as different voices try out unfamiliar phrases.

A small woman says, slowly and carefully, 'My name is Elena. I come from Chile. A long time ago.'

A tall man says, 'My wife is an undergraduate. She does the laundry in a care home. Her English is not good enough to finish her studies.'

A young man barely out of his teens says, 'I don't want to think about my parents. It is too sad.'

They come from all over: Iran, The Congo, The Sudan, Chile, Kurdistan, The Yemen, Belgium, Ethiopia.

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Originally the idea for this project was to make the telling of their stories for QueenSpark a part of the student's English tuition. Writing down their experiences would, we thought, be good practice. However, it soon became clear that this was not an option. Often their memories were very painful, and expecting someone to struggle to do this in a new language in order to be 'heard' seemed wrong. So, it became a question of interviewing each person who wished to participate in the project. Over the

course of a few weeks, I listened, asked questions and transcribed as their tales unfolded.

Understandably, many people were suspicious. Who was this person wanting to ask questions? Was it a trick, even? Would it jeopardise their stay in the UK? But slowly, over the weeks, their suspicions subsided and more and more people came forward to tell their stories.

Exiled journalists and displaced teachers, a lorry driver accused of smuggling tobacco, a young Kurd displaced for his own safety, an exiled Iranian poet, an abused Congolese lady, an industrialist and two young women from Ethiopia whose only crime seemed to be being born into the wrong tribe - these are just a few of the extraordinary people I have talked to over the last few months. And these are just the tip of an iceberg.

It has been an incredible journey for me personally. I'd like to thank John Riches of QueenSpark for giving me this opportunity. It must be one of the best things I have ever done. Thank you too, to all the friends I've made at The Cowley Club.

I have met some extraordinary people; people who have gone out of their way to make me welcome in a way that, sadly, we Brits seldom do.

I was asked, 'How do we learn your language if people will not talk to us every day, in shops, in the street, at bus stops?'

How indeed.

Vanessa Gebbie
www.vanessagebbie.com

The Migrant English Project at The Cowley Club

Paolo Boldrini and Solveig Carlson

The Cowley Club was named after the renowned Brighton activist Harry Cowley. Born in the 1890s, Harry Cowley was a soldier, a chimney sweep, a market trader and Brighton's most celebrated and charismatic radical. He devoted most of his life to the defence of the oppressed and fighting for the rights of workers, squatters and pensioners and, in the thirties, he took on Mosley's fascists.

The club itself grew out of a group involved in anarchist and grass-roots politics that had been organizing squatted social centres. Brighton was becoming increasingly gentrified; squatting was getting a lot harder and the group decided to establish a permanent and secure base. After a long and complicated process of obtaining funds, finding a building, planning and organization, the doors of The Cowley Club finally opened in 2003.

The Club is a base for all sorts of community action, self-organisation and empowerment and hosts groups active in areas such as anti-GM crops, allotments, animal rights, health, feminism and the anti-war movement and, in more recent times, has expanded to include a kids club, set up as a centre for childcare and home schooling.

There is also a café that provides cheap vegan food, a radical bookshop and, in the evenings, a bar, all of which generate an essential contribution towards costs.

The Project

The Migrant English Project (MEP) was started by about six of us who wanted to campaign on the politics of state borders and migration issues at a time when the government and the Home Office were cracking

down on migrants. In addition to campaigning, we also wanted to help migrants in more direct practical terms. In both the UK and Europe there is a major problem with migrants becoming isolated. One of the biggest restrictions placed on migrants by the government is that of not being able to work. They are unable to gain experience and, even when they have refugee status, they don't have an understanding of how to deal with the job-seeking environment. We realized that, for a migrant, learning the language of the host country is the most important step towards finding their feet in a new environment. As the Cowley Club was closed on Mondays, it proved to be the ideal place to hold English classes.

Nowadays the need for support in language learning is about to increase. At the moment, in the UK, colleges are still offering free ESOL classes to asylum seekers and refugees, but that is set to change. As part of the government's new asylum policy, which seems to be being framed as a deterrent, the funding for these classes will, from August 2007, be scrapped.

We advertised on our own website **www.cowleyclub.org.uk**, through the Sussex Community Internet Project, in Refugee Week, at the volunteer centre and at TEFL courses, and teachers soon started to contact us. For many of the teachers it was a fantastic opportunity to gain experience and, as always at the Cowley Club, there were people turning up at the door and offering to help in the café or with teaching or the cooking.

We produced a leaflet and had it translated into about ten languages. We distributed it to solicitors and local community organizations. We established relationships with the universities and colleges like BHASVIC and City College. We also had people referred to us from advice and mentoring projects for refugees and asylum seekers. Before long we had a huge network of friends and contacts.

The Students

On an average Monday at the MEP there'll be about thirty students with ten or twelve volunteer tutors. There are as many people as there are chairs, and we're beginning to run out of space. Amongst the students there'll be anything up to a dozen nationalities. Some, like the

Iranians, have been around for a long time, as Brighton used to be a dispersal area for Iranian asylum seekers; others have arrived much more recently.

Brighton is no longer a dispersal area like London, Manchester or Glasgow and the asylum seekers who come here now, are mainly those who aren't happy with the accommodation allocated to them by the Home Office, and who have chosen to come down here and stay with friends. The population at the MEP still reflects what is going on in the wider world and at the moment we've got quite a few people coming from Ethiopia through a United Nations project called the Gateway Protection Programme and also refugees from Iraq and Darfur.

It might be thought that there would be difficulties having to accommodate people that come from such a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, but it has never presented a problem. We have found that all that is needed is respect and consideration; beyond that, we have never had to be anything other than ourselves.

Migrant Rights

We offer support, advice and information for people going through the Asylum process in a relaxed, safe and unthreatening environment. The teachers, in particular, build close and trusting relationships with individual students and are able to give them a great deal of personal encouragement.

The origins of the MEP were political and it has always worked on asylum cases and anti-deportation campaigns. We have, on at least one occasion, been able to prevent the deportation of one our students. It is clear is that migration is not getting any easier. We are seeing the development of a fortress Europe mentality, with the closing of borders outside Europe, the opening of borders within it, and the unification of migration policies. As a response to this, and as the English classes and social club were taking centre stage in the project, we decided to maintain the MEP's political edge by starting a separate campaigning group called No Borders.

Independence and Success

The success and growth of the project has been astounding. There are projects that are similar to MEP, but what makes it almost unique in Europe is that it is completely independent and wholly run by volunteers.

The MEP's independence is possibly its greatest strength. and we are very careful to avoid doing anything that would compromise our freedom of action. We have no connections with the church or any government agencies and have, in the past, rejected funding because we felt it would place limitations and obligations on us. Our independence is vitally important, as it is one of the main reasons that the people who come here feel they can place absolute trust in us.

What is amazing, is how naturally the MEP developed beyond being just a place for teaching English, how it became a social club, a place where people are brought together and a place where so much has been done to break down the isolation that is felt by many refugees and asylum seekers.

Of course, the success of the MEP has brought its problems, mainly because it has become so big. Lack of space and the logistics of organizing a large number of volunteers can make life a little complicated. But, measured against what has been achieved, these problems are trivial.

The Future

There are lots of areas in which we would like to see the work of the MEP develop. There are, for instance, a growing number of women with literacy problems amongst the migrant population; women who have found themselves isolated at home, looking after children and unable to get any assistance. This is a group we would particularly like to reach. We also want to give people the opportunity to get out and about more. We think it would be helpful and also a great deal of fun to arrange trips and days out for students at the project.

The line between tutors and students is already starting to blur, as some students are now going on to give tuition and others are assisting in administration. In the long term we would like to move away from being a service that just hands down teaching to the students and reach a point where the project is run wholly or in part by the students themselves.

Thanks

It would be difficult and probably wrong to single out and thank any individual in what has been such a collective enterprise. A huge number of people have contributed and put their energy and time into running the project, and we'd like to thank them all.

For us it's been a remarkable journey. We've learnt a great deal about the world of migration and the asylum system and it's been good to know that we have been able to make a difference, however slight. But the best thing of all, has been getting to meet so many extraordinary people, learning about their cultures and hearing their stories.

