GAZA
EXTRACT OF MISERY

12 Stories
by Ali Abu Yaseen

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Dedicated to all the free people of the world, who believe in the justice of our cause and raised their voices high:

“Free Free Palestine… Stop the War!”

Your voices played the greatest role in lifting the gallows from our necks. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
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They Embrace their Dreams and Keep Going

Inside the Rubble of Memory

Memories and Remnants of a Homeland

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Preface

Words have the power to step beyond imagination, to turn into living truths shaped by sorrow and pain, by joy and love—by everything the human heart is asked to carry.

Words also capture a person's ability to describe reality with such vividness that readers can wander into a place they may not be able to escape, nor would they want to.

Not all writers are given this gift. Some arrange words; others awaken them. Ali Abu Yaseen belongs to the latter.

His writing breathes pain and tenderness into the same space, gathering everyone within it—the ones who live the story, the ones who witness it from afar, and the ones who meet it quietly on the page. No one is left behind.

I am grateful to Ali Abu Yaseen for offering this shared human truth, and for trusting us to carry it with him.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who helped bring this volume to life. I am deeply grateful to Ola Daragmeh, our project coordinator in RLS Palestine and Jordan; without her support and collaboration with Ali Abu Yaseen throughout the entire process, this print would not be in your hands. Special thanks go to Arsen Aghazarian for his immaculate and skillful translation into English, and to Arda Aghazarian for her careful editing and creative insight. I also extend my sincere appreciation to Mohammad Hassouna and his team for their artistic contributions in designing, laying out, and printing this volume.

Dr. Karin A. Gerster
Director / Regional Office of RLS Palestine & Jordan

Ali Abu-Yassin

is a Palestinian playwright and director from Gaza. He began his artistic career in 1990, co-founding several theatrical groups and projects which reflected the matters and concerns of the Palestinian people.

He has been the Director of Al-Bayader Theater Group from 1994 until 2026.

In 2024, he received the International Solidarity Award from the Norwegian Authors' Union for his overall writings.

He was honored at the 6th Ashtar International Youth Theater Festival (AIYTF) in 2022, for his pivotal role in the "Gaza Monologues" and his decades of work at Ashtar as director and trainer.

He was honored at the Maghreb Theatre Festival in Tunisia in 2018.

Moreover, he won the Best Actor Award for the monodrama "Abu Arab" in the "Here's to You" category at the International Tunis Spring Festival in 2005.

In 2025, he published a play titled: "Son of the Sea" (Ibn Al-Bahar), through Arflon Publishing House.

He also participated in several Arab and international festivals.

The Story of Cola

When I returned from Deir al-Balah to my house in al-Shati refugee camp, my friend Ihab came to congratulate me on my safe return. But he was unusually sullen – so much so that sadness seemed to inhabit not only his face but his entire body, his posture hunched and his movements hesitant. Ihab is normally cheerful and upbeat, so I tried to draw a smile from him by telling him a joke. He smiled, but it was dull and lifeless. I had never seen him like this before, so I stopped and asked, "What's wrong, Ihab?"

"I'm afraid that my aunt, Umm al-Abd ad-Dahir, has gone mad," he replied. "I love her so much—she is like a mother to me."
"What's happened to her?" I asked.

He began to explain: "When the war ended, she returned from the south to her home next to ours in al-Saftawi. She would stand by the rubble of the supermarket where Cola used to work. After waiting there for a long time, she would wander through the neighborhood alleyways. Every time we try to take her back home, she says, 'I swear Cola is here. Leave me alone! I can hear his voice! I want to bring him home. It's lunchtime, and he's probably hungry. I want to feed him'."

"Every time we take her back home," he proceeded, "she would go out again looking for Cola. She would swear that she heard his voice and saw him, and she would demand us to leave her and let her be." Ihab went on, "My aunt was stronger than the toughest men, both physically and mentally. She was a woman unlike any other. Never in her life had she been weak or broken. She was always unwavering – like a mountain – protecting her home and shielding her children like a lioness. No one dared approach her children, her house, or even the neighborhood we lived in, lest they get into trouble. She was, as the saying goes, 'a woman worth a million men.'"

