Meme

Tracy Fuad

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss85/18

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
TRACY FUAD, WINNER OF THE MONTANA PRIZE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

MEME
Years ago in her kitchen, my Kurdish aunt Parween taught me how to make yaprah, stuffed vegetables and grape leaves served hot and glistening with oil at picnics and parties in Kurdistan. First, you must hollow out the vegetables, coring the eggplants with a sharp knife and scraping the inside with a spoon. You must cut the onions to the core but not past, and coax each layer apart, like separating nesting dolls. You must gently spread the grape leaves in your open palm and spoon the aromatic filling of rice and meat and dill, which you fold in tightly, so none escapes. You stack the stuffed leaves like tiny parcels in a big tin pot with an upside down plate in the bottom to keep the yaprah from burning while cooking over a low flame. The rice will expand, so you must know how to fill the vegetables with just enough: too little, and the vegetables will collapse as they steam. Too much, and the filling will spill out.

Deep in the basement of my childhood home, there is a bookshelf filled with yellow-spined issues of National Geographic. In one of them, more worn than the rest, my grandfather is quoted, having fled his family – my family – during a Kurdish rebellion, living for three months in a cave near the Iran-Iraq border. Alongside his long-ago highlighted words are pictures of Kurdish people, who look like all the brown-skinned people in its pages, squinting into the camera.

One of the first things my father told me when I came out to him was that I didn’t need to tell my grandfather, ever. He comes from Fuad
a different culture, he explained, and it’s true, he does.

But he comes from a country that doesn’t exist. Despite the efforts of my grandfather and millions of others dreaming of a homeland, the Kurds are the largest nationless nation in the world.

The same year the twin towers fall, my family takes a vacation to Spain, where we visit Alhambra, the Moorish palace in Granada. I am entranced by the intricate patterns carved into the marble, which I do not recognize as language until my father points where I am looking and begins to read. *Allahu akbar*, he says, *God is great*.

Fifteen years later, ISIS affiliates will notoriously shout this same phrase—*Allahu akbar*—before they pick off diners at a café in Paris with machine guns.

The word *barbaric* comes from the Greek. In ancient times they called the Persians *barbarous* for the way they sounded when they spoke, making sounds like a babbling brook. What was foreign was seen as savage, as uncivilized.

It is easy to recognize what is barbaric. Humans who don’t seem
human repulse us.

Last spring, CNN reported on an alleged ISIS flag among the rainbow crowds of London’s Pride Parade. But its lettering was made from the shapes of dildos and butt plugs, cut from white cloth and stitched to the banner.

The flag was not a prank, but the work of an artist, in protest of the Islamic State, which even Al-Qaeda has dismissed as excessive in its cruelty.

Like Kurdistan, ISIS is a construct. It spreads it dark stain over the map where I locate my homeland. But there are people for whom it is the answer.

On CNN the reporters go on oblivious. They acknowledge only that the script does not quite appear to be Arabic, reporting, instead, that it looks like “gobbledygook.”

Despite two years of formal study, I cannot carry on a conversation in Arabic. I can read the script without comprehending anything but the few words I do know, which rise out of the texts like little islands. After reading reports of a woman my age recruited by ISIS on Twitter, I spend hours scrolling through pages of tweets in Ara-
bic, which I cannot read, cannot comprehend. I detect in myself all
the hallmark signs of fear: my heart quickens; my chest clenches;
my body floods with heat.

The unknown is frightening because we cannot see it, cannot
touch it. It is like walking into a dark cave. You do not know what
dangers threaten you, and dangers may be unrecognized as such.
Our senses are hindered at best and useless at worst.

[]

While waiting in the doctor’s office in Brooklyn, I watch two
women kiss on the TV. WHAT, whispers one little girl beside me
to the other. GAY, the other whispers back, eyes squinched with
disgust.

[]

I am in the US capitol with my girlfriend when my future wedding
is legalized by nine strangers. Congratulations, says a woman on
the street. Are you planning on getting married now? I smiled, but
later, feel this was invasive.

That afternoon, Foreign Policy publishes an article titled, ”Can
Gay Marriage Defeat the Islamic State?” It suggests that we fight
terrorism by posting and tweeting pictures of gay people kissing. It
is very stupid.
By then I have already uploaded a photo of my girlfriend and I kissing on the steps of the Supreme Court, a rainbow flag behind us.

By then ISIS has already posted a video of four allegedly gay men being flung from a rooftop and stoned when they hit the street.

[]

Among the flurry of media flooding the internet after the marriage equality ruling, I see a video produced by a friend for the Kurdish news.

Two minutes in, I recognize myself in the background, unmistakable in a black cap and floral button up, kissing my girlfriend.

My heart pounds until the clip ends without my figure ever coming into focus. But undoubtedly, dozens of my relatives watched me without knowing as the footage played and replayed in their living rooms in Kurdistan while they sucked their teeth with disapproval.

[]

It wasn’t the first time I’d felt so publicly invisible. After my first summer in Kurdistan, I received a barrage of messages from relatives alerting me of a photo being passed around on Facebook. I
recognize it: it’s me in a yellow dress, shaking hands with the then-
president of Iraq, but my face is swapped out for the face of a man
with a mustache.

My cousin explains: it’s a political joke, mocking the president,
but I can’t make any sense of it. I’m stuck on the fact that I’d been
made into a meme.

Like the word barbaric, the word meme also comes from Greek,
adapted from the word mimema, or “imitated thing.” A meme
spreads within a culture: it’s an idea, a behavior or style, passed
from person to person in the viral manner of a disease. Mimetics
can explain the spread of radical Islamic ideology, and also the
rapid acceptance of gay rights in the United States.