M.M.

I am from the Congo. I came to Britain on the 25th February 2002. The events that brought me here took place only eleven days before I arrived. They happened in a very short space of time, and they tore apart the life I had been living and destroyed any peace I had ever had.

To tell the full story, I need to go back to 2001, when I was living in the suburbs of Kinshasa with my second husband and three of my five children from my first marriage: two grown sons, and my eldest daughter. My eldest daughter has suffered from diabetes and poor health since birth and has always needed special care and attention; her sisters had, by this time, already left Kinshasa and were living in London. Their father, my first husband, had died some years before.

I met my second husband when he was a travelling salesman, dealing in wholesale foodstuffs: manioc, maize and sheep and goat meat. I was one of his customers. He is a good kind man. He had no children of his own and it was not long before we were thinking about perhaps having a child together.

One day some soldiers came to our door and demanded that we give them supplies. This was not a commercial transaction. 'We are here to protect you,' they said, 'and we need to be fed...' and with that, they took everything they wanted.

We knew this raid was only the beginning of our harassment, the soldiers would be back again and again. The only thing to do was to leave Kinshasa and get as far away from their attentions as possible. Some distance from the city there was a community in a valley, a beautiful place, a place where you could choose where you wanted to live, and settle there. We built ourselves a traditional two-roomed house out of wood planking filled and lined with mud. We moved in and found life very pleasant in the valley. Most days I went to church. I sang in the choir and, when my husband was out at work, I went to choir practice with my daughter.

There was, at that time, a strange man who used to hang around the church. He was, we thought, a madman, but the church was good to

him and fed and looked after him, but he always made me feel a little afraid.

One day, walking home from choir practice with my daughter, I realised that the madman was following us. He kept up with us until we had nearly reached home, and then he stopped me.

'Mama, I want to talk to you,' he said.

It is not unusual, in my country, to be called Mama or Papa by a stranger; these are just terms of respect that are used for older people. But I didn't want to speak to this madman. I tried to shoo him away, but he wouldn't go.

'Mama, I want to talk to you,' he said again.

And then, 'Mama, I am not mad,'

This made me stop and listen.

'I am not mad, Mama,' he continued, 'I am only pretending to be mad for my own safety.'

I asked him why, and he told me his story. He had, he said, been one of President Kabila's bodyguards at the time the president was assassinated and, although he had been on duty in the presidential building on that day, he wasn't present at the time of the shooting. He had no idea who had done it. He didn't hear anything; whoever the assassin or assassins had been, they had used a silenced gun and made a very quick escape.

The man and his fellow bodyguards were all very frightened. It was inevitable that they themselves would be arrested and accused of the assassination and so they all fled. The only way he could survive, he said, was to pretend to be out of his mind and to rely on the church to look after him; then no one would ask questions.

'But why tell me this?' I asked, and he replied,

'Because I have often seen you in church Mama, and I wondered if I could stay with you.'

I thought about this for a while and then told him that he must go away, for the time being at least. I said I would speak to my husband when he came home. I then left the man and went indoors with my daughter.

The man didn't go away. He just stayed, crouched down on the ground outside my house. When my husband returned, he wanted to know who the strange man was. I explained what had happened and how the man had asked for our help. My husband went out and spoke to

him and heard the story for himself. In the course of their conversation my husband discovered that the man came from the same region as himself, a place called Kasai.

Later we discussed the situation and decided to take the man in and give him protection. He was more or less the same age as my sons and I reasoned that, if he had been my son and was asking for help, I would hope that someone would be kind to him.

This was in August of 2001and, as my husband was planning to go to Kasai in December, he thought that he could take the man with him and help him escape. But my husband's travel was delayed and the man ended up staying with us for six months.

Then, at about two or three in the morning on the 14th February 2002, we were woken by the sound of banging at the door.

'Who is it?' my husband shouted.

'Open up!' a voice shouted back.

'Who is it?' my husband said again.

'Open the door and you'll see who it is.'

I had a very bad feeling about all this, and I pushed my daughter under the bed and told her to stay quiet. We had no electricity in the house and it was very dark. With our guest and myself standing behind him, my husband finally opened the door, .

Outside were five soldiers. It was obvious from their clothes that they were military men. They wore hoods and, underneath these hoods, their faces were covered; only their eyes and mouths were visible. They shone torches into our faces and, as soon as they saw our guest, they said, 'That's him.'

'What have I done?' the man asked.

They didn't answer him except to say, 'Be quiet. You'll see...'

Then my husband said, 'Who are you looking for?'

'You'll see,' they said.

Then they turned on my husband and said, '*You*... you've been encouraging others to do bad things.' Someone, we had no idea who, had been informing on us.

Then, with no warning, there was a shot and our guest fell dead. With no more ado, my husband and my sons were handcuffed and two of the soldiers led them away, leaving me in the house with the other three. I was very frightened.

I find it very difficult to talk about what happened next. All I can say, is that they did what they wanted with me.

I cried out, 'How can you do this...I am like your own Mama...'

They only left me after their comrades outside started to shout at them to hurry up. Once they had left the house, the soldiers started firing their guns into the air. I guess they were doing it to frighten the neighbours. Then they disappeared into the night, taking my husband and my sons with them.

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Shortly after the soldiers had left, a neighbour arrived. As soon as she saw me she started to cry. She ran off to the church and, not long after, the Pastor and his wife came hurrying in. I was hurt and bleeding. The Pastor gave me some medical treatment and his wife gave me some warm water and permanganate to wash myself with. And, all through this, my daughter had stayed quiet under the bed.

We went to the Pastor's house, but it wasn't safe for him to keep us there for more than a day and so we were taken to a place not too far away on the banks of the River Congo.

The Pastor was friendly with some of the river fishermen and, for the next week, they brought messages and food from him. The Pastor told me that I should give him whatever money I possessed and that he would see what he could do to help us get away. He told me I had to do everything exactly as he instructed. I did have some money. Back in the Congo we didn't keep money in the bank because, if you ever wanted to take money out, the bank never had enough; so I kept my money in a wide-topped glass jar, in a hole in the ground. I also had some jewellery hidden in the same place. I trusted the Pastor completely and gave him everything I had.

It was not long before a message came to say that it had been arranged for my daughter and I to be taken to another country. I was told to wait at a place by the river. I waited there until a stranger arrived. The stranger called me by name, and said that the Pastor had sent him.

'M..., bring your daughter, be quick. Follow me.' he said and, although I was very frightened, I did as he asked.

At first we walked a distance and then we went on a very long lorry journey all the way to Brazzaville and from there to the airport.

At the airport we waited in line for our plane. When we were asked for our passports, the man with us produced one and then put it away again. I don't know where the passport came from or whose it was. I have never had a passport and neither has my daughter.

The three of us, my daughter, the man accompanying us and myself, boarded the plane and we flew to Paris. There, my daughter and I were left with another stranger, as our escort went to get tickets. Next we travelled by train and then, finally, by boat; I could feel the movement of the sea beneath my feet.

When we arrived in Dover, our escort took us to Customs. He found us a place to sit and told us to wait where we were. Then he left us and never returned. It was about seven-thirty in the evening when he left, and it was another two hours before anyone came to talk to us. By then we were almost the last people there.

A Customs official came up to us and started to ask questions. I suppose he was asking who I was, where I was going and if I had a passport, but, as I didn't speak any English, I couldn't understand.

They searched our bags and found my daughter's diabetes medication that, for some reason, they took away. They also found our birth certificates. From these, they could see that we came from the Congo. They called an interpreter and I explained to him on the phone what had happened.

It was two or three in the morning before we finally left the port and were taken to a hotel in Dover. By then I was very worried about my daughter. She needs to have her medication regularly, but it took another two days, and then only with help from the Migrant Helpline, to see a doctor who was able to give her the right tablets.

Someone called my daughters for me and they came down from London to see us in Dover. I hadn't seen them for a long time. One had left Congo for London in 1996 when she had to escape the government after being involved in a protest group and, in 2000, the other also left for London.

We weren't able to stay with them in London, as they were living in a hostel at the time. Asylum seekers can be sent to places all over the UK, so my daughters asked that we be taken to a city not too far away from

where they lived. Now we live in Brighton and, as it is an easy journey to London, I get to see what's left of my family at least once a month.