"But after Cola was killed," Ihab stressed, "this mountain crumbled and turned into sand, blown by the wind. She was no longer the same person. Honestly, neither I nor the neighborhood were the same after that. Cola wasn't just my cousin; he was

the neighborhood star. Everyone saw him as a son or a brother, and every mother felt he was her own child."

"He did not become an engineer or a doctor; he didn't even finish high school," Ihab explained. "He dropped out of school at the age of twelve and began working at the neighborhood supermarket, starting by delivering groceries to the neighbors. Everyone loved Cola. He was everyone's son. His name echoed through the streets all day long: 'Send to Cola,' 'Have Cola prepare,' 'Have Cola go,' 'Can you please call Cola?' – and on and on. To us, he was more famous than a movie star."

"He worked like that until he was promoted at the age of seventeen. He was put in charge of the scales at the supermarket, where he weighed items for customers, always smiling. He was smiling even when he passed away! I swear to God, when I carried his coffin, I smelled a fragrance of musk. It unlike anything in the world, filling the air along the way. We did not only lose Cola's smile; we lost the smiles of the entire neighborhood, as if the light in our eyes had been extinguished and a part of our souls had departed."

Ihab paused for a moment, then took out his phone and said, "Look how beautiful he was." I looked at the picture; his face seemed angelic. Ihab began to cry as he stared at the photo. This was the first time I had ever seen him cry.

"He was unfortunate from the moment he was born," he added. "He had an unusual appearance – extremely thin and very short. He began walking on his tiny legs at just ten months old, can you imagine? And because he was so short, he was nicknamed 'Cola'. One day my cousin saw him walking one and was completely shocked. He asked me, 'What is this?? How can he walk when he's the size of a bottle of Coke?' From that moment on, he started calling him Cola, and the name spread like wildfire, so much so that everyone forgot his real name. He was simply known as Cola. For a short time, he had another nickname, but it didn't last. 'Cola' remained the dominant name, while the other one, 'Project Victim,' quickly faded away."

"I will tell you the reason behind his famous nickname," he elaborated. "When Cola was just one year old, the UNRWA[1] was building a clinic to provide medical care for people in the area. The construction took place in winter, and while bulldozers were digging the ground, one of the drivers found Cola trying to keep warm by sitting on the bulldozer's exhaust pipe! The driver noticed him at the very last moment. Otherwise, Cola would have been run over. The driver took Cola back to his father and warned him to keep a close eye on his son, because had he not been paying attention, little Cola would have been crushed under the wheels. The next day, before starting work, the driver stopped to check around the truck, as Cola had become a source of anxiety for him. Sure enough, he found Cola again, having sneaked over and settled by the bulldozer's wheels, playing in the sand and smiling. Angrily, the driver went back to Cola's father and told him to watch out for his son so he would not become a victim of the project. From that moment on, the project workers began calling him 'Project Victim.'"

Ihab continued: "When the drivers brought construction materials like stones, cement, iron, and the like, they would park far from the project site and step out onto the roadside toward the clinic being built in front of Cola's house. 'Where is the project victim?' they would ask, meaning Cola. They would then lift him up and seat him beside the driver to keep him company during the ride, and once the driver finished delivering the load, he would hand 'Project Victim' back to his father. As such, Cola had already acquired three nicknames by the age of one: his real name, which no one knew; his popular nickname 'Cola'; and the short-lived 'Project Victim.'"

Cola was always the most vibrant and active among his peers. Everyone in the neighborhood, and even beyond it, knew Cola, because he served everyone and was devoted to his parents, especially his mother—for whom he risked his life throughout the war to bring her food, flour, and whatever else she needed. He was a man in the body of a child. No one saw Cola as a child… until he was martyred.

1 The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

Only then did they realize that he was just seventeen, practically a child. Yet by then, he was already everyone's friend.

He was only trying to get food in the Zikim aid zone. Ihab mentioned that Cola loved helping everyone he knew by carrying their flour and boxes to the transportation points. He would load heavy burdens onto his shoulders to make things easier for others, walking considerable distances to the nearest means of transport, whether donkey-drawn carts or three-wheeled vehicles. And, of course, he always did that for free.

