

vides — or unites, depending on your philosophical bent — the sands of the Sahara and Africa's tropical forests. It is a belt of semiarid grassland that separates (or joins) Arabs and blacks, Muslims and Christians, nomads and farmers, a landscape of greens and a world of tans. Some fifty million of the world's poorest, most disempowered, most forgotten people hang fiercely on to life there. And for thirty-four days in Darfur we joined their ranks.

There were three of us.

Idriss Anu drove the Toyota truck that would be stolen by militants. Daoud Hari was the translator, and for this he would eventually pay with severe beatings. We were en route to the village of Furawiya when the progovernment guerrillas rose silently from the grass.

"Stay in the car," Daoud said.

But it was already too late. Even as the gunmen sauntered up, their hair matted in dreadlocks and their chests slung with small blackened things that looked like dried ears but which were Koric amulets, we still hadn't grasped that we had crossed a threshold where it no longer mattered what passport you carried, that you were young and loved, that your skin was supposedly not of a torturable color, or that you were a noncombatant. Words had lost all currency as words, and by the time the grinning teenager with the Kalashnikov reached for my door handle, we were condemned to live and die according to choices made by others. We had become truly Sahelian.

The Sahel is a line.

But it is also a crack in the heart — a tightrope, a brink, a ledge. See how its people walk: straight-backed on paths of red dust, placing one foot carefully before the other, as if balanced upon a knife-edge. The Sahel is a bullet's trajectory. It is the track of rains that fall but never touch the sand. It is a call to prayer and a call for your blood, and for me a desert road without end.

Gaga Refugee Camp, Chad

My journey began among refugees in eastern Chad. This is where I met George Bush's father.

Bush tyrannized his family's small plot of sand. He threw his mother's battered dishes to the ground, pulled on visitors' noses,

PAUL SALOPEK

Lost in the Sahel

FROM *National Geographic*

Darfur — The Road to Furawiya

THE ROAD WAS NOT REALLY A ROAD. Its two ruts led into Darfur, to the war in western Sudan, from the unmarked border of Chad. So much of the Sahel was like this — unmapped, invisible, yet a boundary nonetheless. The land stretched away in a monotony of gravel pans and dried grasses so translucent — so brittle — they seemed made of blown glass. The iron horizons never budged. Yet we were crossing boundaries with every passing hour, mostly without seeing them.

After I was arrested and imprisoned in Darfur, an American soldier told me, shaking his head in disgust, "You fly over this place and all you see is miles and miles of nothing." But that was an outsider's delusion. Every outcrop and plain was parsed by unseen tangents, lines, ghostly demarcations. They portioned off the claims of tribes, individuals, clans. They bulged and recoiled according to war and season. No-go zones encircled water holes. Certain unseen lines, *masars*, dictated the migration routes of nomads. There was nothing haphazard about any of this. To cross one line or to venture too far from another might invite retribution, even death. And that was the ultimate line of them all in the Sahel: the one between knowing and ignorance.

The Sahel itself is a line.

The word means "shore" in Arabic, which implies a continental margin, a grand beginning and a final end. Stretching across northern Africa roughly along the thirteenth parallel, the Sahel di-

and scampered away giggling. He got away with this because he was an only son. His elder sister, age four, despised him. Bush was fat-cheeked and two. "Booshi!" the refugees cooed. "Boosh-ka!" He was clearly a great camp favorite. This was in the Gaga settlement, where more than seven thousand Darfuris lived and died under UN canvas.

"Only George Bush can stop the Arabs in our land," said Bush's papa, Ahmed Juma Abakar. He corralled the boy in his lap. "When he grows up, he will help kill them."

Multiple lines of identity were braided through Abakar. He was a coffee-colored African with a puff of white hair on his chin. He was a Masali, a member of one of the African farming tribes driven out of Darfur at gunpoint by the janjaweed, the Arab nomads armed by the Arab-dominated government of Sudan. He detested Arabs. Yet he himself spoke Arabic. He also served sugary tea in shot glasses like an Arab, wore a white Arabic robe, and prayed five times a day toward Mecca. I, too, find this puzzling.

