

Poetry Across Time



Conflict



At the Border, 1979

By Choman Hardi

Defining 'Refuge' ...



1. Can you **define** the word refuge?
2. What makes a **home**?
3. What is the difference between a Refugee and a **Migrant**?

What does the word refuge mean to you?

Rowan Williams

What does the word refuge mean to you?

**Camila
Batmanghelidjh**

What is the Simple Acts campaign trying to promote?

What does the word refuge mean to you?

Alan Johnstone

What does the word refuge mean to you?

Nick Clegg





Discuss/Identify

At the Border, 1979

By Choman Hardi

Choman Hardi was born in Kurdistan and raised in Iraq and Iran. She admits to having a difficult relationship with her homeland and came to the UK in 1993 where she was educated at Queens College Oxford, University College London, and University of Kent in Canterbury. Hardi used to translate her poems but found that it didn't work. She says, "Kurdish belongs to a very different literary tradition - it's a lot more colourful, elaborate and abstract, whereas contemporary English poetry is very understated, and quiet."



'At the border, 1979' addresses the myths and stories created by immigrants about their homelands. It talks about the moment of crossing the Iranian border back to Iraqi Kurdistan when, at the age of 5, I realised that much of what I had been told about Kurdistan was not true. You're always idolising your homeland and when you get there, you're disappointed, and you want to run away, but then after a few years you want to go back. So there's this constant cyclical push, but really, that place you left will never exist again. That world is gone, and you keep searching for it, thinking that when you go back you'll find it, but you never do.

Iraqi Kurds

Choman Hardi was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1974, but her family fled to Iran while she was still a baby. When she was five years old, Saddam Hussein became president of the Iraqi Republic and she returned with her family to the country of her birth. At the age of 14, however, the Kurds in Iraq were attacked with chemical weapons. There were mass killings and disappearances and once again Hardi's family was forced into exile.



Iraqi Kurds

The Kurdish people are an Iranian people native to the Middle East, mostly inhabiting a region known as Kurdistan, which includes adjacent parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. They do not have a nation state and, as such, are often seen as an ethnic minority by the governments of these countries.

In the 1970s, the Iraq regime initiated an Arabisation program that moved Arabs into the oil-rich regions of Kurdistan. This action was supported by Iran who cut supplies to Iraqi Kurds. Between 1975 and 1978, 200 000 Kurds were deported from their homes to other parts of Iraq.

In the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq war provided another opportunity to promote anti-Kurdish policies and though Iraq was widely condemned by the international community, it has never been taken to account for oppressive measures such as the murder of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians. In 1988 the campaign of the Iraqi government against the Kurds was called Anfal (spoils of war). It led to the destruction of two thousand villages and the death of 50 000 to 100 000 Kurds.

In 1991, 1.5 million Kurds abandoned their homes and fled to the Turkish and Iranian borders. Close to 20 000 died due to exhaustion, lack of food and exposure to cold and disease. It was only this that prompted the UN to condemn the repression of the Iraqi Kurds and allow them access to international humanitarian organisations.



Summary: At the Border, 1979

The poet describes how, at the age of five, she and her family crossed back into Iraq, the country where she had been born. She remembers her sister's naive playful attitude, the sternness of the border guards, the mothers being very emotional because they could return home, and one man's display of affection for his homeland. Since she was so young, she could not understand why a 'thick iron chain' should make any difference between two countries that looked identical to her: the soil 'continued on the other side', it was raining on both sides of the chain, and the same Kurdistan mountains surrounded them. Yet the adults were behaving as though something important was happening.



At the Border, 1979

'It is your last check-in point in this country!'
We grabbed a drink -
soon everything would taste different.

The land under our feet continued
divided by a thick iron chain.

My sister put her leg across it.
'Look over here,' she said to us,
'my right leg is in this country
and my left leg in the other.'
The border guards told her off.

My mother informed me: We are going home.
She said that the roads are much cleaner
the landscape is more beautiful
and people are much kinder.

Dozens of families waited in the rain.
'I can inhale home,' somebody said.
Now our mothers were crying. I was five years old
standing by the check-in point
comparing both sides of the border.

The autumn soil continued on the other side
with the same colour, the same texture.
It rained on both sides of the chain.

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

CHOMAN HARDI

Suggests control by officials

At the Border, 1979

What does this word suggest?

'It is your last **check-in point** in this country!'
We grabbed a drink -
soon everything **would taste different.**

Why will everything taste different?

The land under our feet continued divided by a thick iron chain.

What does this suggest?

My sister put her leg across it.
'Look over here,' she said to us,
'my right leg is in this country
and my left leg in the other.'
The border guards told her off.

What do you notice about the language used in this line?

Mother's exaggeration suggests?

My mother informed me: We are going home.
She said that the roads are **much** cleaner
the landscape is **more** beautiful
and people are **much** kinder.

Caesura - makes the mother's announcement seem grand and significant

What does the adult's reaction imply?

Dozens of families waited in the rain.
'I can **inhale** home,' somebody said.
Now our mothers were crying. I was five years old
standing by the check-in point
comparing both sides of the border.

Logical behaviour in comparison to the adults

Natural qualities remain the same - divisions are imposed by people.