"On the day of his death," Ihab spoke through his grief, "he was waiting for the aid trucks to arrive. When he finally saw them after a long wait, he was overjoyed. He jumped with happiness, cheering and calling out to people to come forward, announcing that the aid had arrived. He waved his hand, and, in a split second, it fell limp as Cola collapsed on the hilltop, shot in the head by an Israeli sniper. Cola curled up on the ground, screaming like a newborn, his eyes fixed on the sea—the place he loved most in Gaza. On Fridays, his days off, he would sit on the beach for long hours, pouring his heart out to the sea, telling it his worries and secrets. As he gazed at the sea that last time, he uttered his final words: 'A bullet to the head hurts, I'm dying…' That day would come to be known as 'Sniper Day,' the day dozens of young men, all under the age of twenty, were shot in the head."

Ihab continued: "I was sitting at home when I received a phone call from my cousin, telling me that Cola had been shot in the head and that they were taking him to Hamad Hospital. I quickly got dressed and rushed out, arriving at the hospital yard. He was already dead… I couldn't even bid him farewell. There was a large pool of blood beneath his head. I hugged my nephew, who had been there with him. He kept saying, 'His last words were: 'A bullet in the head hurts…' repeating the sentence over and over as we recited the Shahada, the final testimony of faith, over him'."

Ihab fell silent, tears filling his eyes. "I have never grieved for anything in my life the way I grieved for Cola. Everyone is mourning; even the streets and demolished houses of the neighborhood are weeping for him. Grief has saturated everything. He was an angel in human form."

"Who can convince his mother that he has died? The tragedy is that she sees him standing right in front of her. Every time we try to calm her and take her home, she swears by the most solemn oaths that she hears his voice and sees him before her – that she is ready to take him home, but that we are standing in her way. She has remained in this state ever since, caught between grief and madness, unable to comprehend what has happened. Everyone keeps telling her that Cola was martyred and is now with God, in a place far better than this one. Still, she insists, 'No matter what you say, Cola is not dead. I can still hear his voice calling: Take me, Mother…'"

I don't know why, but as Ihab recounted this, I was reminded of Hamlet's father appearing to him as a ghost. There seemed to be a strange parallel between Hamlet's love for his father and Umm al-Abd's love for Cola – where the king returns as a ghost, and Cola returns from death.

"They kept trying to convince her that Cola had been martyred. They even took her to the cemetery and had her sit beside his grave, telling her that he was resting among thousands of martyrs who had fallen in the war. She remained silent for a long time, then embraced the grave and wept for her son until her tears ran dry, her voice faded, and her strength dissipated. She wept as bitterly as Jacob wept for Joseph."

"She returned to the neighborhood," Ihab went on, "and the moment she arrived, she began hearing Cola's voice again. She told her husband and children that she now knows that Cola is dead, yet she can still hear and see him. It seems she is losing her mind. She will likely return to the south to live in a tent, far from Cola's scent and footprints, and the alleyways where he used to play. But if she stays here, she may not survive it intact." I reassured her: 'Aunt Umm al-Abd, wherever you go, Cola

will remain in your heart and mind. None of us will ever forget him.' Exhausted from weeping, with dark circles beneath her sunken eyes, she replied: 'I know, son, but I hate the entire north because it took away my beloved son, my source of support.'"

"Eventually, she took some clothes and returned to the southernmost point, where she lives alone in a tent. I believe she is waiting to die, or perhaps she is already dead, only breathing. Cola is gone, my aunt is gone, my heart has gone with them, and this place has turned unbearably silent."

Ihab fell silent, tears filling his eyes. "I've never grieved or cried for anything in my life as much as I did for Cola. Everyone was in deep agony. He was really like an angel. His spirit wandered through every corner, every stone, every closed door, and every ruined home." Ihab kept holding his phone, staring at Cola's photos with trembling hands, as if the images were trying to bring him back to life, as if saying: 'He is not dead. He is still around.'

The greatest tragedy here is Umm al-Abd, the mother who raised Cola with all her strength, who never knew fear or brokenness. Who could convince her that her son had died? How could her heart accept that this extraordinary child, who once walked on tiptoes, laughed, played, and filled the entire neighborhood with joy, was now nothing but a memory beneath the soil?

