

Loyalty and Betrayal

By Kinana Issa (Syria)

She was a white round girl considered an outcast in her traditional Damascene environment, and I was a country girl raised in the big city, where neither Damascenes nor my original townsmen considered me one of their own. We were both in our early twenties, struggling with our families' traditional values, and trying to be honest to our own, which made us stick together quite well through the seven years that followed. Each of us was trying to pull herself, and the other, together through the difficulties of growing into independent women in a complex and patriarchal society. But somehow, our friendship wasn't enough; she attempted suicide three times before becoming an alcoholic, and when she called me to come by with a bottle of vodka, I refused; this was the first time she called me a traitor.

Despite my best efforts, nothing was the same again. Six months afterwards, something came up that was bigger than any of us; protests started to fill the Syrian streets, people were killed only for protesting, and since I was an activist, I couldn't stay silent, while she thought everyone was better off keeping silent and that our lives were just fine. Since March 2011 we took opposing sides, and would meet once or twice a month at best. Five months after that, on my birthday, my cell phone rang, waking me up to the sound of another friend telling me that Ulla was in the hospital. Two days later, she died. I wasn't sure who betrayed the other, me for being so drowned in civil action, or her for giving up on both of us on my birthday?

The day after her death, I was faced with a new decision. Two of my friends had been detained and many others were threatened with detention and torture for their civil activities. I was still grieving, but since many were dependent on me, this begged the question: to whom should I be loyal? Who should I betray? My living friends, or my dead best friend's memory and her family? Does a person really have a choice when they know that others' lives or freedom depend on them? Did I even have the choice of going from door to door to hide my detained friends' external hard-disks so they wouldn't be found by the intelligence services, leading to even more friends being tortured? To find a hiding place for those in danger? Does anyone have a choice in such matters? I believe the only real choice I had was back in March 2011, in either joining the protests or not, but afterwards, everything was already decided. We choose our paths, and these force us into their own loyalties and betrayals.

In October 2012 I crossed the Syrian border to Lebanon, and this is when I realized that I was wanted by the Syrian regime for the third time. Somehow, with a bribe, I managed to cross the border. Before that I had already been detained twice, leading me to decide not to go back. I didn't think of anything but the lice and insects in the cold prison cell, and the fear of military checkpoints in Damascus' streets. I just wanted to survive. But now, not only was Ulla dead, but six of my friends had died during their civil actions or under torture, and I couldn't dare to think about going back to Syria. Does this make me just an ordinary person caring for my own well-being? Or do I deserve to be called a traitor?

By the end of 2012, I was writing again, and faced with the choice: do I betray my ideas for what true literature should be? Or should I betray the memory of my friends and write my conceptual ideology-free literature? Or should I betray literature and just talk about my friends? I chose my

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friends back then, and I wrote about the dead ones, then about the detained, and bit by bit, my depression closed in. I was dead with the dead, and detained with the detained, not satisfied with any written piece. I can't use my name because I'm still threatened in Lebanon, and I feel that I gained nothing by staying away from Syria.

By 2014 I was sick of everything, obsessed with death, wanting to leave at least one great work before dying. This is when I decided to choose literature, and with that, I went back and dug into my authentic motives and values, and the question of loyalty and betrayal came back to the surface. Who decides what is treason and what is not? What are my loyalties? Is loyalty even a real concept, or is it something that was created by those in power to control us and make us feel indebted to something that is not clear or defined? Something that is left to those with the power of decision over you, be it emotional or governmental? My family demanded loyalty, the Syrian intelligence wanted loyalty, Islamists wanted loyalty, friends, homeland, the dead, the living, those who supported Assad and those who supported god, they all demanded a loyalty that serves no other purpose than their own. Loyalty is a concept that helps humans feel secure and powerful. And a writer, as I understand the term, has no loyalties, but may choose to be faithful to what humanity is about. Writing is the act of being more human than one individual can be, it is about seeing through all the simple details and personal convictions, and portraying human life as it is, with all its complications and unsolvable riddles. Fiction writing is a process of digging into the universe and finding even more questions in it, rather than trying to find answers or building convictions. By choosing writing I choose to betray everything. I betray the real world in creating a parallel one, I betray my own peace of mind by having to get past the personal and seeing the human, I betray every one of my readers' security by challenging their convictions, fixed ideas and easy stereotypes, and I betray the dead and living by using them to build my fictional characters...I betray everyone, yet through writing, I am at the same time more loyal to humanity than ever before.

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