The **autumn soil continued** on the other side
with the **same** colour, the **same** texture. **Repetition used.**
It rained on both sides of the chain.

What is the speaker suggesting?

Why? How does the speaker feel about the border guards?

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his **muddy** homeland
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

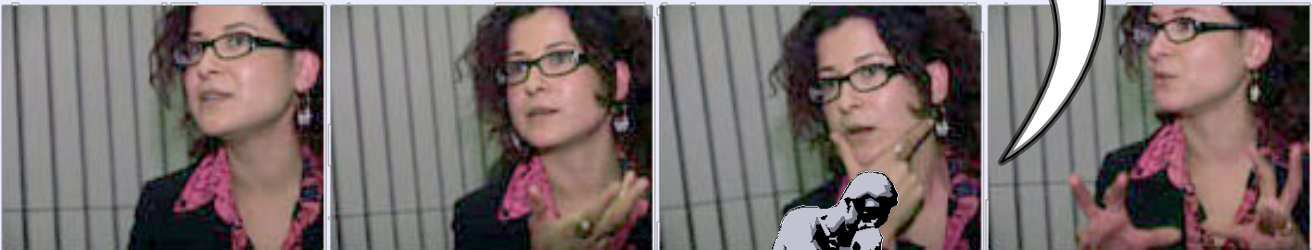
His reaction seems exaggerated as the land is nothing special.

Writing in a second language:

Writing in a **second language** is a form of distancing. **Nostalgia** is very difficult in poetry: strong emotions can really turn people off. It's important to have a bit of **distance** in time and space, and using another language will allow you to write about it a bit more **neutrally**.



What effects are created by the poet's use of language?



first person

direct speech

passive voice



Exploring the text:



Repetition

- * What words are repeated throughout the poem?
- * Why?



Associations

- * How does the poet make different uses of the idea of a chain?
- * Why does someone claim to be able to 'inhale' home?



Emotions

- * Track the different perspectives of the poem.
- * What do you notice?



Exploring the text:



1. How is direct speech used?
2. Which people are mentioned specifically?
Do you think it is significant that a father is not mentioned?
3. What does the word 'autumn' in 'autumn soil' suggest?
Does it just refer to the time of year?
4. Why is the word 'same' repeated?
5. What is the weather like?
What does this suggest?
6. What does the phrase 'his muddy homeland' suggest about the country they are returning to?
7. What effect does placing 'We are going home' in italics have?
8. When are short sentences used?
What is their effect?
9. Why is the chain described as 'a thick iron chain'?
10. What is the effect of placing the word 'divided' at the beginning of a line?
11. What is implied by 'She said' at the beginning of line 12?
12. What is the narrative perspective of the poem?
13. Which senses are mentioned in the poem?
14. A man bends down to kiss the ground.
What does the posture of the man suggest?
15. What is the effect of placing 'I was five years old,' at the end of a line?
16. Where do lines end and why?



Endings:

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.



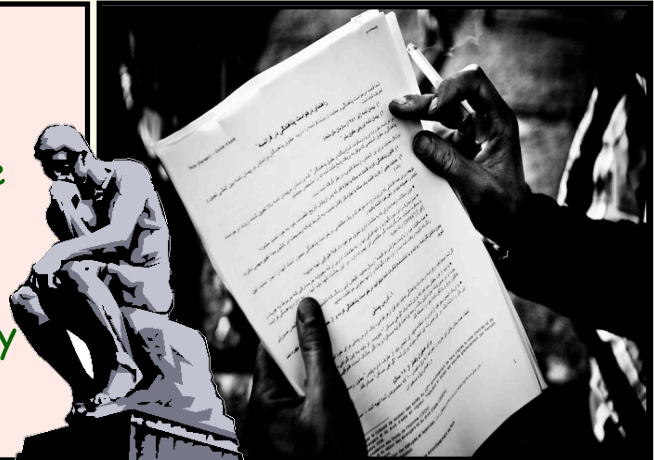
Then the chain was removed to let us through.

A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.

The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

Reflection...

- * What do you notice about the way that Hardi makes use of language here?
- * Why describe it as 'his muddy homeland'?



Look at the images below:



Can you find the quotation/idea that they refer to?

Question Time!

1. Why do you think the adults become emotional?
2. What examples of humour can you find in the poem?
3. Why does the poet use humour in parts of their poem?
4. Why does the poet use the word 'muddy' to describe the homeland?
5. How do you think the speaker feels about the whole situation?



If home is where the heart is...

If home is where the heart is
Then may your home be blessed
A shelter from the storms of life
A place of rest,
And when each day is over
And toil put in its place
Your home's dear warmth
Will bring its smile
To light the saddest face!

JOHN MCLEOD

Links:

The poet talks about her work and the poetry of human rights:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Literature/exiledpoets_3035.jsp

The poet talks about her work:

<http://www.kurdishaspect.com/chomanhardi.html>

An interview with the poet:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singleInterview.do?interviewId=13638>

About the poet:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=13036>

Poet explains why she had to flee her country:

<http://news.bhopal.net/2006/09/27/why-i-had-to-flee-my-country/>

The Kurds - People without a country timeline:

http://www.britannica.com/worldsapart/3_timeline_print.html

Refugee Week (Simple Acts):

<http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk/simple-acts>