I sat beside her at the cemetery, watching her every move and sigh as she touched the soil. I felt her indescribable agony, as the entire neighborhood gathered around her in silence—from every house, every corner, and every pile of rubble— to share her unimaginable pain. Yet amid all the weeping and lamentation, there was one man who did not shed any tears, neither screamed nor collapsed, nor struck his face as bereaved families do, and that man was Cola's father. A thin and quiet man, he sat on a broken stone at the edge of the cemetery, far from the crowd, staring at the soil as if expecting it to split open so his son might emerge. He neither approached the grave nor touched the earth. He did not hug anyone. His gaze was

steady, and his hands clasped on his knees, as if afraid that releasing them would unleash unbearable pain.

I had known this man since I was a child. He was never very talkative, even before the war. He worked in silence and returned home without a sound, as if he were made of clay. But on that day, he was quite different; present yet absent, like a statue shaped from the dust of the neighborhood, neither moving nor breathing—except in pain. I saw people turning toward him anxiously. Some muttered, "Why isn't he crying? Perhaps he is frozen by shock!" Others exclaimed, "Maybe his tears ran dry before they could fall." But the truth was that his tears had not yet begun, for he was living in a soundless grief.

After Cola was buried, his father remained seated in the same place until sunset. Everyone else eventually left, and we helped Umm al-Abd walk so she would not collapse onto the grave from exhaustion. But his father did not move. Whenever someone approached to speak to him, he would only nod, then return his gaze to the soil – as if afraid that if he spoke, everything would collapse. Finally, as the sun sank in a moment filled with sorrow, he raised his head toward the sky and murmured in a faint voice, "May God have mercy on you, Cola." Then he rose slowly and walked back home.

Since then, he became withdrawn. He no longer visits neighbors nor speaks about the war or the martyrs. Even now, he walks alone in the predawn hours through neighborhood alleys that once held his son's footsteps. He stops before the rubble that was once the supermarket – Cola's workplace. He gazes at it for a while, then moves on. Some neighbors have seen him talking to himself, muttering unintelligible words. Once, he was heard calling out, "He was so young, yet he eased my burdens." He did not weep for Cola, but not a day passes that he does not mourn him behind closed lips. His silence became heavier than any tears, deeper than any scream. He became like a shadow wandering the neighborhood streets, unseen except in moments of silence. At sunset, he would sit outside his house, light a cigarette, stub it out halfway, then light another. He would stare into the void, as if his son were

passing by with his familiar smile, carrying the bag of bread and saying, "Mom, I need to go deliver these groceries to the neighbors."

People say: "Umm al-Abd has gone mad from pain, but Cola's father buried his pain inside his chest.' I say that both of them died – but in different ways. She died from unbearable longing, and he died from the crushing weight of silence. He became a wall in the neighborhood, standing firm, not collapsing, yet eroding from within, day after day. Umm al-Abd returned with us to the neighborhood, but she didn't enter it as before; she lacked the presence and vitality that she had once been known for. Upon arriving home, she began hearing Cola's voice again. She is convinced that he is still present, even though she knows he has passed away. She acknowledged, "I know Cola is a martyr, but I still hear him and see him. I think I'm going mad…"

She gathered some of her belongings and returned to the southernmost point of Gaza. She now lives there alone, in a small tent, awaiting death or struggling through unseen hardships – no one knows. At times, I feel she is a dead woman walking, carrying a permanent sorrow and unending pain.

Cola is gone, but he did not truly die. He is engraved deeply in every heart and every street. His spirit lingers in every neighborhood striving to survive amid the rubble. Cola is gone physically, but the entire neighborhood carries in its soul everything about him, his silence, his shouts, his laughter, and all of the lingering sorrow.

Ihab mentioned that Cola had a sweetheart from the neighborhood, whose heart had been bound to him since they were kids. He knew every detail about her, and she knew everything about him—his laughter, his struggles, and even the words he uttered without thinking. But after Cola's death, she changed completely, as if her soul had been torn apart. She became extremely moody, fluctuating between crying and screaming, and drifting between closeness and withdrawal.

