

Case Study 1

# Sharing testimony in conflict zones

## ‘Many women, many words’

Special Interest Group ‘Cultural Literacy and Social Futures’



## Testimony and Cultural Literacy: some basic principles

In the last twenty years, creative writing, and especially life story narrative, has become a standard source of information in cultural research. Culture is situational and multi-layered. Its analysis calls for research methods which focus on precisely defined social environments rather than on broad-brush, national characteristics. The more specific the context, the closer the insight offered into shared ways of life. Personal writing style is a complex index of cultural literacy. It is not just content that varies. The language itself tells its own story.



Neither is it true that one person's narrative style is more or less 'literate' than another's. It is simply that the cultural outlook of an individual or group is an intrinsic property of the medium through which experience is communicated. Written style operates as a lens through which cultural outlook can be evaluated. However, the lens is not fixed in its settings. People express themselves differently. Stylistic features such as syntactic structure, imagery and figures of speech offer singular perspectives on common experiences. It is essential therefore that written data be elicited and deconstructed according to a consistent methodology. Only then can similarities and differences between individuals be meaningfully identified and a collective perspective arrived at.

Clearly, the appropriate decoding of 'style' is one of the fundamental issues raised by the act of translation, especially when the process is applied in the context of cross-cultural ethnographic fieldwork. Highly developed insight into the grammatical and pragmatic nuances of the language under consideration is

crucial. It demands special qualifications on the part of project designers and researchers in the field. These include native speaker bilingualism combined with the closest possible teamwork, if the full significance of live data is to be successfully appreciated, let alone adequately communicated to others.

Much creative writing is governed by the commercial interests of publishers. As with any qualitative research data, critical analysis of literary text demands that the circumstances of its production be fully taken into account. The same principle applies to the use of life writing as a source of cultural information.

Not only is academic, research-led, personal narrative distinct from conventional publication; it is also different from journalism or documentary where statements by individuals may well be biased or where false claims of 'balance' pose as objective representation. While the focus of creative narrative may be agreed in advance by researchers and participants as a reflection of specific research questions, the personal stories which constitute finished data should be as open-ended and authentic as circumstances allow. Selected quotation is frequently a product of pre-conception. The same principles apply to the transcription of oral testimony which may be more or less 'open' or 'close' in its reference to repetition, pauses, phatic interjections, intonation patterns and so on. Here too, a degree of editorial intervention normally occurs.

It follows from the above that designers of projects built around written or transcribed testimony need not only to be acutely aware of the contexts in which personal narratives are generated, but also of the manner in which the data has been elicited. Equally, this awareness should be reflected in researchers' interpretation of the stories themselves. It hardly needs stating that this is particularly controversial in cross-cultural, translingual situations where researchers are not necessarily equipped to decipher coded signals which are embedded in the local language.

As mentioned above, the content of written text or transcribed oral testimony cannot be taken at face value. Written language is not transparent. Its meaning is bound up with its formal stylistic features. Such properties are cultural insignia which reflect shared imaginations. They are the symbolic markers of an in-group's common experiences. As all those who deal in live data know well, the principles outlined above are the stock in trade of qualitative research methodology. However, they are especially pertinent when written data is used to assess and promote cultural literacy. How they do so and who benefits most from the exercise are just two of the questions raised by the case study below.

## The discussants and the project



The first discussant, Professor Graham Mort, is an active writer of poetry and prose, former project leader of Crossing Borders, a distance learning programme for emergent writers in 9 sub-Saharan African countries under the auspices of The British Council. He was also a leading partner in the AHRC funded project Moving Manchester (2006-11):

[http://transculturalwriting.com/movingmanchester/migration\\_stories.htm](http://transculturalwriting.com/movingmanchester/migration_stories.htm)

The objective of the Moving Manchester project was to assess the impact of creative writing by first and second generation immigrants to Manchester on the culture of that city. Other projects followed. The most recent of these has been an initiative to enable young adult Kurds to confront the life experience of previous generations of women by recording and transcribing both groups' oral testimonies. The testimonies focused on lives under duress, political and military, arising from the Kurds' struggle for recognition as an independent state in the geopolitical chaos of the Middle East. This struggle which originated in the partition of Kurdish territory under the notorious Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 led indirectly to the genocide perpetrated by Saddam

Hussein and the Al Anfal massacres of the late 1980s. It has been followed by the twin threats posed by ISIS/Daesh and the military oppression of the Turkish State.

• [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anfal\\_genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anfal_genocide)



The principal investigator and initiator of the project, Dr. Muli Amaye, was an experienced teacher of mixed Nigerian origin, herself a creative writer and former core participant in Moving Manchester when she had been active in promoting writing in secondary education. At the time of the project, she held a post as lecturer in Soran University.

• [www.soran.edu.iq/about/soran-university.html](http://www.soran.edu.iq/about/soran-university.html)

As a case study, Many women Many Words is a classic example of the contextual specificity which attaches to the term 'cultural literacy'. There was a definite sense that the informants wanted their stories to reach a younger generation of men and women in an effort to sustain a sense of cultural continuity which went beyond survival. The project's outputs were regionally focused. Nevertheless, there were obvious analogies with other environments where geopolitical conflict was accelerating the anarchic pace of cultural change and intensifying physical suffering. Sadly, the project's findings have been superseded by events, obliterated by the more recent repressive measures undertaken by the Iraqi and Turkish governments. These have unfortunately made it impossible for the states of awareness generated by the project to be absorbed into a new way of life. This is at odds with a view of cultural literacy which depends on continuity. The cultures of local contexts dominated by violence, mobility, multilingualism and intercultural hybridity call for research methods which are at one and the same time sensitive to change and transferable to other environments which are similarly transient.