The war in Darfur has killed at least two hundred thousand people and displaced more than two million. It may be the first genocide of the new century. But it also happens to be one of several similar, if smaller, conflicts boiling across the Sahel. Chad, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal — low-intensity battles smoldered in each nation I visited. Niger was expelling its Mahamid nomads. Tuaregs were ambushing African soldiers in Mali. These clashes were parochial, obscure, yet part of an overarching quarrel: the eternal struggle over grass, water, and soil between pastoralists and settled peoples. Viewed this way, the Sahel represents the oldest killing field in human history. In the Sahel, Cain is still trading blows with Abel.

In Darfur the violence is infamous because Sudan's government had cynically armed one side — the Beni Huseins, Ereigats, and other Arab herders — against rebellious African farmers such as the Masalits and Furs. These two rivals, both Muslim, had earlier evolved a complex entente. When a farmer speared a nomad's camel, elders docked part of his harvest. The plaintiff usually claimed the grain in a hungry year. It was an antique food bank system. Murder between tribes was settled with a sliding scale of blood money — a hundred camels for a man, fifty for a woman.

A ten-pound machine with eleven moving parts has erased this legacy.

The flood of cheap Kalashnikov rifles into Darfur has devalued individual responsibility in warfare. It has undercut the tribal authorities. Young men who once sang songs to their favorite cows now serenaded their guns: "The Kalash brings cash / Without a Kalash you're trash."

"We used to get along," Abakar said. "The Arabs would graze their camels on our fallow fields. They were my father's friends."

I asked when Arabs and Africans would be brothers again. Abakar looked at me with genuine incredulity. He then tuned his transistor radio to the BBC. The Israelis were bombing Lebanon. "Allah-u akbar!" the old Muslim tribesman said, cheering on the Israel Defense Forces. He raised George Bush's chubby little arms in triumph.

Darfur — Towé Village

On our first night in Darfur, the gunmen forced Idriss and Daoud into a pickup truck and drove them off into the moonlight. They tortured them out there, tied to a thorn tree for three days. Me they pummeled without enthusiasm inside an abandoned hut in the burned-out village of Towé. Between sessions, I lay trussed on my belly, breathing hard against a dirt floor that smelled of rancid butter. I squinted out a brilliant doorway at two women.

They were planting sorghum in a dry wadi.

The women's work appeared rudderless. They planted their seeds in lines that wriggled across the field, nudged here and there by whims of conversation. The older woman swerved whenever she told jokes, and her seed rows lurched like cardiograms. She giggled into her hands often, and I decided she must be mad. The younger one was more solemn. She toiled briskly, with a sense of purpose, as if engaged in a race, and her planting was much straighter. A tiny child crawled at her side, trying to eat the seed grain. The women labored like this all day. Then, late in the afternoon, they quarreled, and their plantings veered apart in rancor.

It occurred to me that the women were doing more than growing food. They were sowing their autobiographies.

Sex jokes, village gossip, little wisps of song, rebukes to children — all of it lay scribbled in the eccentric lines of their crops.

Women have been singled out for maximum violence in Darfur. Mass rapes by the janjaweed are systematic and well-documented.

As part of a Sudanese campaign of ethnic cleansing, women have been burned alive, shot, bayoneted, and dumped down wells. These stories, too, would be recorded in their fields. Lying in the hut, I imagined flying low over the savannas of Darfur and reading the women's lives inscribed in plots of millet, peanuts, and sorghum. (See that row of melons ending abruptly at midfield? A Fur grandmother dropped her seed bucket and ran at the sound of approaching hoofbeats.)

In Towé the women were Zaghawa seminomads. The laughing one was named Fatim Yousif Zaite. She wasn't crazy. She was forty, with the burning, clairvoyant gaze of the starving, and a smile that transmitted the innocence of her heart. She brought me gourds of *asida*, a yellow lentil paste she could hardly afford to share. Once, while untied to eat, I grabbed both her dusty hands in mine. She sprang back in fear.

But I only wanted to thank you, Fatim. You will always be with me. The janjaweed may toss your kids into vats of boiling water as they had done to children in another village, and the Sudanese Air Force may bomb your wretched fields as they had before, killing five of your family members. But for three days in Darfur you were my mother.

Kirou Bugaje, Niger

A few months later I was in Niger. I took a bus east. The plains turned lush.

Oxcarts jerked along red roads, hauling mountains of peanuts. Children's laughter dribbled from the high grasses. The *thok-thok-thok* of women pounding millet telegraphed the news of full granaries.