Sometimes she would go to the supermarket and search for Cola as if he might suddenly step out from behind the shelves and stand before her. In those moments, she would imagine Cola speaking to her, trying to calm her down. But she would scream at him incessantly, blaming him for everything that had happened. She would talk non-stop for long minutes, pouring out her heartbreak and rage. Meanwhile, Cola wouldn't respond. He would only listen in silence, as if to say, "I'm here, but I can't change what happened." Then she would walk away with her head lowered, and her eyes hidden behind a veil of sadness.

At other times, she would visit him with love and tenderness, touching him gently, trying to hold his hand. She would sit beside him for a few moments, speaking in a low voice with soft words, as if searching for every fragment of Cola. But these moments were rare, and sorrow would quickly kick in again and tighten its grip around her heart.

Ihab has not seen her face since Cola's death. She now always walks with her head down, hiding her eyes from anyone who attempts to understand or console her. She moves through the streets as if the earth had swallowed her, moving soundlessly without concrete steps. She is like the shadow of Cola that no longer exists. Ihab watches her from a distance and with a heavy heart, feeling her unending grief and tears not yet fallen. Every moment of silence is accompanied by her heart's cry heard only by Cola's spirit.

The neighborhood grew dull and lost much of its spark after Cola's death. Beyond that, it was overtaken by a merciless absence that cast an uncanny silence over every pavement, corner, and stone. As for Cola's girlfriend, she became the embodiment of that void in human form: walking among people without truly being there, loving without the ability to remain attached, remembering without the capacity to stop. Her head remains forever bowed, as if Cola's loss had drowned her in his beloved sea, with nothing left in the world that could raise her head again.

Umm Badr

Throughout the war, I tried to capture different human scenes through writing about them. But there were times when I felt too exhausted to write, or that writing itself was futile. After all, the slaughter was ceaseless; entire families were wiped out from the civil registry every night, and destruction was relentless. Every day, dozens of houses were completely flattened, while hunger, suffering, oppression, and helplessness unfolded before everyone's eyes, while nothing changed.

I began to feel that everything I had read and written was meaningless amid this continuing carnage. The entire universe seemed unable to stop Israel's massacres, broadcast live on television before the whole world.

For nearly ten days, I was unable to write anything. Then one day, as I was sitting in front of the house to which I had been displaced in Deir al-Balah, I asked myself, what in the world has happened to me? How can it be that I am unable to write a single story amid these countless calamities? Or do I simply not want to write?

As I underwent this internal struggle, a good friend visited me. He sat beside me and said, "I came to check on you after hearing the news about the bombing of the house across from yours." He was referring to the rubble scattered around us. "Man," he added, "Get out of this area already. This is the third time they've bombed around you. I'm afraid the next strike will hit you."

"The persistent survive," I replied with the familiar proverb.

When he asked how I was doing, I shared my frustration about my writing hiatus. I felt my head was empty and found nothing to write or express. "Write about last night," he offered. "It was a night like any other for people," I said, "Bombing, then death. Nothing exciting for the reader. All day long, that's the most common news: bombardment then death."

"Listen," he asserted, "If you want to write a truly unique story that will lift you out of your current state, go to my uncle's wife, Umm Badr, and listen to her story. I challenge you to find a story like it! She lives near you now that they've been displaced from Tal al-Hawa. I'll tell her about you and that you want to write her

story. She's a woman of few words, but I will convince her of the importance of preserving her son Badr's story for future generations."

"All stories are similar, my friend," I muttered.

"But this story is one of a kind," he stressed. "I challenge you. It will reinvigorate you to write." "You seem very confident," I said, intrigued. "Give me her address."

I took the address and went to Umm Badr's house – or rather, the storage room she and her husband had rented after their displacement from Tal al-Hawa. I arrived at the appointed time. As I sat with her, I told her that I wanted to write her story. I asked her to recount it exactly as it had happened, down to the smallest detail.

She said, "I don't like to repeat my story, but my nephew Hamed is dear to my heart. He convinced me of the importance of recounting our story, so I will tell it to you."

She began to narrate her story, which was unlike any other, and I present it here exactly as I heard it:

Twenty-five-year-old Badr left his home in Tal al-Hawa, near the Council of Ministers, in search of bread. Their house had been completely devoid of anything edible, and hunger had rumbled in their stomachs for days. He felt it was his duty to bring food to his parents, especially because he was their only son.