In addition to the possibility of political comparison, there were a number of features in the design and operation of the project which are frequently replicated in transgenerational studies of writing covering periods of unstable social transformation.

The older women's reminiscences about the agricultural way of life which they had experienced in their youth underpinned a sense of Kurdish identity only partly shared by the following generation, many of whom had been forced to abandon their birthplace as young children. This had been accompanied by the women's own resettlement in towns which marked a break with their earlier existence. The testimonies bear witness to the pain and confusion arising from patriarchal/domestic manipulation, displacement, the death of children, looting by fighters and so on. In this, they echo much media reporting on the multiple instances of ethnic and geopolitical conflict in different parts of the world.

The experiences of the participants were dominated by a sense of victimhood. At the same time, they revealed their pride and resilience in the throes of political struggle: as wives of fighters, single mothers or partners of negotiators seeking funding for new infrastructural projects.

“‘Social change’ in Western society has almost been synonymous with an improvement in material conditions, greater social inclusion, sharing and personal agency. Working in African countries – and dramatically in a two-year period in Kurdistan – shows that social change can be a reversal of all those things.”

## How did the project unfold?

The methodology followed by 'Many women, many words' sought to ensure that its outcomes extended beyond the personal.



It attempted to confront an essential challenge for qualitative research: the intrinsic unreliability of selected data sets. The extent to which this challenge was met can only be judged independently by studying the texts which feature on the project's website.

A sample of 14 women subjects was selected by colleagues at Soran university. Objectively the sample size was small by social science standards, even in relation to qualitative research norms. Semi-structured interviews gave rise to oral testimonies which were transcribed and translated into English. The papers on which the testimonies had been written were then studied simultaneously by the two investigators, researchers at Soran University and the participants themselves, working in groups.

Months later and in a separate national location in Western Europe, physical copies of the translated testimonies were literally

cut up into fragments representing specific experiential features. The fragments were successively grouped and re-constituted around foregrounded issues. In this way, the testimonies were reorganised thematically before being incorporated into a poem [see below]. The poem was subsequently performed out loud and recorded in Kurdish and English. The texts and recordings were then made available to be revisited as a basis for retrospective reflections.

In essence, this process followed the same analytical procedure as established ethnographic data coding software, but did so in a much more physical, participatory way leading to a performed outcome. It also allowed for a form of generic translation in which narratives of lived experience were reassembled and distilled in a series of steps leading to their eventual emergence as prose poems. The translations were therefore trans-lingual and inter-modal, making it possible to understand the participants' experiences from both individual and collective perspectives.

At the same time, the progressive transformation of the original oral data is a sharp reminder of the pitfalls associated with capturing cultural literacy in transcultural environments.



The women were identified initially as a pilot group by staff from Soran University. They came mainly from the Rawanduz region

and often knew each other already. They were not therefore self-selected, except to the extent that they all wanted their stories to be heard. The selectors aimed at as broad a representation as possible. Participants' social categories ranged from teachers to women who had led more circumscribed and hence less well-educated lives. Their religious beliefs were also diverse. While most were Muslim, at least one was Christian.

The narratives were initially elicited by semi-structured interview, implying that their thematic focus had been broadly identified in advance by the researchers (see website). The translations of the interview transcriptions

were undertaken by three native speaker researchers well qualified in English before being reviewed by the two investigators who were themselves unfamiliar with the Kurdish dialects of the originals. Given that the translations were now at third hand, an outsider would have to take the correspondence between the source and target texts on trust.



As can be seen, the project was applying appropriate features of qualitative research methodology conducted in a culturally, politically and linguistically distinctive context. The process could perhaps best be qualified as creative writing by proxy in that initial oral testimony passed through two subsequent phases: first through the medium of interpreters and then refined and poeticised by English language experts. The data was effectively mediated by the researchers and selectively diluted in subsequent presentations of the project's findings to 'outsider' academic communities who were themselves from diverse cultural backgrounds.

“Cultural practice and its transformations into and through art forms, makes us more fully human through something that we prioritise over brute necessity, or in the presence of that necessity.”

As already mentioned, the environment was changing rapidly and unpredictably. The wider population was subject to virtual genocide during and after the life of the project. Social structures, and living space were literally being levelled. The boundaries between qualitative research and journalism were collapsing, raising intriguing questions about the nature of cultural literacy at moments of social disintegration.

#### **AS THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR PUT IT:**

*The process of transcription into Kurdish was relatively straightforward, because we had a recording. Our bi-lingual translators then translated the recording into English and we used members of staff at Soran whose English was more advanced to translate what were obviously idiomatic uses of Sorani Kurdish. So, there were at least three iterations of each interview [...]. We went back to all the women about being identified by name and featured in photographs on the website (not all women had agreed to this anyway) because Daesh were very close to Erbil and we were anxious that they might be endangering themselves.*

As can be seen, Many women, Many words was a remarkable project whose ambitious objectives were ultimately undermined by geopolitical conflict. Qualitative research criteria were applied as effectively as conditions allowed, enabling the researchers largely to overcome the difficulties associated with conducting research in a trans-cultural, trans-lingual, ethnically distinct, politically unstable environment. Conducting academic investigations in conditions such as these raises fundamental questions – logistical, methodological, even ethical, when viewed from a cultural literacy perspective.



