

Offerings

By Clara McBride

About the author

Clara McBride is an interdisciplinary performance artist and educator who has worked in France, England, and Canada for 26 years. She holds a BA from Mount Allison University and is completing her MAIS at Athabasca University. She has taught at RADA, Acting International Paris, Wesleyan, and Toronto Metropolitan University. Her creations explore the transformative nature of storytelling utilising a combination of mask and mask making, ensemble physical theatre, writing and new media. She actively seeks new stages and spaces to tell frisky stories that uplift and protest. Her current academic research examines body image, body dissatisfaction and the representation of female archetypes in the media. Clara is Theatre Arts Coordinator of Act II Studio at Toronto Metropolitan University.

An audio story of a prescient, sacrificial coincidence; a personal journey through intercultural marriage, pregnancy, and miscarriage. An exploration of self-blame and the interconnection between faith and family.

Music: Fergani, Hadj Mohamed Tahar. "Bacheref" 2018. La Nuba Maya, Algerie, anthologie de la Musique Arabo-Andalouse, Vol. 1

Music License courtesy of APM Music: <https://www.apmmusic.com>

Sound Editor: Adam Achacon

Keywords: ***Content Warning*** blood, animal harm

Transcript

Eid al Kabir, the Great Feast, celebrates the story of Ibrahim, a man willing to sacrifice his own son, Ishmail, to prove his faith in God. When Ibrahim was about to slay his son, God replaced the boy with a ram.

Who could have faith in a manipulative God like that?

« On est content quand Clara est chez nous, en Algérie » Translation: “We are happy when Clara comes to visit us in Algeria”.

Miuma, my mother-in-law. She was open to all of my questions and eager that I learn the traditions. Especially the cooking. She was visiting us in France for our son’s first birthday. She called me “Ma fille” and laughed at my doubts as we made dish after dish in our tiny Paris kitchen. I mastered the recipes, my son took his first steps, I made her proud. I’d understand better though if I came to Algiers. “I’d love it there”. She made me promise we’d come for Eid. I promised.

Sheep bleats.

We found out I was pregnant 9 weeks before we were booked to leave for Algeria. My first checkup was the same day as our flight.

Ultrasound

Polite etiquette is compounded in a prenatal waiting room. Vulnerability darts about like a wasp, yet no one risks swatting it away for fear of filling the space with doubt.

The foetus hadn’t grown since week 3. There was no heartbeat. I “might” lose it soon, but there was no guarantee. If it was still there when I got back, they’d perform a D and C.

All told, with Miuma and Yebe, my father-in-law, we were fifteen staying in their apartment in Algiers for Eid. It was 40 degrees, no air conditioning. I was assured the breeze from the Mediterranean Sea would cool us down.

No one understood my situation. “I was still pregnant; it’d be fine! We’ll pray for you! You must have faith.”

There it was.

Have faith.

Call to prayer

I didn’t know what that meant. Had I done something wrong? Had I wanted it too badly? Maybe I didn’t deserve to have another baby.

We were on the 5th and last floor of the building. Their long balcony looked over the parking lot where the sacrifices would take place. The sheep were kept in a small, fenced off enclosure, with grass that might have been green once, but was a brittle, dusty yellow. Children of all ages ran amongst them. Men leaned up against the wire fence, assessing, comparing. When we first arrived, it housed one sheep, by the morning of Eid, there were at least twenty.

I first felt the abdominal cramps as my sister-in-law rubbed henna into my hand as part of the celebration. She prayed for me as she applied the paste and bound my fist with care. “Henna is for fertility and good blessings,” she whispered.

The bustle of the new day was intense. The men and children were down in the parking lot at dawn. Except Yebe, who was not strong enough, and so paced from the living room to kitchen to balcony and back.

I knew the sacrifice had begun when the first panicked bleat rose up on that Mediterranean crossbreeze. The high pitched, frantic cry echoed through our top floor perch. Then another and another.

I was scared to look but stole a glance below when my son was occupied with a toy. It was a war zone. People running everywhere, others huddled around fluffy white mounds, twitching in bright red puddles between the parked cars, on the sidewalk. The enclosure was empty.

And then, it happened. A gush. I froze. “This is not possible, not now, please not now.”

I shuffled to the bathroom. I was lucky it was free, with fifteen people using one toilet it not often was. Behind the locked door, I realized that I’d still been hoping. I’d never left that waiting room. No more.

I searched for a pad and went back to the kitchen.

Body parts were now being brought up by nieces and nephews. Plastic bowls, buckets and pots filled with organs, then hooves, then the head.

Miuma was a valiant field surgeon leading the triage, organizing the stations. I was put in charge of the liver. It was huge, viscous and warm. She handed me a freshly sharpened knife and told me to slice it very thinly. Everything went silent.

Ultrasound

Yebe came up behind me, took my left hand and placed my hennaed palm on the flat liver. He wrapped my right hand in his and guided the blade along the dark, red flesh with a smooth, swift motion. The smell of blood filled the kitchen. But also, garlic, onions, ginger, turmeric, and cinnamon.

My delicately thin slices were immediately seasoned and fried then passed around with fresh bread, dijon and mayonnaise. The children with mouths full ran the dripping sandwiches to the men downstairs.

I managed another peek below. Skins now littered the parking lot hanging off fences and tree branches. My husband and brother-in-law were hoisting the carcass over their shoulders, beginning the five-flight ascent.

I went to the bathroom again. My pad was soaked through and overflowing. It had been less than an hour.

I took my husband into our room, his white t-shirt was covered in blood, and started bawling.

I tried to hold it together. I was ashamed to admit the truth. We were leaving in five days surely, I could keep my bleeding a secret. But everyone knew. I was in the bathroom every five minutes and couldn't control my tears through the whirlwind of guests, introductions, and meat.

We ate every part of that sheep from morning until late at night and even parts of other sheep that were brought over by friends and family. It's a plentiful feast. The sacrifice means sharing, feeding family and friends, those suffering and less fortunate.

On our last day, I stayed in bed, bleeding, curled up on a pile of towels so as not to stain the mattress. I wept until Miuma came to sit with me before dinner.

« Pourquoi tu pleures toujours ma fille? » Translation: "My daughter, why are you still crying?."

I balked. How could she not understand? I had just lost a baby; I was in pain. I rolled over and tried to ignore her, hiding my face. She stroked my back and said she'd a miscarriage as well, so had her daughter. I knew my own mum had, two sisters an aunt and grandmother.

"But it's my fault," I cried from the pillow, "I'm not good enough."

"Non, ma fille. You're a strong woman." She squeezed my arm and left.

I didn't move until my son jumped on me a while later. He needed me. I let him lead me into the kitchen.

I was greeted with hugs and laughter. When Miuma handed me a freshly grilled mutton skewer, I grasped the part of faith I had overlooked. It's not just in God, but in each other, in kindness, equality and compassion. I felt blessed.