His parents tried to stop him from stepping out of the house amid the ceaseless sounds of shelling and gunfire. They had not seen a living person in the area since the day before. He told them he would not be gone for long and tried to reassure them that there was nothing to worry about, and that the sounds seemed far away. In the end, they could not stop him, and he left, not knowing where to go.

His parents waited as the minutes and hours dragged on endlessly in unbearable anticipation. Their anxiety grew as they awaited his return, and terror gripped their hearts for Badr, all the more because he was their only son. Hours ticked by, each moment agonizingly slow, accompanied by the sounds of explosions and the

incessant crackle of bullets.

Umm Badr was deeply worried about her son, who had left three hours earlier and had not returned. She felt like a pendulum swinging back and forth, constantly wringing her hands. It was a total war zone outside, and his absence filled her with dread. His mere departure had been dangerous, and she had opposed it from the beginning.

"I can't wait any longer!" She cried out to her husband. "I'm going out to look for my son. The shooting has subsided a bit. It's my fault that I allowed him to go. I should have stopped him by force!"

Her husband exclaimed, "How will you go out? Are you crazy? Haven't you heard the nonstop gunfire? There must be violent clashes outside. Wait until it calms down completely."

"I will not wait!" She exclaimed back. "Shelling, gunfire, and explosions never stop. I should have prevented him from leaving, even by force. What was I thinking when I let him go? Wait for me at home. I can no longer bear his absence. I must go now. I won't be gone for long. I'll search the area around the house."

Her husband grabbed her hand and tried to stop her. "Let me go out and look for him," he insisted.

"No," she said firmly. "I will go out. You stay here to protect the house from thieves. It seems many people left the area, and thieves are looting homes in times like these." She pushed his hand away and left the house quickly, scanning the empty streets in every direction. Only the incessant barking of dogs could be heard. As if the place were not already horrifying enough, the dogs' barking amplified the terror.

The Tal al-Hawa neighborhood had become a ghost town. Before the war, it had been a bustling and vibrant area, considered one of the most prestigious and beautiful parts of the Gaza Strip, with its modern buildings, universities, schools,

numerous hospitals, theaters, restaurants, and shopping centers. It was like a city on its own, full of charm and life, but now it had fallen utterly silent.

The area had once been filled with songs and laughter, and voices of vendors and children leaving school, with joy and cheer in the air. Now, those sounds had been replaced by the barking of dogs, artillery, missiles, drones, and tanks.

Umm Badr walked alone through the streets, hoping to find someone who could help her find Badr.

"Could it be that there is no one here? Are we the only ones left in Tal al-Hawa?" she wondered. But she kept walking, sometimes north, sometimes south, and all she heard was the distant barking of dogs.

She was baffled: "How could everyone disappear so quickly!? The city is dead. Yes, cities have a soul, and when people leave, the city dies. People are the soul of the city."

"This isn't the time for your empty philosophies," she pulled herself out of her thoughts. "I should head toward the barking. They must be howling for something—perhaps a person, an animal, or something in the road. Despite my fear of dogs, I will follow that sound. Maybe I'll find a sign of life there."

She moved cautiously toward the area surrounding the obliterated towers for which Tal al-Hawa had been famous. There she realized that the explosions she had heard had not been in vain; even the ground was greatly damaged. The stench of dead bodies was unbearable. It was like stepping into a horror scene, especially near Al-Aqsa University.

Suddenly, she saw three bodies lying on the ground at a distance, being devoured by dogs. At first, she hesitated to approach the corpses–the dogs were large and feral–but she had a terrible suspicion that her son might be among them, especially when she noticed a pair of shoes that resembled those Badr used to wear when he left home.

Approaching slowly, she discovered that the young man lying there was wearing the same pants and shirt that Badr used to wear.

She ran toward him and screamed at the top of her lungs– a scream that seemed louder than missiles, tearing through Tal al-Hawa and breaking the terrifying silence that hung over the place: "Oh, Mother! Oh, Mother!"

She turned into a different creature, more savage than the predatory dogs themselves. Even the dogs were frightened and flinched for a moment at the intensity of her grief-stricken, furious voice and the storm of emotions carried in that sound. She ran toward Badr's body without thinking, as a dog was devouring him, while two other dogs tore at the flesh of the other two people.