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I do not know if my husband or my sons are still alive. I have not seen them or heard anything of them since the night the soldiers took them away.

Baz and Z

Baz comes from the Sudan and lives in Brighton with his wife Z and their fifteen-month-old daughter Solara. The name Baz derives from the Arabic word for hawk. Baz and Z – who was born in Britain - met in Khartoum at the British Educational Institute where Baz was teaching English as a second language.

Baz studied at Omdurman Ahlia University. It is an unusual place and is run on democratic lines by its students and has always been independent of the state. It has never been popular with Sudan's military regime; the government regard it as a threat and the militia has tried to shut it down many times. But although they have set fire to the University twice, taken students and beaten them, destroyed computers, laboratories and lecture theatres, it has persisted.

Baz himself has been caught up in political unrest at the University. He and forty others were once arrested after taking part in a student protest against the government. They spent two days in prison. Fortunately, when the case went to court, the arresting officers failed to turn up and the judge let Baz and the others go on condition they agreed not to demonstrate again. Although lucky for the students, the judge's generosity proved his undoing and he was subsequently fired for his decision.

It was while he was at Omdurman Ahlia University that Baz began to write. His speciality was short stories and, in 1997, he received a mark of ninety-nine per cent for one of them. This gave a real boost to his confidence as a writer and since then he has not looked back. He went on to be published in The Other Opinion a non-government newspaper run by a famous and remarkable liberated Sudanese woman journalist called Amal Abbas. On another newspaper he became a part-time editor of the culture pages.

The government in Sudan is staunchly Islamic and does not have a tolerant attitude towards opposition. Baz's father was forced out of his job as a government personnel officer for being a member of an opposition party. When his father lost his job it fell to Baz, as the eldest of six siblings,

to provide for the family. He decided to go to Saudi Arabia where salaries are considerably higher.

In Saudi, Baz taught English as a foreign language in a series of schools. The first was in Tharb, a new village that had been built specifically for the Bedouin. Tharb had new houses, a mosque and a market place at the centre. There was a school and perhaps fifteen or sixteen houses for the teachers. But the Bedouin, who are a nomadic people, far preferred living in their own houses and tents out in the desert and would only come into the village on Fridays to attend prayers in the mosque and do their shopping in the market. Then they'd go back to the desert, leaving the modern homes in the village empty.

Baz lived frugally, he didn't buy a house or a car or any luxuries; every bit of money he could spare he sent back home to his family in Sudan.

It was while he was working in Saudi Arabia he heard, from his uncle, the news that his father had died. Despite being asthmatic, his father had been quite well and had been fit enough to go out and buy a sheep for Eid, but he died suddenly the night before the festival took place. This was a terrible shock for Baz. He had loved his father very much. He had not just been a good father and a good sportsman or a man with a wonderful sense of humour, he had been, above all, Baz's great friend.

After three years in Tharb, the Ministry of Education moved Baz to a village called Sofiana. Life was very different here; it was greener and more pleasant but it was not a place where the Bedouin were liked. Baz was moved yet again a year later, to Swarquia. It was while he was working in this, his third post, that Z came out to join him.

In late 2004, Z became pregnant. Four months into the pregnancy she decided that she didn't want to bring up a child in Saudi Arabia. Z felt that it was a miserable place to bring up a child. Both Baz and Z thought it would be wrong, especially if the child were a girl, to bring it up in the restrictive conditions of Saudi society. Z herself had run into problems over dress codes. It is a requirement for women to wear the niqab when they go out and when Baz and Z went for a walk, with Z wearing only a Sudanese traditional dress, similar to a hijab, her friends questioned her. Why, they wanted to know, did she show her eyes when she went out and why did they not have a car. After this, she covered herself whenever she went out in future. Even when they went to the more cosmopolitan

cities of Riyadh and Jeddah she was still obliged to cover up.

In addition to these social pressures, Z felt she was being held back and that she was not accomplishing anything in her life. She had a degree in physics, but was unable to use it. When Z refused to do military service in the Sudan, the authorities responded by preventing her receiving a certificate for her degree, leaving her unable to get work that in any way matched her abilities. Baz himself did do a year's military service in the Sudan. At first he had refused, but he eventually gave in. As he says himself, 'I don't like getting into trouble, I "walk by the wall."'

Z held on until April 2005 when she set out for England. Z had a cousin and friends in Brighton and she came here to stay. Solara was born at the Royal Sussex County Hospital on the 20th July 2005.

Baz and Z kept in constant phone and e-mail contact and Baz was also able to see photos of his daughter via the Internet. He tried to come over to see Solara in January 2006, but the British Embassy in Jeddah told him that he would have to wait a month for an appointment and he couldn't get the time off from his work at the school.

Z was angry, thinking that for some reason he did not want to see her or their daughter. She asked him to resign his job, but he wasn't sure that he could get into the UK as the process was tough, so he held on.

Louisa Rabbat, a solicitor with the Brighton Housing Trust, helped arrange a visa for Baz, but the papers never arrived in Saudi Arabia. Eventually Baz decided to return to the Sudan. Organizing things through the embassy in Jeddah had seemed difficult and he thought that he might have a better chance of coming to the UK from Sudan. He travelled to the Sudan at the end of June. Louise Rabbat sent his paperwork on to him there, but it was held up for another two weeks by a postal strike. Baz finally arrived in the UK on the 22nd August.

Baz and Z still live in the council flat where Z was living when Baz came over. Most days Baz stays at home with his daughter while his wife goes out to work in a laundry in a local care home. Although it's Baz's first time in England it's been relatively easy for him to settle, as he is familiar with English culture through his teaching.

Baz finds it is very hard to mix with other people here. 'Back in Sudan,' he says, 'if I was hungry, or a neighbour was hungry, we'd just knock on each other's doors and share our food. You can't do that here.' There have also been problems with his neighbours; they seem to be inventing

reasons to be unpleasant. Baz worries about leaving Z and their daughter alone in the flat. He always tries to make sure she has company when he is away.

Baz's sister is now a graduate from Omdurman Ahlia University with a degree in English Literature Studies. His brothers have also graduated, and now are able to support themselves and their mother.

Baz would like Z to be able continue with her studies. She has spoken to Sussex University, and they have told her she has to do one more year to complete the degree here, but that her English is not yet good enough.

On a Monday Baz teaches English at the MEP at Cowley Club and also translates for others - there is always a need there. He also wants to return to study but, most of all, he wants to write. 'I have so many ideas,' he says, 'it would be wonderful to be able to write much more – and with others!'

Northern Requiem for a Southern Lad

Baz

The light and dark of our faces didn't matter.
Our fatherland mattered.
Our country, dying,
Gave up to two travellers
Its stories, its glories.
There was no celebration
As the fragmented map
Scattered itself into our souls.
No schism.
How many times on that higher plain
Qu'ran and Gospel
Mixed like water in two streams?
How many times the songs we loved
Pointed to a bright horizon?
How many times we fought,
Then found, in peace, sweetness?
How many times our shallow imaginings
Our thin boastings, were overcome
By the flood of truth and deeper desires.
On and on and on the gifts of friendship were to last.
Gifts from the ebony lad with the heart of ivory.
But fate dictates.
It snatched you from the path,
Kidnapped you,
Took you, sleeping, to a longer sleep.
Leaving us...leaving us unfriended,
Alone on our journey.

Both victim and criminal
We pore over your photograph
And remember the music of your voice.
Blinded, we search for strength.
Alexandria's academe shouts,
The very sea howls
"Did Logo die?"

Can I heap with ashes
A coastline, a city?
Myself I would heap with memories.
Ah, Logo. You are a jewel among stones.
You are a sweet breeze in the heat.
You entranced us, conquered us all.
Are you now conquered in death?
You leave us to mourn.
Your fatherland, your land
Will not forget your touch.
Your light will burn on.

A.N.