This was a surprise. The Sahel of the imagination is a geographic hunger pang. Cataclysmic droughts scorched northern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. The most recent famine lashed Niger as recently as 2005. In places, the Sahel continues to starve, to lose ground to the Sahara. On the banks of the Niger River houses lie buried in coffins of sand.

Yet in Niger, a country twice the size of France, researchers have been fascinated to discover that nineteen thousand square miles of savanna are more vegetated today than twenty or thirty years ago.

Lost in the Sahel

Similar regeneration of trees, grasses, and bushes appears to be under way in parts of Mali and Burkina Faso. The most precious line in the Sahel has always been green. And lately it has been growing thicker, brighter, more lustrous.

Why?

Ecologists disagree. Some credit global warming, which may be boosting rainfall in sections of northern Africa. Others say years of warfare and chaos in the Sahel have depopulated the African countryside, allowing millions of acres to lie fallow and recover.

At the Hausa village of Kirou Bugaje, the plump chief, Abdurahaman Ademu, had his own explanation: the miraculous leaf of a tree.

"The gao improves our yields of millet and sorghum," Ademu said, padding in a white robe and sandals across his tree-shaded fields. "That's why we don't cut the trees down anymore. We plant around them."

The gao, an indigenous acacia known to biologists as *Faidherbia albida*, is a nitrogen-fixer like the alfalfa plant. Its leaf litter is rich in nutrients. Twenty-five years ago Ademu and his people had wiped out virtually every tree within a day's walk to feed themselves in a famine. When their crops failed, they ate the leaves. When the leaves were gone, they razed entire groves to sell for firewood and buy food. But eventually, somewhere, someone remembered that the yields of grain were richer when sown in the fertile shade of surviving gaos. Husbanding wild trees is an ancient practice in the Sahel. Its importance was rediscovered. And from there, the dusty boughs of the gao spread in widening circles of green. Today, without fanfare or mercy concerts, some of the world's poorest farmers are busy stitching huge tracts of the Sahel back together again.

Ademu had three wives. Their names were Zeinahu, Hajara, and Hadjia. He had twenty children whom he called Hey You and This One. He was amused that I found his village beautiful.

At dusk the sky turned orange, and we ate spaghetti drowned in palm oil. The village chirped and squealed like a playground. A white moon rose, and out on the savanna the Fulani nomads were driving their lyre-horned cattle south into Nigeria. They were armed with bows, and some carried broadswords strapped to their backs. There hadn't been a war for years. Drifting to sleep on a prayer rug outside Ademu's family mosque, it was possible to imag-

ine that there was nothing in the world that could not be re-claimed.

Darfur — Ghost House Prison

On the third day of our captivity in Darfur, the gunmen traded Idriss, Daoud, and me to the Sudanese Army for a box of uniforms. A military helicopter ferried us to El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, but over Kuum, a loud banging made my muscles grab. We were taking rebel ground fire. Holes blinked open in the fuselage, and a bespectacled officer sitting across from me toppled out of his seat. He rolled around on the deck clawing at his back. It was just a spent round, so he survived. His comrades congratulated him as if he'd won the lottery. But the pilot knew better. After a hard landing at the airport, he jumped out of the machine and strode away without looking back.

We were taken to a "ghost house" — one of Sudan's many secret prisons. It was night. A gang of armed toughs screamed into our faces and shoved us against a mud wall. They called us spies and waved their cell phones in front of my eyes. The tiny screens displayed burning towers and Lilliputian images of Osama bin Laden. I thought: This is the end. But of course it was only the beginning. What can be said about those days?

An agent of the *istikhbarat* pawed through my cell's pit toilet each morning, looking for what I can't say. His work was unrewarded because I was on a hunger strike. I was protesting my being held separately, in solitary confinement. I resumed eating on the eighth day when the guards informed me they would force-feed me through a rubber tube. "Like Guantanamo," they said.

My dreams reached malarial intensity. I dreamed of my wife and of running through the wheat north of Mosul where the falling Iraqi shells made the sound of bed sheets ripping and of Don Benito soaking his oak plow in the ranch well in the Sierra Madre. I dreamed of men I had worked with at sea, and where did you go, Edie Brickell, and of *la vida loca*.