She tried to pull her son away, but the dog attacked her, biting her hands and feet. It was a rabid dog that had grown accustomed to human flesh. She defended herself with all her might and managed to break free. Then she moved a short distance away and began searching for anything to defend herself with. She found a stick and grabbed it, ready for battle. She quickly took off her headscarf, her hair falling across her face—etched with the fiercest expression of rage and fury. She ripped the headscarf in two and tied the pieces together tightly. Then she pulled out her trousers from under her cloak, tore them in half, and tied them to the headscarf, creating a long rope. She returned to her son's body and defied the dogs once more. She attacked them with strength, roaring like a ferocious lioness, striking them with the stick as they resisted. The dogs seemed terrified by this strange creature, screaming and growling even louder. She struck one of them again while tying her son's foot with the makeshift rope, tightening it firmly. Then she began to drag him away from the dogs, who seemed to have had enough of the other two bodies.

But that specific dog continued to pursue its prey until Umm Badr attacked it fiercely, frightening it into retreating to its pack. Meanwhile, Umm Badr kept dragging Badr until they were far away from the dogs. "Oh, mother…" she cried our again as she embraced him and kissed his cheek: "Get up, Badr, get up, Mama, get up dear! Wake up…" But there was no response.

As she dragged her son away, Umm Badr felt an inner struggle each time she glanced back at the two corpses left behind. She felt compelled to pull them away too, not to leave them to be ravaged by death all alone in that desolation. She felt a sense of betrayal—as if she had failed two other mothers waiting for their sons, or perhaps mothers who, like her, had been abandoned by fate.

She felt the urge to go back, stepping backward and then forward again, torn between duty and fear, courage and helplessness. "I can't leave them," she told herself, "But I can't leave Badr either." Eventually, she walked on, stumbling through her tears, carrying the weight of her son and another weight of guilt pressing on her soul.

She dragged her son back toward the house, about a thousand meters away. She pulled him the whole way, the rope cutting into her shoulder, while she could hardly believe what was happening. As she walked, she would temporarily doubt, Is this really my son Badr? Then she would look at him, hug him, call out to him, and once again beg him to get up.

His entire life flashed before her eyes: the day he was born, his first cry, the first time he crawled, his first steps, and the first time he said "Mama." She was flooded with memories of his first day of kindergarten, his graduation from university, and the girl he spoke to in secret. She looked at him and pleaded, "Get up, Badr. My son, do you know who named you Badr?"

She paused. "No, it wasn't me, and it wasn't your father either. It was the midwife. She looked at your face and said to me, "Wow, you have given birth to a Badr; a splendid full moon, madam. Praise be to the Creator!" She even called her fellow nurses to come and see your great beauty. That's when we decided to call you Badr."

From that moment on, he was called Badr, even before his parents had a chance to think of another name. Whenever she remembered that day, she would recall his round face, shining eyes, and his serenity from the very beginning.

Umm Badr said she felt something strange that day, as if the pain she had not

experienced at his birth had not vanished, but had hidden cleverly somewhere inside her, waiting to erupt all at once and at any given moment. It felt as though life had postponed her pain, only to return it to her twofold on a day she could have never imagined. She had convinced herself that God granted her a painless birth as a sign of mercy. But now she realized that the true pain of childbirth was not in birth, but in loss.

As she gazed at his frozen features, every pain she had not felt at his birth returned to her at once, engulfing her chest, stomach, and back in the same searing pain. It was like giving birth to Badr all over again, only this time she was delivering his absence, his loss, and his end. "Get up, my son, get up. I want to see you married. I want to rejoice in your children… but none of them should call me Grandma." She chuckled faintly, and a song played in her mind—Farid al-Atrash's "Life is beautiful, if only we understood it."

She shook that voice away and muttered, What madness is this in my mind? Dragging my martyred son and singing Farid Al-Atrash?!

Blood trickled from her shoulder from the impact of the rope cut into her skin, but she felt nothing. She kept walking through the empty streets. She felt like Eve at the beginning of creation, dragging her son Abel, killed by his brother Cain… except that Badr had been killed by Israel.