> "No man is an **Iland**, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the **Continent**, a part of the **maine**; if a Clod bee washed away by the **Sea**, **Europe** is the lesse, as well as if a **Promontorie** were, as well as if a **Mannor** of thy **friends** or of **thine own** were; any mans **death** diminishes **me**, because I am involved in **Mankinde**; And therefore never send to know for whom the **bell** tolls; It tolls for **thee**."
>
> John Donne (1572 –1631)

I'm a publisher and journalist from Iran, and I've been living in Brighton since the beginning of 2005. At six o' clock one morning in November of that year, I was taken from my room and arrested - my claim for asylum had been refused. In the following fifteen days, I was taken to five different Detention Centres in England and Scotland and, despite there being a Home Office order against it, an attempt was made to deport me back to Iran.

It was only through the support of friends and strangers who understood the case and realised the danger I was in, that I was reprieved. As an asylum-seeker, a foreigner here, my position in this society is almost non-existent. I never imagined that a Member of Parliament would listen to me and take up my case; but one did, her name is Celia Barlow and she listened to me and stood up for me when others didn't. She acted in the true spirit of human rights and through her my Deportation Order was cancelled.

In the end though, it was the last minute action of my neighbour that saved me and kept me in the UK. She got to Heathrow at half past seven on the morning of my deportation and demanded that the Immigration Service observe the Home Office cancellation of the Deportation Order. It was only through her selfless action that I was kept safe and alive at the eleventh hour.

I am still astonished by the behaviour of the Home Office. I don't

understand for example what, if any, measures they take to guarantee a fair legal process. I don't know, when mistakes are made in judgements, if they ever find who is accountable. What is happening in the mind of the Home Office, when rules, supposedly created to support Human Rights, are turned so that they conspire against asylum seekers, leaving them homeless and destitute?

Fortune was on my side and I was able to get further evidence to support my case and, in April 2006, my solicitors put in a fresh Asylum claim. Months went by and I heard nothing from the authorities. Then, in October, I learnt that my MP, Celia Barlow, had received a response to a letter she had written to the Parliamentary Secretary of State regarding my case. This letter, which I'm not sure I would have received had the department not been chased by my MP, stated that the Home Office had received my new claim, that it had been attached to my file and was, only now, being updated onto the computer system.

It took six long months to get this response, six months just waiting, unable to work and having to live off charity and the good will of others. The Home Office's inaction has made me feel worth nothing. I have been in limbo; in a place where you cannot live like a normal human being. I felt I was in a psychological ghetto with no rights, no face, and no hope. The stress of my situation was such, that a few months ago, on the day I was due to sign in, I became ill with a suspected heart attack. Even though I was under the doctor, the Home Office then changed my reporting point from Brighton to Croydon – even though I had informed both my solicitor and the Police that I was ill. What does this say about their level of concern and their concept of Human Rights?

On the surface I appear to be as well as anyone could under this pressure. But no one can see what is going on inside me. How can I convey the torture of hearing my child on the phone say 'I just want to cuddle you. Why won't you let me?' Sometimes when he speaks to me he cries and says, 'This is enough Daddy, please, just come back!' This is the worst thing for a parent – a child's request that is impossible to fulfil. For a normal parent it would be so easy, but I can't respond. Can you imagine the pain of not being able touch him or comfort him?

I fled my country to escape prison, to stay alive and to keep my family safe but, for the last two years, I have been a prisoner here. My wife and my son are in Iran, where they also are, in their own way, prisoners. In

this beautiful, green prison called the UK, I have learnt that it is not just walls and bars that keep you in chains.

If there weren't so many angelic people around me I, like so many hundreds of other 'failed' asylum seekers, would be sleeping on people's floors or in night shelters or sleeping rough on park benches and begging for food. But I have survived with the help of the people here who look after me. They are like angels; more than angels - I can't find words that do them justice. They live the words Human Rights; they put their own comfort second and do so without hesitation or any consideration of their own positions.

What does 'failed' asylum seeker mean? For me, it reinforces a multiple feeling of failure – a failed father, a failed career and a failed life. There is something about being disbelieved that makes you feel empty inside. I have lost my identity and have been left to walk around in a dream world, no longer able to support my family or myself.

I still don't understand. What was my crime? Was it a crime to have to flee the country that I loved, Iran, because I was attacked by the regime and prevented from doing my work as a journalist and publisher? That I have to live with this pain is hard enough but, on top of that, the inhuman Home Office process squeezes the breath out of me and puts unbearable pressure on my mind and on my whole being.

After my Asylum case was refused and I was left homeless, people took me into their homes and showed me great kindness. There are too many of you to mention individually, but what I want to say is that this experience has taught me that there really are people who reach out with love and without consideration of nationality, religion, colour or race; people for whom human rights is a reality, a reality that lives in their hearts.

I want to thank you all.

Ganno & Maliha

Ganno and Maliha are two young women from Ethiopia. They are inseparable at the Cowley Club. They both live in Brighton, Ganno with her father and brother, Maliha on her own. They both wear thick coats, even though it is warm in here, and headscarves cover their hair.

For us Brighton means freedom. Here we can speak - we can say exactly what we want.

Brighton is good! We like the beach. You can see it from Maliha's house. We both love walking on the beach. Now, it's winter and it's cold. It's never cold like this in Ethiopia or Nairobi. We've bought thick coats, gloves and hats. The Red Cross has helped us by giving us clothes. The clothes are OK, sort of.

Language is a problem for us both. Learning is difficult. In Kenya we both learnt Swahili very fast just by listening and talking to the people we met. Here it's hard to practice. English people don't talk to you openly; they don't seem to talk to others easily.

Ganno

My town was near Addis Ababa – my father is from the Oromo tribe and that was the reason we had to leave. I left with my father and my older brother and went to Kenya where life was safer. After a year, my mother and my two younger brothers left Ethiopia and came to join us. All went well for a while, but then Mum and Dad fell out and Mum went back to Ethiopia.

My father is a photographer. He had a photographic studio in both countries, first in Ethiopia, then in Nairobi in Kenya. He specialised in portraits. Here in Brighton he doesn't work as a photographer; he is trying hard to learn English first. He is also doing a voluntary job while he is learning.

In Kenya, I was a designer and a hairdresser. I designed textiles for use in the home, things like covers for pillows and cushions. I can't

work here as a hairdresser. In our culture, women cannot be uncovered in public. In Brighton there are hairdressers that have both men and women as staff and as clients. For us, that is impossible – a man being a hairdresser for a woman is not right for us, because of our religion. I'd like to study design, but I'd also like to study nursing. When I have learned English, I will study.

My best friend here is Mahila. She is also Ethiopian. We met in Kenya at a mosque in Nairobi. We were the only ones there speaking Oromo and we heard each other straight away. It was so good to find someone who spoke the same language!

I went to the United Nations and like Maliha was allocated the UK as my destination. We came to England together, travelling on a plane. It was the first time I had flown and we laughed a lot! When we arrived, we stayed in a hostel in London for three days before coming here to Brighton.

Maliha

My father was a businessman. In 1991, when I was only seven years old, soldiers arrested him. He was from the Oromo tribe and the Oromo are not the tribe of the government.

I was arrested in 2003, when I was at school, just because of my tribe. I have five brothers and sisters and I was arrested because I am the eldest. They tortured me. Then, in prison, I was sick for a long time with kidney problems.

When I was released they warned me. They said, 'If we find you at home you'll be imprisoned again. If not, we'll take your mother'. I had to sign something. I didn't understand.

When they came for me, I was away at a friend's house, so they took my mother. I don't know who is looking after my brothers and sisters now. My mother is still in Ethiopia.

In 2005 I went on my own by bus to Kenya. I was very scared – scared to stay, scared to go. There I met another mum. She was a Somali woman called Nadifa. She lived in Nairobi with her six children. I heard her voice in the street; she spoke exactly like me and I went up to her and just started talking. She took me in as one of her family.

Nadifa and her children were sent to America by the U.N. She rings me up still and that's lovely. I also went to the U.N. I told them my story and they sent me to the UK. I've been here for six months now. I'm happy where I live; it is very nice.

Now I am studying. I also do a voluntary job – selling books, clothes and furniture. I'd love to be a nurse; it's what I would have done if I'd stayed in Ethiopia.