## QUESTION 1

# Who has become more 'culturally literate'?

This question is only relevant if one of the original aims of the project was to promote cultural literacy amongst the participants. Logic and ethical imperative demanded that this be the case - by default if not explicitly.

To have set up an investigation based on written and oral testimony without tangible benefit accruing to the data providers would have raised serious issues surrounding the motivation for conducting the research, however scrupulous the methodology used.

As it was, there was some evidence from feedback that the participants increased their knowledge and understanding of their own culture, though the precise nature of this gain remains unclear. Intuitively, it may be assumed that through articulation they sharpened their insight into their previous history as an ethnic and culturally independent group. Such insight will have increased their awareness of the processes of change which had affected them and their families.

As one would expect, there was also evidence that the experience of narrating was itself therapeutic.

The challenge of recording their testimonies in speech and then in written English would have made them more 'culturally articulate' in the strictly technical sense of the term defined by such writers as Stuart Hall<sup>1</sup> and Eva Hoffman<sup>2</sup> [i.e. the manner in which an individual or group interacts with a wider social and cultural environment].



It must also be assumed that the researchers themselves extended and deepened their own cultural literacy. They came to understand better the reasons behind demands for Kurdish independence and acquired privileged first-hand knowledge of the way in which the political and economic developments in the region were affecting the everyday lives of the population. As researchers, they were able to experiment methodologically and thereby to contribute to the academic culture of which they were/are a part.

The study was based on fieldwork, the form of mediation being directly representative of first-hand experience rather than corresponding to a pre-existing generic frame acting as a cultural lens or filter. Furthermore, while the researchers may have subscribed to the political principles behind the fight for Kurdish independence, they were forced to confront the paradox that the women's plight and their nostalgia for the pacific culture of the past was a direct result of the conflict. It was therefore all the more sobering to recognise retrospectively that the project's findings had effectively been eradicated by subsequent military action.

1 Stuart Hall 'Who needs identity?' in S.Hall & P.du Gay (eds.) Questions of Cultural identity (London: Sage, 1996)

2 Eva Hoffman, Lost in Translation (London: Penguin, 1989)



## IN THE WORDS OF THE PI:

*One factor was the relationship between individual experience (though the women knew there were other women who'd had similar experience, hence our network) and the Kurdish project of nation building through media-based propaganda. It seemed that Peshmerga women fighters were being celebrated (and a new generation were fighting Daesh in Iraq), but that other forms of resistance and resilience were ignored. It's also interesting to note that women Peshmerga fighters are rarely expected to marry and re-integrate into society. In some sense they had transgressed traditional family values and roles. Yet the women who had upheld these values by fleeing with their children, waiting for their imprisoned husbands... were ironically rendered invisible by the veil of what was regarded as normative expectations. So the women wanted their 'women's stories' to be told and recognised.*

*There is a sense [...] that participation (writing, narration, bearing witness) was perhaps the primary social change that these processes of intervention bring about. The sense of hitherto silenced groups shaping their experience through this process... in terms of the historical creative writing 'movement' shaping it personally and in some senses within what the creative writing professionals hoped was a developing ideological context of empowerment.*

*In some sense, I think that our urge to participate in the re-formulation of interview data as a narrative art (our performance poem) as artists was a desire to respond, to create an ideological continuum... that the women would remain as participants (and not become subject to research methods*

*or objects of investigation) through the direct use of their words (which remained almost entirely unchanged in the new text). We had built this anticipated process into our ethical framework, which the women had all read and signed, so from the outset we had put a particular perspective on how their 'data' might be used – first as an unmediated archive through recordings in Kurdish with Kurdish and English translations, then as 'new artistic work' generation through a collaborative engagement with the same material, that would enable its effective transmission through a multi-valent and dynamic narrative form that also echoed aspects of oral culture.*

*The presentation of this work at an academic conference sought to further position the role of artwork, not as the subject of academic research, but as a more direct vector for a complex human experience and history that had been re-configured through narration and forms of transcultural working and translation to create understanding and realisations in new audiences – an 'original contribution to knowledge' in itself, performed in the public and academic spheres, rather than an artwork subordinated to or realised by theoretical hegemonies. So, in a sense also, perhaps ironically, responding to the underlying rationale in 'impact' agendas to have significance outside academia. Also, perhaps, also a way of reconciling Creative Writings' awkward but opportunity-rich straddling of public and academic audience.*



The third group of potential cultural beneficiaries were 'outsider' members of the public, mostly academic specialists, staff or students who would have read or listened to accounts of the project, on line and/or textual, or otherwise delivered by the researchers or participants to peer-groups or acquaintances, mostly in more or less formal academic settings or controlled public fora.

Such presentations are of course heavily mediated by the presenters in that they are habitually designed for a particular audience and are normally strictly time limited. Their objective is arguably more focused on illustrating, if not promoting a particular methodological approach, selecting data which supports a set of provisional conclusions based on the ethnographic findings of the project.

