Friday in thick August heat, the holy day of rest, the result of an online classified ad. Everything around her now ticks to a stop. Distant, limp trees on dry plains and the foothills lining the city blur in haze. A giant yellow generator vibrates, next to a small white trailer, where two guards—barely 18, barely heavier than their kalishnakoffs—sleep away the afternoon. For now, it's new. No bitter dust storm battles the clouds, blackbirds aren't yet buzzards, the dog has yet to thump by tied to a moped.

The young Kurdish woman, four yards down, pinning laundry and banging rugs against cinders, spots her, breaks the quiet—

My home. Go my home, come!

Running from her yard, the Kurdish woman takes her arm. And then the woman's husband in his white muddy pick-up. Come, he echoes his wife, a torso stretched through the window.

She goes. Up to their small apartment, warm and doll-like. The young woman parts the heavy red curtains, waking the man asleep on the floor, kicks him toward another room.

Here-here-here-sit, the Kurdish husband sings, pointing to the corner—a window spot, a pinkish cushion, some stray black seeds, maybe watermelon, and something grainy, maybe sugar, caught in the stitching.

She offers them the Kurdish word for thank-you. In return they give her a Kurdish phrase that translates as *on your eyes*! She knows this means *your welcome*! She has nothing more than this. From them she can take nothing more than this. Blackbirds pass, just beyond the window.

She'd said Iraqi Kurdistan and Everyone asked, *Why go there*?

Because. Why go elsewhere?

Because. She decided to think things were possible, despite anything and everything she knew. The word *possible* nuzzled, nipped, until a hole began and crawled through to where, over twenty some years, she'd slowly gone buried under herself. Not a peek of light anywhere. The word *possible* came to break it all up, throw her out, show her stuff. Because she answered the online ad and two weeks later the Kurdish Regional Government offered a year-long contract as an editor and journalist at their English-language newspaper. Because they needed someone who spoke and wrote in English. Because she needed money and could make decisions fast. Because she believed her resume was weaker than she was. Because the paper was government funded—a safe, secure job with a translator and driver, free accommodations in a guarded and spacious villa. Because it was Northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, the Land of the Kurds, the Cradle of Civilization, The Other Iraq. *Because you will fall in love with it here.*

Ask about them and she'd say they're okay—the two other women in this guarded and spacious villa. English teachers, and just as new: O from North Britain, putty arms, shifting bags of duty free Marlboros, toppled Absolute Vodka. Y from Boston, Louis Vuitton luggage, a delicate voice that calls home daily, candy-colored everything.

Their villa sits at the lip of an arid valley, near a sandbagged checkpoint, inside the alloy fence line, close to the USAID compound, a Lebanese import and trade company, Chinese engineering company, oil-this-and-that company, land mine removal organization, two Australian private security agencies, three Lebanese-owned bars, a roadside petrol stand, and several other villas, all in varying stages of completion, all in varying states of guarded.

Kurdistan's long, coarse cough, roots down, rattles deep, shoots up the torso, bleeds off flares like a sparkler, snags the throat, fragments the mouth, and nose. Just four days and it takes these three women. But it gives them something to say, some communal point among the sprouts of their difference. It takes them, this cough, the congestion of dust and generator exhaust, every time they push open or pull closed the villa's iron gate.

CHONI? HOW ARE YOU?

Not most, but some Kurdish restaurants consist of slippery objects—large creamy tiles and mustard velvet chairs—and unaffordable food, bright foods like salads and star shaped fruits. This one includes a pink-lit waterfall and no patrons other than her and the rest of the newspaper: six chain smoking men in suits of various browns and greens, hair slick and black, tea severely slurped, a masculine, acrid smell hovers, a welcome dinner. Only the editor-in-chief has words.

No one can afford it now, true, but that will change, he says, poking a forked cherry tomato in the vacant air, looking nothing like she had imagined.

He says *this will be the next Dubai. Someday I hope there will be a disco in a place like this. This place could hold a disco. This country wants to change. Soon there will be shopping malls and helicopter pads on the roofs of hotels. They are building them now. Progressive. We are progressive enough to have you here. It's not by chance that you are American. Everyone back home should be proud of you.*

He slips fast between languages and topics, mechanical. His posed questions outweighing any answers. He's the sort with a pompadour, the sort who went to *uni in Sweden*, the sort with a driver in sharkskin pants.

There are lots of opportunities for you in this region. Here, you can have it all, really, and you will—you will see, he tells her, spreading her conclusions all over the table, nimble and light as cards.

She takes it politely, a nod and a smile, some simple chirped words that quickly removed themselves from the scene. Clearly, her words aren't expected tonight and that's fine. A week here and she can't shake this tired. Everything feels giant.

Giant. Walking out the restaurant doors. The golden ticks of a distant trash fire, the smell of paper burning and singing—the shrill sounds from the throats of invisible women beyond the fence line.

(Everyone: Most would never remember which *stan*. Some expected she'd come back decapitated. Regardless they admitted—mostly while drunk and far into another time—that yes they'd felt proud. None of it will matter.)