I was scared at first of living on my own but now I'm fine. I have a boyfriend in Kenya. He is also Ethiopian. He writes to me here and he hopes to come to England too. I hope he does.

Louis

Louis is Belgian. He is fifty-six years old and speaks Flemish. He is living in a bail hostel in Brighton.

I've been driving lorries internationally for thirty-seven years; working for many different companies. I have been with my current firm for twenty-two years. We carry car parts between Belgium and a factory in Preston, Lancashire. I've done this trip over and over.

I have a wife in Belgium. Her name is Cecile. She is not at all well and, a month ago, she had to have a heart by-pass operation. On top of that, she now has influenza. I wish I were able to help her. Her mother is helping her as much as she can, but she is seventy-two years old so there is a limit to what she can do.

I was arrested in Dover last May. I have been doing this journey for so many years and it was a terrible shock. I asked them why I was being arrested and they said I had tobacco in my lorry.

'I am only carrying exhausts,' I protested, because that was what the lorry had – all packed up before I drove it.

'Yes,' they said, 'you have car exhausts, and six pallets of tobacco.'

It seems that when they searched the lorry they found pallets of tobacco, one thousand three hundred and eighty kilos of it, as well as the proper goods, exhausts and so on for Preston.

So, I have been accused of smuggling tobacco into the UK. I was in Elmley prison in Sheerness for five weeks and then I was sent to a bail hostel in Brighton.

I had a heart attack when I was in prison. My cellmate pressed the alarm button at midnight to try to get help, but no one came until nine in the morning. By the time an officer arrived, symptoms had subsided.

I saw the prison doctor and he gave me some medicine for my stomach.

'But it's not my stomach, doctor, it's my heart.' I said. He said that it was all in my head. I had a heart attack before, a few years ago, and this felt exactly the same. When you've had a heart attack, you know.

I contacted a solicitor and a few days later I was discharged to a bail

hostel. The hostel is a good place, much better than prison at any rate! There are two of us in a big room with plenty of space. We get fed. Some days the food is better than others, but overall it's good. I've been at the hostel for five months now, waiting for my case to come to court. I've been told that it will be another six months at the earliest.

But I've done nothing. Nothing. I am only a driver. I don't load the lorries. I have worked for firm for twenty-two years. It's a Belgian firm. They have not spoken to me at all since my arrest. No one has helped me. My job there is finished; I'm sure of that. I don't know of any laws in Belgium that could help me retain my job. I'm very sad about it.

I've been stuck here since the 11th May. My wife has visited me several times. Once she came to the Cowley Club with me. Her English is very good, much better than mine! She has never worked. She's a housewife and she doesn't earn anything. I am so worried about what is going to happen to her now.

On a normal day I am free to do as I please between 7am and 11pm. The only thing I have to do every day is report to the Police Station and sign in. If I don't sign in by 3pm I will be picked up and taken back to prison - that's what they said. If I am unable to sign in for any reason, if I have to attend a court session for instance, then I have to get a letter from my solicitor to cover me.

I fill my time OK. I watch television, but sadly I can't get Belgian TV at the hostel. I also listen to the radio, music mainly. I love the Beatles, the Stones, UB40, Queen and Status Quo. Cecile sends me puzzle books from Belgium. I like my puzzle books. I like finding words. My roommate is English and he's given me a puzzle book in English – that'll be good for learning!

My roommate is a good man. He's from Portsmouth. He's like my second teacher, after my teacher here at the Cowley Club. He corrects my pronunciation. I used to say *'twaalet'* for 'toilet'. Now, I know better! Sometimes we go to the pub together. I particularly like The Pavilion Pub and I have a Carling daily!

At present there are fourteen of us in the hostel. There are eight rooms in total and each one holds two men. My roommate goes before the court on the 11th December. These dates are important. I have no idea what he's supposed to have done. We never speak of our problems with the courts, prison, police and so on.

The office at the hostel told me about The Cowley Club and how they could help me to improve my English. Normally I'm here every Monday. The lessons are very good; ten out of ten thanks to my teacher Lorna.

My English was very bad, but now, after my lessons, I have been able to write a letter in English to Cecile. She cried when she read it. We speak on the phone, or at least leave messages for each other, every day.

This is my letter to Cecile.

Darling

I am a little sick. I know that you are very sick and very alone. I hope that you get better very soon.

I hope that you can come to Brighton very soon so that I can kiss and cuddle you. I love and miss you very much!

Every Monday afternoon I go to The Cowley Club for English lessons and 6th November is my best friend's birthday. Lorna sends her best wishes.

I hope that the problems with the court finish very soon and that I can come home.

Darling, take care of yourself and lots of kisses.

From your darling

Louis

Hasan

I am thirty-two years old and come from a village called Tilkiler in the part of Kurdistan that lies within the Turkish border. It's a very small village; when I left, four years ago, there were only twelve houses there, but, in more recent times, it has grown and now there are about forty-five. My Mum and Dad who are both in their early seventies still live there.

My family was a farming family. They also ran a business; a clothes shop in Maras the nearest city. Back home, selling men's clothes was my main occupation and I used to make the long journey to Maras by bus, two hours there and two hours back, every day.

I had to leave my home because I was in danger. The Turkish authorities treated Kurds, especially socialist Kurds, very badly and both my older brothers were targeted and tortured. They left the village while I was away doing my own National Service. They went to another country and since then I have lost touch with them. I have no idea where they are now.

In Turkey, the government could say whatever they want about you and do whatever they liked with you. If the authorities were out to get you, there was nothing you could do to stop them. If you spoke out against the government, you could end up dead. There were two men and an eleven-year-old boy killed near my village. They were killed for political reasons. The government operatives were seen and they were taken to court, but the case soon collapsed. Not one witness would say anything in court, they were too frightened and it's easy to understand why.

The authorities in Turkey protected the right - the nationalists and the fascists - because, they said, the people of the right 'love the flag'. The authorities never tortured anyone from the right. Nowadays they hide what they have done. They know that if they want to join Europe they cannot be seen to behave that way.

I too have been tortured. I try to forget. I try to keep the memory buried inside. When I came here, I had to tell the UK authorities everything

that had happened to me; but now I don't want to talk about it any more; I want to try and move on.

In Turkey everyone has to do national service. For me, national service marked the beginning of things going wrong in my life. On my first day with the army, I was spoken to by an officer who said that he knew I was Kurdish and for that reason he wanted to give me a warning. He said that my task would be to search for Kurdish guerrillas and that, if I were ever caught letting them get away, if I didn't shoot any that I saw, I would be in trouble. 'If you don't work for the Army,' he said, 'you will very quickly understand the consequences.'

I spent nearly twenty months in the mountains with the army. It was very cold and the living conditions were terrible. I did my job and looked for guerrillas and luckily, in all my time with the army, I never saw one.

One thing I did get to see was the government Special Forces at work. With no uniform and all wearing dark glasses, the Special Forces are easy enough to recognise. On the occasion I saw them, they had accused some older people of giving food to the guerrillas. The men and women were separated and questioned in front of us soldiers. The women were saying, 'We have never helped any guerrillas,' but no one listened. Eventually these people were put into cars and driven away. We never saw them again.

Back in my village I was at even greater risk than I had been in the army. It was here that I was picked up by the authorities and tortured.

My parents and I decided that it would be best if I got away from Tilkiler as soon as I could. I left with six others, all of them friends, all of them people I had grown up with. Each one of us, or our families, had had to pay ten thousand two hundred and fifty euros to an agency that made the arrangements for our escape.

When the message that we were leaving came, we had no time to prepare. We grabbed some food, things that would last, like biscuits and bread, but there wasn't time to get anything else, not even a change of clothes; we went in whatever we happened to be wearing. We travelled in a lorry that was full of packages. We hid ourselves amongst the packages; I have no idea what was in them.

The journey was a nightmare. It was very hot and we couldn't breathe and I thought I was going to die. We could only talk when the lorry

stopped and even then it was in whispers. Otherwise, we had to be silent. When we stopped, the driver, who was Turkish, would bang on the side if it was safe to get out for water or to go to the toilet. We had to live like this for two weeks.