There is no doubt that a well-designed, well-run project in a cultural setting with which an audience is relatively unfamiliar can only contribute positively to that audience's cultural literacy, provided that the project allows for a sufficiently representative range of participants' voices to interact with the findings of the project as the data emerge. Even then, however, the cultural awareness of the audience/readership will inevitably be conditioned by the form and content of the mediation involved. Findings may well be used to support a particular ideological or theoretical position, in which case the term 'literacy' itself becomes relativized to an extent which undermines its generic status.



It seems that the Kurdish project was able to confront the above challenges by focusing on the project's methodological coherence and the human impact of the testimonies themselves. As has already been pointed out, this meant that its findings were 'exportable', that is to say culturally transferable, thus retaining its capacity to draw the attention of other groups in politically analogous situations to some of the key issues which the project had highlighted. This was demonstrated by re-enacting the poetically reconstructed samples of the original data: a significant achievement in itself, as was borne out by the intensity of the local audience's emotional response to the mediated performance.

#### THE PI AGAIN:

*[The selected poetic output] was performed in English at the Cape Town Writing for Liberty conference by three coloured SA women, one Nigerian/English woman and one black American woman. The poem was also performed at Soran by younger Kurdish women in Kurdish to an audience including some of the original interviewees. I have no detailed feedback from this event because, by then, [the co-investigator] had left Soran [...] and many other things were unravelling due to tension between Kurdistan and Iraq and intensified military activity during which the money supply was cut...). Our original hope, of course, was that our project would inform and contribute to a developing research culture at Soran University, another form of cultural literacy in which research methodologies based on artistic process could be seen as integral to the understanding of social processes and events.*

## QUESTION 2

# What is the nature of cultural literacy involved?

To some extent this question has already been answered. Cultural Literacy varies according to the interests and backgrounds of the groups to whom the term is applied. The academic culture

governing research methodology is quite clearly different from the symbolic and material priorities of Kurdish women living under the threat of civil and military oppression. The responses and forms of awareness to which the Kurdish project has given rise will have been qualitatively distinct for local participants, researchers and subsequent third party audiences whose perceptions will have been directly conditioned by the mode, content and structure of retrospective mediations. Inevitably, the different backgrounds of members of the different groups: ethnic, intellectual, cultural, linguistic, personal, will have meant that the cultural gain which they have derived from their contact with the project will have been experientially distinctive in each individual case.

Each 'performance' of a well-designed project extends the original narrative of the participants and becomes itself a culturally literate inter-text whose adaptation, if respectfully mediated, reinforces its outreach and hence the cultural literacy of others. Collaboration between public media

and high-quality university-led research should be a symbiotic component of projects designed to promote the dissemination of cultural insight. Reflexively structured research and the best journalism go hand in hand.



“Our choice of an expressive linguistic medium rich in emotional overtones (rather than stripped of them to secrete a sense of rationality in the resulting prose) was obviously influenced by this sense that we had become participants in that narrated experience.”



### QUESTION 3

## In developing cultural literacy, what should be the balance between cognition and emotional identification?

by proxy of the lives of others undoubtedly increases awareness of individual circumstances. Whether this alone can be described as 'literate' is less clear. The act of 'reading' in a symbolic sense implies that emotional identification be understood in relation to a wider context, political, historical and cultural which extends beyond personal experience while being derived from it.

In other words, the generic frame of contemporary ethnography should identify the determinants of the experience to be revealed as a product of the form which the narration takes. Such a condition places special demands on research design, in terms of the type of questions put to participants, the manner in which the questions are formulated and so on, just as it does on 'responsible journalism'.

In discussing the Many women, Many Words project, it was not clear how or to what extent the participants' informed understanding of their predicament had evolved. Objectively it must have done so through the very act of translating it into

There is no simple answer to this question. The burden of the above analysis is that empathy is only one element in a composite response to mediated communications of experience.

The post-enlightenment principles which underpin academic research, when taken in the round, should, by definition, entail an adequate degree of factual information. The sharing



words which were then shared with others and preserved for future reflection. In what way, however, remains an open question.

### THE PI'S RESPONSE:

*I think one issue here may be specific to the exploration of events that are traumatic to a society, through their traumatic effect on individuals. One might argue that such personal trauma, enacted through mass evacuation, bombing and gassing is inevitably damaging to the emotional and psychological responses of that collective social group. The experience of these women had been hidden from their children, but it also seemed to have been hidden from a wider society that was 'nation building' through selective narratives that simultaneously projected victimisation and resistance with a redemptive outcome – the emergent, semi-autonomous state of Kurdistan whose project was to become an independent state recognised by other states. The women too, needed recognition, but wanted it based on the 'real' terms of their experience and not massaged by a State PR apparatus. That their experience was deeply felt was unmistakeable (I attended some interviews in Kurdish and was gripped by the obvious anguish of the women), so it seemed part of our ethical framework and understanding that those feelings were central to the ideas that they also carried forward. Our choice of an expressive linguistic medium rich in emotional overtones (rather than stripped of them to secrete a sense of rationality in the resulting prose) was obviously influenced by this sense that we had become participants in that narrated experience.*

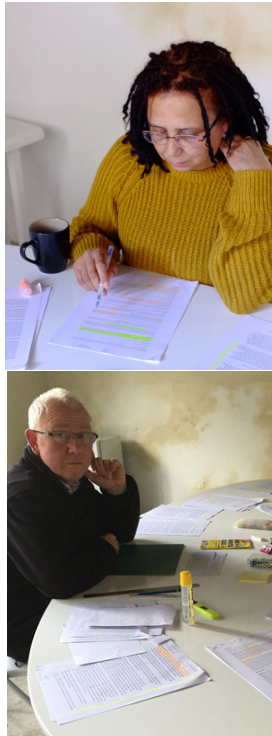
#### QUESTION 4

## To what extent does the development of 'cultural literacy' imply lasting change?

Is cultural literacy simply the capacity to take stock of a current set of circumstances on the basis of limited evidence and to communicate one's understanding to others, or does it imply internalising the ingredients which make it possible to promote social change?