The editor-in-chief would rather start her editing the stories of the others.

Until you feel at home to write your own stories, he says, a large, stiff smile.

So she edits—fixes their words, swaps them out for others, rearranges, respells, alters fragments. It falls into place quick in this smoky box of an office, six days a week and into the nights. 3 computers, 1 couch, a TV flashing Swedish videos and streams of English Aljazeera. Sometimes as they speak, she adds details they lack. They resent this, or so she assumes by the way they swerve from English to Kurdish, the heavy pauses and changing of topics when her questions come, sometimes forgetting she exists for most of the day. But they like her, she assumes, too—judging by the constant tulip shaped glasses of tea that take up her desk, and the aggressive way they insist she take their cigarettes. And it will do.

WHAT'S NOT PREPARED FOR

Here. A dust storm comes with gristle in the bread, cigarette cellophane wrapped around the gate, a blue plastic bag affixed to the window. It's weakening her skin, thinning it ugly. She knows soon the bones will break through. Thorny in the bright dry day.

These tablets of expired Ibuprofen, imported from India, this hole in an old stonewall pharmacy, this leather lump man, haggling the price from 50 dollars to 1.

Insane. Another word to learn in Kurdish.

Eastern toilets. Hovering above the hole, knees over feet, facing forward, taking the plastic water can from the corner, either blue or salmon pink, tilting and hoping for water, cupping the water in the palm, splashing up and wiping, repeating as needed. (If and when possible, taking Kleenex, napkins, whatever might be scrounged. Throw in trash not down hole!)

An Aussie and a Lebanese, two villas down, here doing airport security. From the start they stay constant, somewhere between nuisance and sitcom, opening her door, refrigerator, their mouths, their spilled drinks sticking to her rooftop, taking over tables with their chewy piles of paper and wrappers.

Or, like tonight—Skye vodka and Dunhill cigarettes.

Y says, *no, would rather go to bed.* O says, *you're tired because you're too sober.*

Maybe.

We can change that.
Nope.

Y has a story about the time she drank out of the wrong 7-Up glass, but not now, another night.

(Ask Y why Kurdistan, and you'll hear about her uncle in Saudi Arabia, what he has to do with announcing Ramadan. Some administrative link between the moon's crescent, a month of fasting and how the Muslim world finds out it's time. How exactly, Y can't say, but she knows he's wealthy and keeps the king's number on speed dial. If you ask her what this has to do with Kurdistan, she'll respond, *actually nothing,* blushing, raking a candy pink nail over a hair wisp.)

Standing with the Aussie at the railing. She leans far until a head rush pulls her back. He spits into the dark below, tells her why he hates the Vietnamese. A sign to sleep, she thinks. Then the minaret—full-bellied, graceful, bending long with dawn's call to prayer.

Wow. It's morning. Yawning, his sour breath everywhere.

Yep. Out there, she says, nodding toward the orange crack shaping the city from blackness.

People have already driven places to sit on their knees and talk to God. People have already slept and woke and we

Edit. An essay about a poet who wrote about nights darker than his lover's hair. Poems more beautiful than death. A poet who once lived in prison, briefly in Sweden and most often in a tin-mud house. A poet who took a bullet in the mouth while walking through a park, protesting government oppression.

Her question squeezes them into their tea—maybe they've mistranslated.

More *beautiful* than death?

MAX

(as in *Mad Max*, named by the Aussie) has matted hair
and dirt gaunt cheeks, always seems drunk but not and
those who look close enough (no one other than her, she's
convinced) know. Catch him at the just-right time, he'll tell
you about anything. All the engineering degrees, how he
brought the water here, how he squeaks electricity from the
USAID compound's generators and pumps his TV up with
life, colors, how he built the TV, how he built the colors,
his bike, his cardboard walls, okra, wires and rafters, how he
lived midair to bring the water down, how he died during
war with Iran and went to Abu Ghraib, how he woke and
found himself here cooking French fries on Thursday nights,
how his English got so good.

Inside the villa, BBC reports a Turkish invasion could roll in soon, north from the Qandils, where Turkey touches Iran and Iraq. Again, the Turks against the PKK guerillas—the armed struggle, the gutted-out rocks, the packed-in pistols. Again with the shelling, collapsing mud brick, burning valley orchards and black hide tents. Again the dulled-down political traction, the blown-up bus, the caves of Chinese rocket launchers and grenades. Again the displaced, villages stinking with what remains behind. It could reach as far as Erbil this time. It will reach her and Everybody would have been right. Surely there'll evacuate, take precaution, the USAID compound will close, the international school, too. Evacuation. She sees herself and others, collected together, stranded and sprawled over the airport lobby's carpet, backpacks as pillows, coffee and card games, helpless as to what's next or where. She thinks, Why not?

Invasion, evacuation, the Lebanese laughs, shaking some word-grunts loose from his head, *not even close. For sure.*

(She sees the shame in her thoughts dragging through her. Impossible to pin.)