Then came a time when the driver opened up the back of the lorry and we were greeted by a group of men carrying walkie-talkies. We were on a ferry and the men escorted us away from the vehicle deck and into the main body of the ship. They then gave each of us a single cup of coffee. When we docked at Dover, the police were waiting for us.

I was surprised when the UK police were nice to us; I had been afraid they would be like the Turkish authorities. Instead, they were polite and considerate. They took our names and our fingerprints and then put us on transport to a camp somewhere in Oxfordshire. Once in the camp, I felt safe for the first time in a long time. That was four years ago, in 2002. Now I don't feel so secure. I don't know what's going on or what is going to happen to me. I am still waiting for a decision from the Home Office as to whether I can stay in the UK or not.

When I was released from the camp, I spent some time in London with some Kurdish people I knew. Then I heard that someone from my village was living in Brighton, and I arranged to come down here.

I arrived in Brighton with just one bag and, for the first few days, I had no bed and lived in the cellar of someone's house. Eventually I found somewhere to live and now I have my own room.

Living here is very expensive. I can't afford to eat out, so I do all my own cooking. I cook Turkish food with lots of vegetables. I also can't afford to use public transport and I walk everywhere. I particularly enjoy being on the seafront and walking by the sea.

On Mondays I come to the Cowley Club where I get help with my English and where I meet lots of other people, all foreigners living in difficult circumstances. I have found it a real comfort to meet others who are in similar positions to myself.

Most days I go straight to the library in Brighton. I spend a lot of time reading, mainly newspapers, in English and Turkish. I try to keep up with the news from my country. I love reading. The library also provides free Internet access, which is wonderful.

It was on the Amnesty International site that I learnt that there had been more killings in my village. They didn't give the name on the site,

but I recognised the description and I knew it was Tilkiler as soon as I read about it. It was the case that I mentioned before, the that involved an eleven-year old boy. It's unbelievable that this should happen to anyone, let alone a child. What sort of people torture and kill children and take men away from their families in the middle of the night, never to be seen again?

I have met up with a few Kurdish speaking people in Brighton. We get together from time to time and go to Borders Bookshop in Churchill Square where we drink coffee, read and talk. I used to like going to pubs but, since I have given up cigarettes, I find them too smoky. I also work as a volunteer for Fare Share, an organisation that distributes goods and food to hostels for drug addicts and the homeless. The supermarkets donate stock that is near its sell-by date. They bring it to our base, which is a huge warehouse in Moulescoomb, and we then load up lorries and distribute it to the hostels.

I feel very sorry for the people who are addicts. I often wonder what has happened in their lives. Drugs and alcohol are dreadful things and I'm glad I don't have to battle with them myself.

I try not to think about what has happened to me, the torture and so on. From time to time I have had to go to London to see the organisation *Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture*. They examine me and keep a record of the physical and mental damage that has followed my torture.

Despite all this activity and my work, I am still very stressed. My health isn't good and I have to take tablets to help me sleep. The tablets don't stop the nightmares. My nights are horrible and each morning, when I wake up, it takes only a few seconds before I realise that I am still not safe and that I do not know what's going to happen to me.

I don't know whether I'll ever be able to stay here and do some real work, as I would like. I don't have a girlfriend; it isn't possible... not yet. I need to feel settled before I can start any proper relationship. I want to stay here, but I don't know who can help me or what I should do next.

There are people who do not understand my situation; people who think asylum seekers and refugees are bad for the UK. Freedom and safety are fundamental needs and they are important for everyone. All I can do, is ask those who do not understand to try and imagine how they would survive if such dreadful things happened to them and their

families – ask them to think how they would cope if, like me, they had to leave their own country and be transported to the other side of the world, to a place where no one spoke their language?

Elena

Jenny and the Cowley Club

I want to tell you about my teacher. Her name is Jenny and she came into my life like a miracle. When I first met her I was with another teacher, but that teacher was only around for a short time, as she had to return to Canada to nurse her mother. She was a good teacher, but Jenny had a lot more experience of teaching people with problems like mine.

I have dyslexia and I am embarrassed by it. When I was little, dyslexia wasn't recognised in my country; they just thought I was stupid and slow. No one knew I had learning difficulties.

When I first came to the Cowley Club I was very quiet and I was embarrassed when everybody paid attention to me and asked me questions. Nowadays I talk too much!

When my first teacher left I was very sad. I didn't know who could teach me. I had one teacher after another, but none of them had any experience of people with problems like mine and they didn't know how to help me.

The next time I came to the Cowley Club, I saw Jenny teaching a Chinese girl. I could see how patient she was. I asked her to be my teacher and, when she said yes, I cried. I was so happy, but I worried all summer in case she decided not to teach me. I worried that maybe she would want to teach other people instead.

Jenny has changed my life. She's really special. I trust her; I can say things to Jenny that I can't say to anyone else. She is very clever and she was very quick to understand what I needed. I'm very lucky.

Meeting Six Dinner Sid

Jenny chose a book for me – Six Dinner Sid. She also gave me a tape of the story and a list of the words I had to learn – lots of words. She taught me letter by letter. Some words I found very difficult. I found

them hard to pronounce and I would mix them up; I told her my doctor was coming to sleep with me – I meant my daughter!

When she first showed me the book I was not very interested. She told me to go home and listen to the tape. I wanted to learn. I didn't want to be stupid any more. I would try and learn things, but then I would forget. I'd learn again and forget again. It took a very long time.

Then one day I did remember. I came to the Cowley Club and said to Jenny, 'I'll tell you a story.'

'Six Dinner Sid is very naughty and he is very clever, cleverer than me, cleverer than Jenny. He has six different homes. Every day he eats dinner in one house and then in a second house. Other days he goes to a third house and then another... Every day he eats different dinners: fish, meat, lamb, chicken and stew. He has different names – one I remember is Scaramouche. I can't remember the others. He sleeps in different houses and everybody loves him.'

'One day he has a cold and his family take him to the vet and the vet gives him medicine. Then the other families take him to the vet. Six times he goes to the vet. He has six medicines, six different names and six dinners. The doctor is clever and notices that Sid is naughty. People have paid six bills and the vet tells them what Sid has done. The families are surprised and they are not happy because Sid has been naughty.'

'Then, I think he goes to other homes in another street and starts again. Here he eats too much. Look that's him! He's washing his bottom. Here he's getting into a house. Look, look, fat – six dinners! They all love him because they think he is theirs.'

Six Dinner Sid is a special book. I have some books in Spanish but I don't really read them because they are difficult and I get bored. I don't really understand them and I put them aside.

When my children were little and we were living in our home in Southampton, I couldn't tell them stories in English. When they got bigger they were able help me, but by then I had no time as I had to look after my son who was ill.

School

I grew up in Chile. At school the nuns used to hit me and punish me for being too slow. The other children all seemed to learn much more

quickly.

I could draw well and I could sing too - I could sing the highest notes. In other lessons we were separated, but in singing we were put together. The nuns made me sing because I had a nice voice but they gave priority to the richest children. I was in the choir, but then they took me out. Maybe the nun was embarrassed because I was the only one in the choir who was poor. After that I was only allowed to watch. There were piano, guitar and violin lessons for the rich girls only and the rich children were chosen to sing even if they had bad voices.

The school was divided by a high concrete wall that separated the rich from the poor children. The poor children weren't able to pay for their schooling and the nuns and the teachers treated them badly. In my country, the government didn't give opportunities to poor children. They gave the best to the rich children. The rich children had uniforms; the poor had white overalls. We were not allowed to communicate because we were separated everywhere: in the church, in the dining room, in the toilets and in the playground. Every day we had beans and the rich children had special meals; they had meat; they had fruit and ice cream; they had everything.

From Chile to England

I was pregnant when the UN moved my husband to Peru. He escaped leaving the children and me behind. My new baby was due in a few days. When my baby was born he was very thin. There was only food for the rich. We followed my husband to Peru some time later.

In the summer of 1974, the UN arranged a plane for all the exiles. We were really, really scared. We were almost crazy when we arrived. From Heathrow we went to the university in Southampton. We got a little help but not much. In September, when the students came back, the university moved us out. We went to a house and were totally abandoned. The rooms were damp and there was only one kitchen, two toilets and one bathroom for five families. This was the place we had to live in for the first year after our arrival from Chile.