The answer to this question can only be that it is difficult to achieve the second criterion (the promotion of social change) without satisfying the first (taking stock) but that to have acquired a certain level of cultural literacy does not necessarily mean that you have the power to act. The opposite is often true. The uncertainty surrounding the quality of cultural literacy prevalent within a particular group does not, however, negate the value of identifying its content, structure and mode of articulation, nor its effects on the wider social environment.

Research into cultural literacy should seek not simply to capture its essence but should also define the outcomes which result from promoting greater awareness, the way in which in which new states of sensibility and knowledge impact on everyday life. As has already been said, in a state of rapid change induced by overwhelming geopolitical upheaval, this is almost impossible. The fact of knowing more about the outlook and feelings of two generations of Kurdish women helps educated sectors of western populations to appreciate more fully the contexts in which they eke out their lives, but one important finding of this ambitious project has been that the increased level of cultural literacy which this implies has not made it any easier for them - or us - to change things for the better.



#### THE PI'S FINAL WORD:

*I think this is why I became somewhat anxious during our interview, because that sense of 'social change' in Western society has almost been synonymous with an improvement in material conditions, greater social inclusion, sharing and personal agency. Working in African countries – and dramatically in a two-year period in Kurdistan – shows that social change can be a reversal of all those things, sometimes dramatically through a coup or political reversal, often through the pervasive contamination of vitiated political and civic processes. That takes me back to the locus of desired social change and what we mean by that and by cultural literacy. Back to the idea of the conversation, the precipitating process, the immediate engagement between individuals and social groups. In the simplest sense it reminds me of the difference between historic silences and articulated feeling and thought, the difference between textual literacy and the illiteracy that has existed for most people for most of human history, the difference between a record and the blank page, between presence and absence. I think you're absolutely right to ask this very important question which is incredibly difficult to answer. Some of the answer falls back on belief, desire and paradox itself, the sense that cultural practice and its transformations into and through art forms, makes us more fully human through something that we prioritise over brute necessity, or in the presence of that necessity. So, the social change has, in large part, to be participation itself – then its accumulation is the thing we believe in and hope for, but which you quite rightly identify as a somewhat elusive consequence.*

*Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited.<sup>3</sup>*

3 Seamus Heaney, *The Parliament of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

## Some Day I Will Make Rings From Them

### 1.

What I'm going to say is a story.  
It is neither a dream nor something  
I have created.  
It is an event, a real event.

There are some windows that people  
cannot see through.

But I can see. The story starts here.

My life, what can I say?  
How I lived my life from childhood?

In the past people did not have anything;  
now they are walking on money.

Back then there was no money.  
Anyone who owned a dinar was a king.

Nowadays if you gave a dinar to a child  
they would not take it.

All our life we are imprisoned:  
first in swaddling clothes, then nailed down  
in our coffins.

That is the story of Kurdish women.

We gain freedom through imagination –  
through dreams we build our lives.

Once we lived in harmony together:  
Kurds, Christians, Muslims.

Whether rich or poor we shared each other's  
happiness and sorrow.

Now things are different, living is not pleasant –  
the rich look down on the poor.

In the past people were equal.

Back then people were poor –  
we made the bride one dress, one vest.

There is plenty to say about those days, but I do  
not like to talk about them, do not like to  
remember those events any more.

The more you remember, the sadder life is.

Like I said, there is a window, a *dalaqa*:  
it is morning and silence hangs over the village.

Farmers carry their axes and spades, walking silently;  
flowers are waiting for sunshine, ducks and geese  
are like lines of pearls, walking to the water.

The trees are whispering, the women are speechless  
as if their lips have been sewn.

### 2.

When we were children we went to the mountains  
to gather rhubarb and acanthus, dancing all the way  
until we went back home.

Later we worked in the mountains under wind and rain  
without bedding, sleeping in our poverty.

We used to grow crops on our land, we bought  
only meat from the bazaar.



We grew everything: tomatoes, aubergines;  
we kept oxen, goats and cows.

We had few men at home and people were poor  
which means they needed to work.

Children worked too much for their young age;  
we worked wearing ragged plastic shoes.

We grew wheat, barley, lentils, peas: all these had  
to be grown and reaped by our own hands.

There was no money: there was poverty;  
we all worked, raising goats and cows.

Before our grandmother married him, my grandpa  
had another wife.

Their children were sleeping in one blanket, my  
grandpa slept in his coat.

Our grandma was so smart, she saw how they could live –  
a prosperous life with sheep and goats.

She collected wool and spun blankets; with her very  
own hands she planted and harvested.

My grand mother loved springtime; whenever spring came  
we kids would collect flowers to show her –  
primroses and daisies.

She would kiss those flowers and laugh with excitement,  
laughing the way women laugh for life.

### 3.

When the heat of summer came sweat poured  
like water in your eyes.

How we suffered until we harvested those crops!  
Men couldn't do this, it was only for children to do.