During one of the midnight interrogations, I spotted a small, spiky animal sniffing its way across the interrogation room floor. It looked like a hedgehog. I was lightheaded with hunger. I had long since run out of things to say. I reached down from my chair.

"Don't touch the hedgehog," the colonel said.

"Okay."

I reached down again.

"Don't — touch — the — hedgehog!" It was his pet.

I remember this distinctly: my face felt odd. It was my first smile in ten days.

Kano, Nigeria

I bumped south in a bush taxi shared with five Fulani nomads and 140 pounds of goat cheese bound for the markets of Nigeria. There were flies.

But for a fly, all of Africa might be Muslim.

Islam galloped across northern Africa by horse and camel while Christian Europe dozed under rulers like Henry the Quarrelsome or Ethelred the Unready. By A.D. 1000 Muslim emissaries — warriors, gold merchants, slavers, scholars, holy men — had planted the green flag of Muhammad and Allah on West African shorelines that wouldn't see the bleached sails of a Portuguese caravel for four centuries. But the bite of the tsetse fly, *Glossina*, barred the way south. A vector for the blood parasite that causes sleeping sickness, the insect killed off numberless waves of invaders and their horses in its lethal domain, the open woodlands below the Sahara.

Today the tsetse still reign, and the religious border still holds. North of the fly zone, Africa remains austere Muslim; to the south lies a steamy patchwork of Christianity. I encountered this frontier in Kano.

Nigeria's second largest city lay smeared inside its smog. It received few tourists. It had a reputation for pious mayhem.

Hundreds had died in riots between hotheads among Kano's majority Muslims and thousands of minority Christian migrants from Nigeria's south. Conservative imams encouraged the governor to impose Islamic law, or sharia, on the state — a provocation in secular Nigeria — further inflaming tensions. Street signs in the city were written in Arabic, and the shops were stocked by Lebanese, Yemeni, and Egyptian traveling salesmen. Motorcycle taxis didn't pick up women: contact with male drivers was deemed unseemly. A few years ago, local officials boycotted a UN anti-polio campaign, claiming the vaccines were sterilizing Muslim girls.

Polio, which had been almost wiped out in Africa, has since rebounded in Nigeria and is reinfesting surrounding countries.

There is now a black Taliban movement in Kano. One local mul-lah dubs himself "Kandahar," after the capital of Afghanistan's fanatics.

"I would pay with my blood if I preached inside the Old City," said Foster Ekeleme, the Methodist bishop in Kano's Christian outskirts.

Ekeleme was an Igbo from the southeast who moved with the stiff gait of a retired boxer. He had survived good and bad times between Kano's two great faiths. When I visited, he complained bitterly that his flock was targeted every time the United States bombed another Muslim country, but he ended with a plea. "I am hopeful! We Christians and Muslims must learn to coexist. Look — even my night watchman is Muslim!"

It was true. A bored Hausa youth in a white skullcap leaned against Ekeleme's church. The church itself was a fortress of raw concrete circled by a high iron fence. The fence was spiked. All that was missing was a moat. Suspecting that the Christians were speaking from a position of weakness, I consulted a Muslim thinker.

Sahisu Shehu was a mellow scholar with droopy eyelids. He taught Islamic studies at Bayero University, where hand-painted billboards exhorted students to Dress Fashionable and Decently.

This is what the professor said: while it was lamentable that people had been burned, hacked, and shot to death for their choice of gods in Kano, the real enemy was poverty. Christian Igbo and Muslim Hausas required jobs. The youths were unemployed, restless. As for Islam in the Sahel, it was neither extremist nor intolerant — it was a very old type of Sufism expounded by the moderate Imam Malik; a nomad's faith rooted in the traders' live-and-let-live ethic.

"The Sahel isn't a wall between Africans," Shehu said. "It's a crossroads — a bridge."

Today that bridge is groaning. Both the Muslim and Christian populations of Africa have boomed over the past ten years. In the Sahel, where birrathres are among the highest in the world, mosques financed by conservative Middle Eastern states have sprouted in cities and villages. For their part, many of Africa's Christians aren't of the turn-the-cheek Presbyterian sort. Church loudspeakers boom out sermons, preachers bless militias, and sev-

eral of the riots in Kano were ignited by Christian massacres of Muslims elsewhere in Nigeria. But I never got to meet the extremists.