The family in Kurdistan reacts to photo I posted of me kissing my
girlfriend. Change your profile picture, writes one cousin. I really
hate this rainbow flag, she says, since I learned what it means.

A former American student of mine in New York City finds the
photo and shares it on Facebook. “Fagot ass hoe,” [sic] comments
one of her classmates. “I didn’t no she went the other way,” [sic]
writes another. Twenty-four more of them comment with sad faces,
crying faces, and acronyms I can’t make sense of.
I wasn't scared to post the picture, but I'm scared to take it down. I'm scared of breaking down, of caving in. But eventually, I do. Eventually I take it off Facebook altogether. Eventually I want it to disappear. I delete it from where it once appeared in this essay.

[ ]

My grandfather emails the family, everyone but me. He invites everyone to come back to Kurdistan and praises what fine young men my brothers have become, but I remain unmentioned.

I feel as if I’ve made some trade without intending to, putting Kurdistan on the chopping block while I reveled in some paltry rainbow victory. I’m flattened by forces much bigger than I am.

My father insists I’m being paranoid.

I think of the time a student wrote DYKE on my whiteboard, and his mother insisted he couldn’t have known what the word meant, that it was a just a coincidence. The principal seemed to believe this, and at the time, I almost did, too.

[ ]

Traditional Kurdish clothes for women consist of a sheer gown with long, trailing sleeves that are tied in the back, worn over modest undergarments and topped with a colorful overdress, embroi-
dered with so many beads and sequins that it sits heavier than a winter coat.

The effect is stunning, but immobilizing.

According to legend, the Kurdish people arose when 400 women were banished from the Persian Empire and sent to die in the mountains. But instead of disappearing, they were raped by devils, and the children they gave birth to became the Kurds. Some say that the Kurds are cursed.

Currently, there are more than 2,000 Kurdish and Yezidi women held by ISIS as sex slaves, although no one knows the true number.

In the videos of women and girls who’ve escaped, they blur out the victims’ faces to protect them, so that they appear as their captors saw them: faceless, erased. In Kurdistan, it is so shameful to be raped that some fathers choose to kill their daughters rather than live with the dishonor.

According to family legend, and the menu of my Auntie’s Kurdish
restaurant in St. Paul, my grandfather arrived in Minnesota after
hearing a radio broadcast exalting the state’s strong, blonde, and
beautiful women.

As it is written:

“The great leaders of this mighty empire could not contain
the curiosity of young men, whose desires to explore the
treasures of exotic lands were insatiable.
In keeping with their Babani male tradition, this especially
applied to the wonders of women.”

Even my own family attributes my grandfather’s arrival in America
to sexual appetite, to lust.

It would be easy to believe the Kurds are cursed. When ISIS razes a
village, it’s destroying homes rebuilt from rubble. The bombshells
from Saddam’s genocidal campaign against the Kurds still sit in the
streets of Halabja, where 5,000 Kurds were gassed the year before
I was born. People still limp on legs where shrapnel entered their
flesh. Babies are still born deformed.

*Deformed.* Consider the word. Consider the prefix *de-* , which
signifies removal, separation, negation.

At a certain level of suffering, it becomes difficult or impossible to
In English we describe emotional pain with a vocabulary of fracture and the resulting pieces.

*He fell apart. I suffered a breakdown. The experience left her shattered.*

Being “in pieces” is synonymous with being broken.

And perhaps, in a place as thoroughly shattered as Kurdistan, so broken it doesn’t exist, it’s hard to see someone made of parts, of multiple identities, as anything but broken.

Or at least, this is a common justification for lagging LGBT rights in the parts of the world where privation and violence are common. *We will worry about gay rights when everyone has access to water and food, they say. We have more important things to deal with at the moment.*

It’s tempting to yield to this. I harbor guilt.

But all of these pieces have grooves that fit together. ISIS espouses an ideology that persecutes anyone who doesn’t conform. Rape as
a weapon of war is most effective in a culture where shame flourishes. Some go as far to as to speculate ISIS is effective in recruiting new members because of the promise of sex among the sexually oppressed.


The summer I taught English in my grandfather’s village, my students used to take me berry picking after class. One afternoon I snapped a photo of our open palms, stained vivid red. Later, when the photo was displayed in a gallery in Chicago, everyone assumed the berry juice was blood.

I have felt so many times that there is no room for me to be Queer and Kurdish. To be Kurdish is to have survived genocide. There is no room for rebellion against cultural norms when your culture itself is under attack. But to deny who you are is to attack yourself.
For two years I had no contact with my grandfather. I thought of him in his vineyard, the dry brown hills, his puffed up pride at his orchard of stone fruits and fields of parched watermelon plants. I thought of him in that cave, and all the metaphors that go with it – being in the dark, leaving your family for something you believe in.

My father asked me why I’d been banished. I shrugged, feigning disinterest, too ashamed to tell him I think I’m unwelcome there because of who I am.

The two summers I lived with my grandfather in Kurdistan, we’d open a bottle of his wine every night. The wine, made from grapes stomped in a big plastic bucket, was bitter and silty, but I’d always tell my grandfather it was delicious, and it was. It tasted how I imagined it would taste to drink the earth.

I’m desperate to claim my Kurdish identity. It’s as if the iron in my blood has been magnetized to pull me to my homeland. It’s the endless cups of tea in tiny glass cups that burn your fingers, the way my aunt says yallah when it’s time to go; the picnics by the highwayside and Kurdish music pumped out the speakers of someone’s car. One day, I will return. It’s not that it’s perfect – it’s a place filled with landmines, real and metaphoric. Like so many things, I love it because it is mine. I belong to it; it belongs to me; and that is enough.