We harvested apples, we harvested wheat and peas,  
we picked cucumbers and tomatoes and when we  
returned home from work it was evening  
and dusk was falling

Our mother collected wild pears and hawthorn berries  
from the mountains, she collected nuts to sell.

One day, collecting gallnuts, our mother ran into a bear:  
they were both scared and stopped, staring at each other.

Then she told the bear:  
*Wait, you go your way and I will go mine.*

The bear went away, went on its way; but after  
a few steps it turned, looking back at her,  
then disappeared.

She was also a cook.

She also worked with the men outdoors.

She went out to harvest wheat, to plough fields:  
she was more than a man.

4.

That woven bag: we took it with us to plant crops,  
filling it with wheat to cast over the fields.

We would bring it to the mountains, filling it with  
firewood or edible plants – thistles or arum.

We brought it with us to work when we looked  
after the cattle, putting milk skins in it.

Our mother would fill the milk skin for us, putting  
it on our backs, carrying the water skin.

She would carry sticks under her arms for boiling milk.

We had to go far and come back carrying this.

When we got back, we were exhausted;  
we were dead.

Every day we had to carry a bag in the very early  
morning to take yoghurt and milk to the village.

Even if we were little we had to do it, we had  
to help them.

And how far it was! And I was alone!  
So this was life.

5.

So little by little, you know, spring would come, summer  
would come and we had to go to the lambs, go  
to the heights, go to the mountains.

We had to go with the men to cook for them.

We had to look after the livestock, we had to  
shepherd the lambs; we were yet to move  
to the city.

It was a hard life.

It was the maximum degree of misery.

I was a goat milker, I wore men's shoes and  
left my child in its cradle to milk the goats.

My husband was a tailor.  
His tailoring work was for how much?  
A dirham. We had a small sewing machine  
and I would leave my baby in its cradle to milk  
those goats, boiling it so that my husband, myself,  
my children and guests could drink it.

6.

The Peshmerga, who called themselves opposition,  
had to be fed at the expense of the villagers.

The people who were poor, who had no food  
themselves, would have to feed them.

Whatever I say, I cannot tell how difficult it was.

They would come at night, taking bedding from us,  
taking food from us, and they became your guest,  
but you had nothing to offer them.

I swear I had to leave the kids at home to bring water,  
daily I had to make four or five trips.

And how far away was the water?

For water there was only one route  
and the route was far.

Spring would come, summer would come,  
then winter.

So this was life. I swear to God,  
this was our life.

7.

On that day no one heard the sound of the shepherd's flute;  
the only sound was an owl singing from the *Towk* tree.

It sang until a yellow leaf fell from the tree where  
children were busy playing.

I watched my aunt through the small dalaqa –  
the window of our life, the window of memory,  
of our sorrow.

I loved her with all my heart.

She was holding a severed ear with an earring dangling  
in blood; she wrapped the ear in white cloth, dug a  
small hole under a cherry tree and buried it there.

Nearby the killer was pacing the corridor, still holding  
the warm gun of honour; he looked like a soldier who  
had just rescued a conquered land from enemies.

Back then I was a child, I did not know how sad it was  
to be killed by your loved ones, how sad it is  
when a spring leaf falls from a tree.

Every morning I wonder if her disfigured body  
was thrown into a hole or into weeds  
or devoured by birds.

Nothing could lessen my Aunt's sorrows: I could  
not make a happy story from Zare's death.

8.

I swear my family was a kind one because they did  
not beat me, even once.

My father was dead. I underwent an arranged marriage for  
my uncle's sake and he has never beaten me.

They came to ask for my hand: we were both very young.

One day our family said that we would have guests,  
but they did not tell me why.

When I stepped out of our house, I started crying,  
all the people started crying.

Without asking our opinion the engagement ceremony  
was done.

Yah, mine and my brother's.

There were two women and four men: the men of  
the family insisted I should greet them.

My family did not tell me they had come to ask  
for my hand.

Well my sister came and said:  
*You want the truth? These people have come to see you!*

They made me stand up saying:  
*Come on let the brides kiss each other, in arranged marriages  
they should exchange kisses.*

I didn't know who my fiancé was: I swear I didn't see him,  
I didn't know him. We, these four people, had not  
seen each other.

I did not see the other bride, my sister-in-law.  
I was dying of anxiety.



But my brother was handsome; he walked in a manly way and wore a big *klash*.

I had a brother in law – he was very ugly, my husband was not as ugly as him, yet he was a little ugly.  
I said to myself: *No problem I will accept him the way he is, provided my brother's wife is beautiful.*

Well it was the evening before Ramadan and I said:  
*For God's sake brother, is my sister-in-law pretty?*  
He said: *haven't you seen your husband, Ali?*  
*She is exactly like him!*

Because it was fate it was done;  
because it was done, it was fate.

## 9.

Ours was a love marriage.

Those days, even after engagement a boy could not see the girl.  
But now it is different.

They see, they talk.

Not to be seen as a shameful I got married, my younger sister too.

My mother was left alone, I was sad for her, but we were poor. He was poor.

People did not have clothes: one wedding dress for four or five girls.

If you had a white dress, everyone would ask for it, fight for it.

I had a pair of high heels, straps that stretched and fastened here, like summer sandals that children wear.  
On my wedding day I wore black.

I wore beautiful clothes, a white *kawa*, a beautiful pink dress in very light colours, high heels on my feet, a white georgette scarf around my shoulders.