Life in Chile was very difficult. England was very peaceful in comparison. We couldn't believe how green and pretty it was, like the South of Chile. We really missed our homeland and our culture. It was very

painful leaving and not knowing when we'd see it again. It took nearly ten years to get used to it. I miss having the extended family around – we were very close. It was very different to here. I don't know what it is like now.

The voluntary group that arranged social security for the children also arranged for all the men to be taught English at the university. My husband's first job was working on the construction of a new hospital. This job lasted for a year. He then went and stayed in Reading while he studied Social Sciences to help him earn a better living for the family.

We got a lovely house in Southampton with four bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room and a tremendous garden. But there was no family, no grandparents. At Christmas there was no one but me, my husband and the children. Neighbours had lots of other people around. We talked to the neighbours only when we hung out the washing. When my children got bigger they made friends - mostly with other migrants - Moroccans and Indians.

We compensated with animals. We had a dog, three cats, some tropical fish, two canaries and two parakeets, one blue and one white. We also kept stick insects in a tank. Sometimes the stick insects would escape and end up all over the house. We had a pond in the garden. It started off small and grew bigger. It had lots of fish, and frogs, toads and newts came and made their homes in it.

I really like the chips in England – we couldn't get them in Chile. The children would run to the table and put salt and vinegar on – lovely! Sausages too and baked beans and bacon – wonderful! Eggs too. I cooked our food; I cooked canela, paella, valencian rice, tortilla, chick-peas, lentil casserole, empanados (pasties), but after the children went to school, they didn't want to eat it – it had to be the same as school dinner – pie and chips, etc.

When we were in Southampton I worked in the house. I looked after the children and the house, and I did the cooking. For me the life of a mother was to be there when my husband and my children came home. I had no communication except in Spanish. My role was to be beneath my husband and I was very isolated. I had no friends to go to the park and have a drink with. I also had to look after my son. He got moved to Kent when he became violent. Now I see my son roughly once or twice a month. In August they're having a holiday in a caravan.

First time Brighton

My daughter came here to Brighton to study at university while we were still in Southampton. Through the university, my ex-husband found a family for her to live with. At home I used to cook and do everything for her and in Brighton she needed someone to look after her.

The first time I visited Brighton was when we brought my daughter to stay with the family. They were Polish and really lovely. They showed us round Brighton. It was very nice – the beach, the sea, and the aquarium. I saw a shark, rays and big crabs. We didn't have anything like it in Chile or even in Southampton, not where you could see them from underneath. After our tour of Brighton we went back and had food. I started to cry when I had to leave for Southampton.

Moving to Brighton

My husband left me.

I really missed my daughter and I moved to Brighton in 1995 when my daughter was still at university. My ex-husband worked as a social worker looking after the paperwork for mentally handicapped. He got her a council flat. When I left the house in Southampton he left a note about the fish. The animals came with me till I went to Dubai for three months and I had to give them away.

After she finished her studies, my daughter went on to work in an office. She got bored with it. She ended up having to wear glasses after working so much on the computer and she claimed compensation from the company.

She had an interview with Emirate Airlines. There were over one hundred girls applying and my daughter got the job. They wanted her because she's clever. She left me and never came back. Children are naughty! Like Sid!

The Tree of Death

I went to the Cornerstone in Hove where I painted and learnt English. The teacher put paintings up on the wall and mine disappeared! When the teacher gave people their paintings to take home, my three were

gone. The teacher said she didn't know whether they had been thrown away or not. I was very sad because it was very personal work; work that came from inside me.

One of my paintings was called The River of Blood and another one I called The Tree of Death. In that one I painted a tree and the faces of people running – these people died behind the trees, they have been mutilated or raped. There are children there too. It's a real tree, a very big tree with long branches; it's in the Parke Causinio in the capital, where lots of rapes and mutilations happened. There were bodies in the street and strewn all over the place. In the painting I put crosses – little pieces of wood – where I could. I have lots more pictures. But now I come to school and I learn. I want to forget and I want to be better at English. I throw every picture in the dustbin now. I want to shame Pinochet, but he hasn't seen them.

My ex-husband went back to the park about five years ago. He says they've changed the name of the park, pulled up all the trees and put up straw huts where people can eat and relax – amusement places like Brighton Pier.

Alone

Now I live in the flat alone. Everyone's left me now. I have two sons, one is ill and the other is in the army and lives in Colchester with his wife and my grandson. My daughter lives in Dubai. One day I'd like to have all the family back together again; but it's a dream. My family is here at the Cowley Club now.

I'd like to say one last thing – I'm really grateful to Jenny my special star – for being so patient with me.

K. R.

K.R. handwrote his story in Farsi. This has a significance that becomes apparent as one reads his story. His words were translated by several other Iranian members of the Cowley Club community.

I'm Iranian, a poet and I am, it's fair to say, well past the first flush of youth. I studied Philosophy at University during the time of the Shah's reign. Then, as now, it was obligatory to study Islamic Philosophy. My views of Islam were not the same as those of my Professors and consequently, after only two years of study, I was asked to leave.

I have been writing poetry since I was fourteen. At first, like most young people, I wrote about love but, as I grew older, my views changed and so did my poetry. Love was replaced as my preferred subject by society and community issues. My poems were published in the Teheran newspapers and other non-government literary outlets.

My family had been very influential during the Shah's regime. After the revolution, my brother, who had been in the employ of the Shah, was killed and so was my mother and many of my other close relatives. The coming of the Khomeini regime marked not just a revolution in the country, but also a revolution in me. My life took on a new purpose and so did my poetry. It became a weapon with which to fight the religious dictator. My poetry became the enemy of Khomeini. If I were the sort of man that would take up arms then things would have been different but, for me, the only weapon was words. I fought the regime with the only weapon I had.

My poems could not be published inside Iran under the new regime. Publishing them had to become an underground operation. I made copies and distributed my work by hand to trusted friends and acquaintances.

I had worked for over twenty-four years for one of the Ministries in Iran and in 1980 I was still in an important job and responsible for a large number of people. I was at work one morning when, at about eleven o'clock, three people whom I had never seen before came to my office.

'Would you please come with us?' they said', '...for just a few questions.'

These men were, of course, members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard,

not army, but the *Komite*, the secret police - staffed mainly by ill-educated types who all carried guns. They were extremely polite, they didn't wave their guns around in my office, but still it was obvious they were armed and I had no choice but to go with them. Refusal, it was made clear, was not an option.

I was taken to their car and as soon as I was in it, the *Komite* operatives blindfolded me. After a drive of about half an hour, we reached our destination. I was handed over to some new guards and was left waiting on a chair with my blindfold still on.

Several hours passed and it must have been mid-afternoon when someone said to me, 'If you haven't had lunch, if you are hungry, sit on the floor.'

I decided to eat and got on to the floor and pushed my blindfold up. Immediately a guard kicked me hard in the back. I screamed.

'This is a blindfold, not a headband,' the guard shouted, as it was pulled back over my eyes. Now I couldn't think about eating. I was extremely hungry, but I was in far too much pain.

Some hours later, I was led to another room and made to sit on another chair. This time, the blindfold was removed and I found myself facing a wall.

'Look straight ahead,' a voice said. 'and don't move...'

I was too close to the wall to see who or what else was in the room. A man started to ask me questions. At first he was very polite. He asked me my name, my surname, my job, my date of birth, my father's name – hundreds of questions.

I was very frightened and still in tremendous pain from the kick to my back. I answered all of the questions. And then something prompted me to speak out.

'My name is K.R.,' I said, 'my job is ... I can't believe you've brought me here. What have I done? I have not committed any crime.'

The questioner, again very politely, said, 'Please wait a moment. Everything will be explained.' and then left. I think I was alone in the room then, I couldn't hear anything; I couldn't move and I didn't want to, so I waited, staring at the wall.

It was an hour or more before my interrogator returned and the questions continued.

'When did you start writing poetry? And what was it about, that first

poem?'

I told him. It was teenage love poetry.

'And when did you start to write anti-Khomeini poetry?' he asked.

'Never,' I said. 'I've never written that sort of poem.'

