

Jalal Barzanji is from Kurdistan. He has been in Canada since 1998. A poet & human rights activist for many years in his own country, he published a multitude of poems & articles on individual freedom & freedom of expression. In Edmonton he helped established the Canadian Kurdish Friendship Association and the Edmonton Immigrant Support Network Society. He was a 2004 recipient of a RISE award and was recently appointed PEN Canada Writer-in-Exile. Jalal has three children and works with the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative.

Home in a Suitcase

by Jalal Barzanji

Istanbul to Edmonton is seventeen hours by air
Flying across the Adriatic Sea
the fabric of the ocean floor shortens our exile to waterland
For we and our home live inside a suitcase
From the veiled city of Sevas to the airport of Istanbul
Thirteen hours by bus
The refugees fly at dawn

Some came from very far away
Some were sleeping on chairs
Some were preparing their hearts for the flight
Some were preparing their bodies for freedom
Some were learning a second language, using a dictionary
Some were taking their hats out of their suitcase to wear on the plane
Some were missing home, and others
... could not wait to get away from home
A late fall evening
We and our home in a suitcase

From Ankara city we went to Sevas
Seven hours by bus
Not too long ago
We fled civil war

to the U.N. in Ankara to claim refugee status
Luckily accepted
We were immigrants
at a Canadian embassy
In Ankara six troubled months
In Oluss district
A pool of refugees and the displaced Turkish Kurds
Every morning at dawn a little Kurdish girl
and I walked down 122 stone stairs to Downtown,
She dreams of selling water to buy bread—
and I... to stroll away my challenging fate
I am not a story teller
I speak from my heart

At dawn we board the plane
the first flight
my wife and three little children
ever had
The fear and worry of my wife so strong
She even forgot

That ten thousand feet is our height
That one thousand KM an hour is our speed
Me

When the Iraqi war plane bombed our house in 1961
Since the war took away my first childhood ball
The plane snapping me
It is my fourth flight
... but only one was free

When I was a child
I flew with my kite
A flight with no fear

Second after the reform of the Soviet Union—
I flew to Ukraine en route to Sweden, to claim refugee status
At the airport control in Kiev
I knew it was a fake visa...
 Just as they knew

My third flight:
Deportation from Kiev back to Istanbul
Lonely—hollow as my pocket

Our plane left the ground, discarded
Heading towards the sky, towards freedom
The plane is a swing for my children,
No fear across their faces
The pinnacle of the sky is my wish for the plane—
 to reach god
The plane ascends towards heaven
I wish for window seat,
Watching the clouds fill it
We are above the clouds
Above the rain!
Above the snow!
Above the crowd!
Above the powers!
 Of oppression
We pass through sky, feeling full of blue
 The good kind
Full blue thoughts of separation from our past

Six hours in transit through Amsterdam
Looking like broken birds' wings

Carrying our I.O.M bags
No courage to leave our gate,
Afraid of further loss, feeling lost

In Amsterdam we bought a phone card,
To call home:

 We have passed a quarter of the path to exile

 We are still alive

 We may not come back

 We are strays in Amsterdam

Memory is difficult to maintain

Again we pass through the sky,
Leaving the Netherland flowers to their beauty
Further west, our plane smoothly passing the Atlantic sky
Faster than the wind,
Even faster than our plane
 is our hope

There is no sky left to miss—

 we are the sky

We are following the sunset, the horizon

 is ahead of us

We pass through space to reach our new home in Canada

Alive in February snow

The home presents no address yet, but

The home is as beautiful as our dream!

Istanbul: the biggest city in Turkey

Sevas: a city in Turkey

Ankara: the Capital city of Turkey

Kiev: the Capital city of Ukraine

Oluss: the downtown district of Ankara

I.O.M: one of the organizations working with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) that facilitates the transportation of accepted refugees to their new countries.