In my culture, the groom would throw an apple engraved with the sign of the cross – an old tradition offered marriage to the one who caught it.

Now people are kings.

When I married I only got 25 dinars.

I had a bracelet, a necklace with a pendant:  
whereas now women want a bunch of gold.

Singing and dancing, *dol* and *zurna*, along the way;  
people danced the *dawat*, animals were slaughtered  
songs were sung.

Three days to celebrate amazing times: then the bride-time was over – my husband became a soldier.

## 10.

If I talk of my life as a Kurdish woman, believe me, it's all sorrow.

Before I could get married my father was imprisoned for one year.

When my father was released, my brother was arrested and became sick in jail, sick in his mind.

My brother's property was entirely confiscated.  
Everything.

What to tell you? I have nothing nice to tell you:  
it was all misery, it was a very difficult life.

The presidents were starting coup d'états against  
each other, then came the mass migrations.

We migrated once to Shaqlawa, next time to Hiran.

Our stories are all sad ones.

We slept on the roofs of our houses and airplanes  
bombed the village.

When we were small our mother constantly carried  
us to the caves from the village.

We suffered a lot, we suffered so much.

I was with my daughter-in-law when the Gulf War started.  
We escaped to Shaqlawa and stayed for six days.  
Then Saddam gave amnesty and we returned.

But Saddam captured people, pursued the Kurdish  
people and tortured them.

After that civil war started, we moved from one  
place to another, from here to everywhere.

My sons were soldiers, all my three sons.

## 11.

In Baherka there was civil war, at other places  
war with the PKK and Peshmerga forces.

So many houses were burned, so many people,  
including children, killed.

We could not sleep for the noise of airplanes and bombs;  
we endured so much hardship raising our children.

We used to work from morning until evening, weeding  
and harvesting wheat in return for a dinar.

Not even a dinar but a dirham; a dirham for a piece  
of bread or a kilo of wheat.

Even in Iran immigrants went to work: they did not  
go there to pass the time!

They suffered a lot. Their story is a long one.

My son stepped on anti-personnel mine that ripped  
both his legs off: imagine my life then!

The B'aath party called me in three times a month  
asking: *Where is your man, what has he done?*

At the age of seven I opened my eyes to this killing.

Life was like that not only for us, but for the entire  
Kurdish nation.

Our mountain towns were hideouts for the Peshmerga  
who rose up against the government.

We faced persecution for this: our father was arrested  
and held in jail for four months.

We daren't turn on the radio for fear that they  
would knock upon the door.

When my father was released he had aged so much;  
he had aged so bitterly.

Many men with my father were taken from jail and killed.  
So few of them were left.

There is a Kurdish saying:  
*If a man has power he can kick as well.*

But I can say that women are capable of anything.

## 12.

The year they hung Layla Quasm they hanged three  
other boys who were students with us.

We were so scared because we were under pressure  
from the Ba'ath regime all the time.

Every day we were threatened.

As a Kurdish woman I was raised as a Nationalist.

This made us support our brothers and relatives in the struggle  
but due to this effort we ended up in jail.

The number of prisoners in that jail was over 120;  
there were over 20 people in our room, over 20  
in one stinking room.

The place where we were held had been used for raising  
cattle; this caused us disease, especially skin conditions.

It was all war, killing, hanging.

We opened our eyes to a world of killing and slaughter  
and saw nothing else; I saw my people so deprived,  
so powerless.

We were young children when we went to see men  
being hanged; from the beginning of our lives  
we saw these scenes.

The party organization would send for me and I would say:  
*I'm not responsible for this, I am here only to teach, not to  
serve a political party.*

All night there were Peshmerga and by day there was  
the government.

## 13.

When we were at Bozan Bridge eighteen helicopters arrived.  
*Dear God, we said to ourselves, can we save the children?*

The helicopters dropped chemicals on the mountain,  
they dropped chemicals on our children and I said:  
*God, what can we do with them?*

I had gone to milk the goats and when I got back I had  
the milk bucket with me. When I saw my family, all down,  
I gave them milk; I gave everyone milk and they vomited  
it up like cheese.

The government gave us some materials to construct a shelter –  
wood and a window frame; at that time Diana had been burnt,  
plundered by soldiers and strangers.

Saddam's planes were attacking us, killing people.

People had nothing to eat: they emigrated, they ran away.

For many years my dad was a soldier, a Peshmerga who  
stayed in the mountains most of the time.



After my husband's martyrdom we stayed in Rawanduz,  
we did not move anywhere. When he was martyred  
the children were young, very young.

Our misery did not end there: my daughter died  
when a shell fragment went through her brain.

We had fled to Rawanduz, bare-footed,  
leaving the doors unlocked.

No one was spared.

There was nobody to take the wounded to the city  
to be treated: there was nothing.

When war came we would pack an animal and go  
to the mountains; we would shelter under a rock  
like sleeping shadows.

#### 14.

Then the regime attacked Iran, the regime launched war  
against Iran.

Then planes from Iran would come, dropping shells on us.

The planes dropped a shell here, behind our house:  
The bombs made water spring from earth.  
Water!

All the people of the world came to see this miracle.

On Fridays we would run away, saying that they  
targeted us on Fridays.

We would cross the river on a tractor, heading  
to the mountains.

We fled to the mountains feeling we would  
be safe there.

We did not regard our life as life at all.  
It has all been torture.