At five in the morning, my hotel phone rang. It was a secret policeman.

"Whatisyourpurposehere?" he demanded.

"Beg your pardon?"

"You must come to the lobby now!"

The tone was clear if the English wasn't. My paperwork was in order. But I panicked. I raced through the list of sources who might have betrayed my presence in Kano, settling on a dour pharmacist who must have Googled my name and pounced on the recent headlines: SUDAN CHARGES U.S. JOURNALIST WITH ESPIONAGE.

With the echoes of cell doors clanging inside my head, I made excuses to the agent in the lobby. I frantically began hiding my notes but only managed to throw out my back lifting the room's refrigerator. I tossed my bag out the second-floor window, eased myself down the exterior sill, and dropped the last nine or ten feet to the ground. My back exploded. So I quit. I gave up. Hobbling into the lobby jackknifed at the waist, with my T-shirt on backward and my surviving notes tucked into my socks, I found the place empty. The policeman had got tired of waiting. This was Nigeria.

By sunrise I had bought all the open seats in an old Peugeot bush cab and left for Mali.

Darfur — Police Station Fail

The Russians were very drunk. There were three of them — small, medium, and large — and the Sudanese police had shot out their truck windows. The guards pitched them into our cell at midnight. The Russians had broken curfew.

They were helicopter pilots contracted to AMIS, the beleaguered African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur. One began singing patriotic songs that would last all night, and the other two asked why I was there. I told them. I had crossed into Darfur illegally, through the side door of Chad, like scores of other Western journalists. But I had been caught. I faced a twenty-year sentence. I had to repeat "spying" three times until they understood.

"Sudan" — spat the small one — "is fakit." He wore a mullet

hairdo and yellow Beate boots that curled at the tips like elf shoes. Eventually they would all be deported.

Another prisoner had meanwhile escaped in the night — a Dar-furi gunman — leaving a cupful of his blood splashed on the jail yard wall. He'd maimed himself on the concertina wire. As a result, Idriss, Daoud, and I spent the next two days locked down with sixteen other prisoners inside a fifteen-by-fifteen-foot cell. We hunted against each other in fetal positions like eggs incubating in a carton. Pickpockets, con men, goat rustlers, two street kids, and a lunatic took turns peeing out the barred door.

This was at the civilian police station, our second place of internment in El Fasher.

The cell's interior walls were polished black with human grease from the backs of sitting men. Above this wainscoting of grime rose thousands of scrawled names. And some of them were ours.

Timbuktu, Mali

In Mali I took a ferry up the Niger River to see the Sahel's most faded backwater.

Timbuktu started as a nomads' watering hole, grew by the sixteenth century into the Oxford of the Islamic world (twenty-five thousand scholars once resided there), and has faded back into a geographic coma. Its sand alleys were like solar ovens. Goats jaywalked on the main street, and dehydrated tourists sent letters postmarked from a town synonymous with the uttermost end of the Earth. I ducked into the shade of the Imam Ben Essayouti library for a glimpse of a golden age.

Banzoumana Traore was a Malian albino with hazel eyes and a loose cotton suit ablaze with blue and yellow polka dots. I looked again and saw that the dots were animalaria capsules. Traore was the archivist at the library, which housed a remnant of Timbuktu's priceless trove of medieval manuscripts. With money from South Africa, the United States, Arab countries, and Europe, small private libraries like this one were popping up all over Timbuktu. They held the Sahel's most astonishing intellectual legacy: tens of thousands of hand-lettered manuscripts, some stored in caves and household cupboards since the city's fall to the Moroccans in 1591. There was love poetry composed in Moorish Spain. There were tracts on Islamic jurisprudence and centuries-old essays on, among

other subjects, astronomy, optics, medicine, ethics, and botany. Gazing on these fragile treasures, it was hard not to lament the dearth of book learning in the Arabic-speaking world. A recent UN study found that only ten thousand books have been translated into Arabic over the past 1,200 years — barely equivalent to the number of books Spain translates every year.

Traore's bright pink index finger slid across inks concocted from lampblack. He read aloud of a slave girl in ninth-century Baghdad who shamed the caliph's advisers in a contest of wits (a lesson on women's worth), of a discourse on the Islamic propriety of smoking tobacco (the 223-year-old conclusion was positive), and of an antique memory aid for learning algebra (by matching certain tones to numbers, students could sing out equations).