He showed me a piece of paper.

'Look at this handwriting. It's yours, isn't it?'

The handwriting was mine. It was a poem I'd only given to my friends. I couldn't understand how they had managed to get hold of it. I tried to think quickly.

'Yes,' I said. 'It is mine, it's true. It is my handwriting, but... it's not my poem.'

'I hope it isn't,' he said, 'but we can check that, one way or another.'

There was a pause as more people were brought into the room. I couldn't see anything, so I have no idea if they were blindfolded like me or whether they were sitting or not. I listened as the interrogator turned his attention to them.

'So, how do you know each other?'

After more than of an hour of questioning, each one of them admitted knowing the others and said they had being meeting up every night and, crucially, said they had all heard me read my poem to them.

I thought I recognised some of the voices but I said, 'This is a lie. They've come here to lie...I have never recited poetry to these people.'

'Perhaps you're right,' the interrogator replied and then, after a silence, added, 'Please listen to this.'

I heard the rattle of a cassette being put into a machine, followed by the sound of my own voice reading a poem - an anti-Khomeini poem... my poem.

I felt as if the ground had fallen away from under my feet. There was a Judas amongst my friends. I felt sick. Here I was, alone and without support, without a lawyer or a solicitor and in the hands of people who seemed to know everything about me. They knew so much; they were discussing details of my life that I'd forgotten myself. It was at this point I started to lose track of time. Things became a blur, as if my mind had begun to close down.

They took my personal effects: my wallet, my belt, my watch; everything I had on me. Then a man said, 'If you have anything to say, if you have anything to add, please do so. I will be ready to listen to you

tomorrow.'

I was taken to a cell. It was tiny, no more than two or three metres square, and lit by a single weak bulb. In the cell were a bed, a toilet and nothing else. Before they left me, they gave me some food. I hadn't eaten for more than twenty-four hours and I was desperately hungry. I have no idea what they gave me, but it was like nothing I'd ever eaten before or since. It tasted wonderful, but it may well have been drugged because, as soon as I had finished eating, I fell asleep.

The following morning I was blindfolded again and taken with one other prisoner to what I was sure was a prison. By the time we arrived, I was shaking with cold.

I was put in a single cell, a cell I lived in for the next four months. Every morning I was woken by the terrible sound of someone shouting 'Wake up! Wake up! Wake up for morning prayers...' All this time I had no news from the outside or from my family. I was questioned two or three times a week; they were always the same questions, and I always gave the same answers. The highlight of my days was when I was allowed to have a shower or when, blindfolded of course, I was taken out for some air. These were the only times I left my cell.

I didn't think they would torture me. From the first day I had told them everything. I'd hidden nothing. They knew 'KR did this. This is his handwriting.' I had no reason to keep anything from them. I had nothing else to hide but, throughout the four months that I waited for a decision on my case, I was tortured, both mentally and physically. There was no pattern to it; I never knew when they would come next.

Then one day they moved me to a communal cell. It was about eight metres square and housed eight prisoners. The prisoners didn't wear blindfolds in this cell. None of them knew each other and no one trusted anyone. When we talked, we talked very carefully; we all knew that anything we said was probably overheard. No one asked questions of each other or talked about his own situation or why they were in prison. We didn't say who we were and we all used nicknames - mine was Hamed. This meant that if anyone was released, he couldn't be asked to take news to our families.

Despite these restrictions, life in the communal cell was far better than life in a single one. Being on your own, waiting for death to come, is indescribable. Here I was less stressed; when you are with others, the

life force is much stronger. Humans are sociable animals and we need company. Company helped stopped me dwelling on what could happen and, from time to time, when someone said something light or made a joke, things seemed a little better for a brief while.

Every now and again, guards would arrive without notice and take one of us out for a beating. When that happened, we let the poor person have our extra clothes to make more layers and deaden the blows.

Two days into my stay in the bigger cell, two of the prisoners, Ghasem and Bahram, were taken away. The court had found them guilty and had passed the death sentence - they were taken out to be shot. When they went, all of us in the cell were terribly shaken. We were trembling and crying as well, but our crying was silent, we had to keep our feelings hidden, we didn't want the guards to know how much we were affected by it. From that moment on, whenever we were questioned, as we all were repeatedly, we could all see in our imaginations our own deaths being played out.

Three months later, they came for me. I was shaking as, quietly, I tried to kiss my fellow prisoners. I knew death was no more than a few steps away. All the strength drained out of my body; my legs were too weak to carry me. I was blindfolded and taken from the cell to a room where, again, I was made to sit facing a wall.

This time it was a new voice that spoke to me, and I could tell from the way he talked that he was a Mullah.

'The court's decision in your case,' he said, 'was the death penalty, but I have asked for a pardon on your behalf and the appeal has been granted. During your time here you have done your religious duties correctly. You are not a noisy person and you have not drawn attention to yourself. You have been calm and done no damage in prison. For these reasons, I have spoken to the authorities and said to them - forget about killing this man. Your property has been confiscated and, as my appeal was unofficial, there is nothing I can do to change that.'

The Mullah asked me to sign some papers. I was so surprised and relieved at my reprieve that I signed without question. I was still blindfolded and my hand had to be guided to the paper.

After I had signed, my personal belongings were returned to me... my watch, my belt, my wallet, and so forth. But, apart from those few things, I had lost everything I had ever owned.

The Mullah accompanied me when I left prison. He told me that, from now on, I should go by the name of Haj Agha. He said he had saved my life because he thought that I was a good man. He said that, if I could leave Iran, I should go now. If I was arrested a second time, he warned, I would be killed for certain.

It was clear I had to go, but I had a problem; when they arrested me, all that time ago, they'd taken my passport. Some time later a friend, someone that I really could trust, arranged for me to leave Iran via Turkey, head for the safety of other countries and find a place to start a new life.

***

From Turkey, I went on to travel throughout the world. I visited much of Eastern Europe and Russia, but they didn't hold my interest. I had come from Hell and was trying to find Paradise. I travelled to Latin America, still searching, then on to Syria, Jordan, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden and Norway. The more I travelled, the more I came to realise that there are no paradises

Then the wife of a friend suggested that I should come to the UK. I accepted her invitation and for a while I lived in Essex, as a guest in the country. It was here in England I learnt that I could claim asylum.

It took a long time, but finally the Home Office granted me asylum status and they gave me a British Passport. After my arrest, a year after the revolution, I was officially retired and I have lived on my Iranian retirement benefits, pension, and British Government benefits since then.

I didn't find life in Essex very stimulating. I went to visit a friend in Brighton and was struck by the place. This was a place I enjoyed, especially the sea and the cliffs, and I found the countryside beautiful as it changed through the seasons. In Brighton I found a place where I could relax and find peace; a peace that allowed me, in my mind, to travel anywhere I pleased.

Once settled in Brighton, I considered sending my non-political poems to be published in Iranian newspapers, but there was always the thought that this might make trouble for me again. My dearest wish is to be published but, every time I think about it, there is always the shadow of the past hovering behind me and I tell myself to forget it.

I have written one long poem since I've been here and its title is 'Problem Shadow.' I have only one dream - that my life emerges from the darkness and is returned to the light again, but that, I think, may be impossible.

(KR's story was written in his own handwriting, in Farsi. He asked for the handwritten copy back straight away, saying, 'My handwriting has got me into terrible trouble before.' KR's period of incarceration took place in Evin Prison, Iran's most notorious jail. VG)

Romeo

Romeo is from the Yemen. He likes being called Romeo and smiles when he says this. He is twenty years old and has been here in England with some of his family for six years. He spoke to us for a little while, but became too sad to continue.

We lived in a big city in Yemen. We came here because of the fighting and for jobs. My mother and father died in Yemen. Both of them got ill, kidney problems I think; my father first then, quite some time after, my mother. After that I lived with my sister and her husband. But this makes me sad. I don't want to look back, only forward.

Brighton and Hove in the summer is OK – but in the winter it is terrible. Terrible. Because of the rain, and the cold.

I have plans for the future. I would like to get married. I would like to find a nice girl here in England, or maybe back home, in Yemen. Maybe next year...

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ISBN 0-904733-77-7

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