King Hazy came, then King Faisal, finally Saddam came.  
He was the worst.

It was because of him the people fled.

After the war, the prisoners returned.  
My father asked about his family.

They told him: *No one is alive, go to Khanaqa's mosque  
and wash your face.*

Those times of war forced the Kurdish people  
to resist, to defend their rights.

The Baghdad regime did not spare us: it did not  
spare Kurdish families.

The beginning and the end of any political attempt  
requires struggle.

Those days of conflict were ones of imprisonment,  
Anfal, chemical weapons.

That struggle did not spare us: it did not spare  
Kurdish families.

Not in the beginning and not in the end.

## 15.

Rage caught me, my eyes were like blood.

I ran, for nine days and nine nights into  
government blockades, no way through.

In Qandil Mountain we suffered hunger –  
not another step could be taken.

A woman had a baby 15 days old at her breast;  
she left it on the bridge.

I left him, my baby.  
I walked for ten minutes, twenty minutes,  
and then I turned back, found him still lying  
in the snow, his arms moving. I turned back  
for my child, my tears frozen.

Every year, every year, I swear to God, we fled  
to the caves – no grain to cook, no milk  
to boil on a fire.

We were very tired, but every year, whether spring,  
winter, summer or autumn we were on the mountain  
in tents, plastic covers, caves – there was no joy in  
the world at all.

The snow in my eyes turned black through cold  
and tiredness.

We were victims, victims of war.

In spring, snow melted, we were sitting in the sun;  
a fire was set, water warming, but I woke with my  
heart in my mouth, roosters screaming.

Until the end of war fear was our closest relative:  
*If not today, then tomorrow they will come and arrest us.*

That fear was our betrothal tryst, our wedding song,  
our constant refrain.

So many feet crossing the hills, fear guiding them.

*Sister, they said, why are you left behind?*  
I said, *I don't have the power to go on.*  
I sat. They sat. We shared food and tea.  
I looked at the bottom of the mountain  
to the Martyrs' River.

Children on pack animals tucked into duffel bags, the  
horses falling in the middle of the river.

I screamed as the water took my children, but one man  
with us grabbed those children: like hurling cement  
blocks, he threw those children from the water,  
one by one.

The river did not win.

## 16.

Life stories: every woman, every Kurdish woman  
has got a story in her life.

There is not a woman without a story in our  
Kurdish nations.

But many of our stories have been lost, too.  
I do not remember them.

Sometimes I sit down and I remember: there  
is not a woman without a story.

I've forgotten so much, but at that time I knew  
so much. I stayed with my teachers.  
I was smart.

Two years I went to school, taking one child  
by the hand, another left at home.

Housewives should have schooling but my mind  
was with my children, one in the cradle.

What if they burnt themselves? What if they  
burnt the house to ashes and flame?

Now I am old, my age has caught up to me:  
my age has exceeded the age for education.

How should I remember reading and writing?

Back then, I was a child, I did not know how it was when  
a spring leaf fell from a tree, that when any part of a  
body is removed the whole body is disfigured.

In our days, kerosene and gas lamps lit our  
weaving and knitting.

A tandoor clay oven waited every morning  
for our dough making.

This was the way of life then.

Schools, shops, houses, markets – all had  
refugees in them.

It became such that you were ashamed  
to say that you were Iraqi

There are good and bad people everywhere: thanks  
to God, in my life, I never had bad neighbors.

In our jail there were many heart-burned mothers  
and sisters; with the coming of night they lamented  
over the loss of loved ones.

They wrote poems with their own blood to relieve  
their grief, to give courage.

Mothers of martyrs heartened us and sang:  
*You are the future generation; the independence of  
Kurdistan will come with you.*

Such hardship and grief I lived with, it equaled half  
the pain that my husband underwent – and it was five  
years he was in jail.

I swear to God in all those years of exile I did  
not buy a veil, a skirt, a dress for myself.

Whatever I did was for my children – I was  
their father and their mother, we lived  
with such hardship.

Someone would build a house or cottage carrying  
soil on their backs; I swear, we women carried soil  
on our back in sacks and emptied it onto the roof.

Although it's a sin, a sin I know that God won't write  
down to me, I gave a bribe: five hundred dinar at  
that time: imagine what an amount that was!  
Five hundred dinar and the house was in my name.

At night, I slept with knife under my pillow, fear  
rushing like wind down a narrow corridor,  
my small son by my side.

Each day, each night, I was father and mother,  
mother and father.

17.

I watch her through the window, my mother,  
through the small *dalaqa*, the timeless window.

I loved her with all my heart.

Remember, she had a golden nose-ring she  
traded for earrings? Remember?

They were so beautiful, everyone said.  
I thought: *I will give one to my daughter,*  
*one to my niece.*

They were each around one carat weight:  
how much do you think they cost?  
In life? In sorrow? In suffering?

I thought:  
*Some day I will make rings from them, some day*  
*in the future of my life.*

Let that be.

18.

Now it is morning, again.

Silence hangs over the village where they still live  
in peacefulness, in the past, in the memories  
of the living.

Farmers carry their axes and spades, walking silently.  
Flowers are waiting for sunshine, ducks and geese  
are like lines of pearls, walking to the water.

The trees are whispering, but the women are speaking  
now – the women are speaking and their lips have  
opened like violets in the sun.



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Robert Crawshaw  
Laura Conerney

Lancaster University, March 2020

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