Timbuktu had been ruled by the kings of Mali and Songhai, by the Moroccans and the colonial French. "Local families guarded the manuscripts through it all," a proud Traore said.

When I arrived, yet another empire was eyeing desolate Timbuktu.

U.S. Special Forces bucked through town in dusty Humvees. Having learned a lesson from Afghanistan — ignorance isn't bliss, and ruinscapes of poverty, violence, and neglect incubate a murderous rage — Washington was taking a renewed interest in Muslim black Africa. The Pentagon was spending a hundred million dollars a year to train impoverished Sahelian armies in antiterror tactics. A brand-new Africa command center, AFRICOM, would come on line in October 2008, though few African countries wished to host it.

This murky front in the global war on terrorism was yet another invisible line in the Sahel.

It zigzagged across the dunes north of Timbuktu where Green Berets taught Malian soldiers how to ambush Algeria-based jihadists. The Malians were underfed, hypercourageous, and lacked even the most basic equipment. Some were deaf. Others needed eyeglasses. "They shoot into the sand," drawled a U.S. master sergeant. The world's elite soldiers swooped down on outlying villages like well-toned aid workers, vaccinating babies, filling cavities, and deworming bony nomad cattle. But the most effective hearts-and-minds operation I saw was illicit.

His name was David. His shaved head was burned puce by the sun, his eyes glittered with resolve, and he was a sixteen-year U.S.

Army veteran. He had been deployed to Africa before and wished to convert to Islam, which shows that there is no occupation without counteroccupation. He slipped out of the Special Forces compound at 9 P.M. and drove to the mud-brick palace of Timbuktu's imam. "My gun — I forgot about my gun," he said, realizing he couldn't very well take his pistol to a conversion ceremony. He stashed the weapon under the SUV seat.

The imam was round and jolly and sat cross-legged under a whirling ceiling fan. A television muttered the latest soccer score between Lyon and Real Madrid. The imam instructed David to repeat the *shahadah* three times and lectured him at length on the five pillars of faith, in both Songhai and French.

"I missed some of that," David said.

A half dozen Malian youths took pictures with their cell phones. They were trembling with excitement. A modern centurion embracing Allah in exotic Timbuktu was a once-in-a-lifetime sight. It made almost anything seem possible. David would later be reprimanded for violating security procedures. But for a few electric minutes amid the tan dunes of Africa, the shadows of Abu Ghraib receded.

"*Fin du cérémonie!*" declared the imam, clapping his hands. He added for David's sake, "Mission accomplished!" I liked the imam immensely. He was dying to catch the end of the soccer match.

Darfur — Judiciary Prison

Thursdays were judgment day in El Fasher.

At our third jail, a concrete cellblock outside the local courthouse, Sudanese magistrates in pale blue leisure suits rendered their verdicts according to *huda*, the Islamic punitive code, and police meted out sentences on the spot with an ox-hide whip. I had never seen anyone flogged before. They forced us to watch.

The whip landed with a muffled pop on the backs, buttocks, and legs of prisoners. It was astonishing: how could human beings sweat so much — so fast? After ten blows, the prisoners were wet as swimmers. At twenty, the courtyard wall behind the whipping post was spattered with their sweat. The men's muscles spasmed. Their torsos writhed like trees in a gale. But their grit beggared belief. One middle-aged convict, a Darfuri with the respectable, middle-class look of a schoolteacher, took a hundred lashes without crying out.

When it was done, he walked with great purpose across the yard, as if on some errand, and toppled facedown in the dust. He was an adulterer.

The chief whip man was Corporal Salah.

He was built square as a butcher's block, and at age thirty, his hair was leached of color. Near the end of our imprisonment, on the days when I was feeling bright, I accepted his challenges to play chess. He almost always won. He was a student of the aggressive moves of Bobby Fischer. When he spoke, it was usually in the immature certainties of jihad — "once the world converts to Islam" — but his frequent sighs told a story of repressed ambition. At night he pored over textbooks on microbiology. He dreamed of laying his big, blunt-fingered hands on the brows of patients in hospital wards. He saw himself clad in the snowy whites of a doctor, not the coarse fatigues of a cop.

Will you believe me when I tell you that there was gentleness in Corporal Salah's heart? That he spoke to his victims tenderly, urging them not to be afraid, even as he scoured the hide on their backs?

By this time our whereabouts had become known. An American Air Force lieutenant colonel and a Marine major brought us Cheez Whiz and every other thing, and an American diplomat brought me Faulkner. Eventually Bill Richardson, governor of my home state of New Mexico, intervened. Daoud and Idriss returned to Chad, to the high wire of the Sahel. I tumbled twenty hours across the Earth in the governor's borrowed jet.

I was doing laundry two months later when the telephone rang. It took me a moment to connect the wiry voice of the caller to certain muscular hands — the fingers clamped on men's shoulders, guiding them firmly to a wall flecked with sweat.

"Hello, my friend," Corporal Salah bellowed.

He was shouting over a poor connection. He was in Khartoum, he said, where he'd been transferred, unhappily, to a bigger prison. He asked after my health. But what he really wanted to talk about was the U.S. visa lottery.

Saint-Louis, Senegal

The last line in the Sahel was the Atlantic.

The Senegalese capital of Dakar had the fevered feel of an em-

barkation point — a maritime city of pushy touts, whores for every pocketbook, and scraps of cardboard flattened on sidewalks where visa hunters camped in lines outside European embassies. A reverse trickle of European youngsters, tattooed, puffing cigarettes, self-conscious in their skins, strolled the waterfront. They rode ferries to Île de Gorée, to see the famous “doorway of no return” for slaves bound for the Americas and Europe. (In truth, few of the estimated ten to twenty-eight million Africans sold into bondage in the New World ever passed that way.) Senegalese papers told lurid tales of a new exodus: African migrants dying en masse while trying to reach the Canary Islands, an outpost of Europe, in motorized canoes.

For me the Sahel ended at the door of Didier, the captain of one of these boats. I met him in Saint-Louis.

He lived on the beach in a shack above the high-tide mark. He agreed reluctantly to talk. What he was doing was illegal. He had already steered two shiploads of Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, Nigerians, and Burkinabes to the Canaries. All had hocked their bicycles, their wives' treadle sewing machines, their parents' barren farms, their slum shacks — everything they owned to make the \$900 passage to a Sahelian's version of El Dorado: washing dishes in Valencia or hustling leatherware in the piazzas of Rome. Twelve paying customers had died on him. They had gone out of their heads, Didier explained. They guzzled seawater on the five-day, eight-hundred-nautical-mile journey through the Atlantic's swells.

“We read the Koran over them and threw them over,” he said. “Otherwise they start to stink.”

Didier was leaving that evening with another canoe. He would earn a small fortune, a thousand dollars (a good year's wages) in a week. He was beautifully muscled. Yet despite his virile swagger in brand-new jeans and red T-shirt, his glances collapsed inward with fear. He was a man poised on a gangplank. Ambulances were waiting that entire afternoon in Saint-Louis. An emigrant canoe had foundered offshore. Bodies washed up with all the skin abraded from their arms where they had clung to the doomed boat's gunwales. More than a hundred people were missing.

Tens of thousands attempt this passage every year. Hundreds die. The Europeans were sending naval vessels to try to stop them.

What was going on here could just as well be called the mass

evacuation of Africa as much as “illegal migration.” It was a desperate flight from a way we'll never be. An underpaid schoolteacher in North America or Europe earns not ten times, not twenty times, but a hundred times more than millions of Sahelians. To think such ravening disparity will somehow never touch you is foolish. In the teeming fishermen's quarter of Saint-Louis, among the shanties where battered TVs disgorged idiotic French reality shows, and in the sand alleyways speckled with goat droppings, there was talk of bigger canoes, of more barrels of diesel fuel crammed into holds — reenacting the old slave crossing to the Caribbean, to America.

I watched Didier leave at sunset.

I last saw him standing stiffly at the tiller of his boat, wearing a red slicker, nosing out of the harbor amid a screen of other fishing smacks. He did not acknowledge my wave. A little girl did cart-wheels on the beach among piles of human waste. Impossibly clean white birds pecked at things. Didier's canoe diminished into a darkening sea that seem sketched in charcoal. I was secretly with them. I saw myself huddled in that plank boat. But even if we all survived, I wasn't sure we would ever truly escape the Sahel.