She remembered how Badr used to wake up smiling in the morning and kiss her forehead. She would tease him, "Kiss me on the cheek!" And he would say, "This is the sweetest kiss for the dearest mother in the world."

The song "Life is beautiful" invaded her mind again, suffocating her with grief, but she once again pushed it away. She looked at her son and cried out, "Oh, Mother…"

Only a few steps away from home, the song "Life is beautiful, if only we understood it" began to play again in her mind. Images of Badr flashed before her eyes in succession: preparing his school sandwiches, buying him clothes for holidays, the

day he passed his high school exams, when she distributed sweets to the entire neighborhood and family. But then image of dogs biting his feet returned, and the same song returned with it. “Oh, Mother!” she cried out in a loud voice.

Danger surrounded Umm Badr from every direction as she dragged her son along. Her fear was as thick as the dust hanging in the air. Yet it was not the kind of visible fear one may experience in ordinary situations – the kind that makes one flinch or step back. This was a silent fear, like a heavy shadow pursuing her, clawing at her shoulders with invisible hands.

She could hear the whir of quadcopters overhead, like eyes suspended in the sky, watching her every move. The drones circled above her like metallic creatures with unblinking eyes, tracking every inhale and exhale, every shiver, besieging her from above and from within. This constantly reminded her that she was exposed, and that death could descend upon her like it had upon Badr, like a fragment falling from an unseen missile.

Umm Badr did not look up at the sky. She did not have the courage to raise her head to see what was chasing her. She kept on going, dragging her son along as if the rope holding him were tied not to her shoulder, but to her soul. Drones hovered overhead, their sharp buzz like a needle piercing her eardrum, reminding her she was not alone, yet her loneliness had never been greater. She walked inside her own bubble, a tiny circle that admitted no one but her and her son lying behind her. It was as if the entire world had been erased except for them, as if the war—with all its screams, collapsing towers, missiles and tanks—existed on another layer of reality that neither reached her nor paid attention to her.

Explosions shook the ground beneath her feet, disorienting her steps and forcing her to stumble and stoop. Shrapnel flew near and far, and fires raged in buildings as if the night had swallowed the light and turned it into ashes. But she did not look back or respond. She only heard, as if hearing belonged to another body, not her own. Different sounds reached her, but she did not react. Her body became like a molded clay, moved by some mysterious force.

The sounds of tanks – the heavy, earth-shattering clatters – were greatly pervasive. Umm Badr could hear them from a short distance, with their metallic roar grinding through the streets. They crushed roads, sidewalks, and even the air itself. Yet fear did not seep into her heart—not the kind that makes a person hide, scream, or run for their life. She was larger than fear itself, or perhaps her heart was too small to contain all that terror. She clung to only one sound: her son's breath… which was no longer there. Everything in her mind revolved around only one thing: Badr… Badr… Badr.

She felt neither her body nor the tight rope biting into her shoulder. She felt no pain in her muscles, and her breath came in sharp, shallow gasps, like broken glass in her lungs. She felt like she was carried by a strange faith soaked in grief.

The world around her was collapsing—buildings crumbling, roads tearing apart, gunfire splitting the air – but inside her, everything was still; static like a grave, or like an old womb holding her only son.

The bubble around her protected her, but it also exposed her to great danger. It shielded her from fear, because she listened only to her heart, but it also laid her bare to death because she was completely unguarded. Yet none of that mattered to her. The sky could explode and the ground could swallow the street – everything paled in comparison to the weight of the body being dragged by her.

She knew that if she stopped, she would collapse. And if that happened, she would not be able to continue dragging her son home, to the last place that could unite them, no matter how fragile or vulnerable it was. So she walked on; she couldn't do anything else. She walked on because if she turned toward the thunderous world, even for a fleeting moment, she would scream so loudly it would split the universe in two. She walked on because she wanted to see nothing but her son, hear nothing but his name, and feel no grief but his own.

There were drones above her, explosions around her, and tanks behind her, yet her soul clung to Badr and erased everything else.

And that was her entire universe.

She reached the doorstep like a ghost, or like a dead person dragging another corpse. Her hair clung to her face, matted with blood. Her clothes were torn, and her eyes were empty. The rope slipped from her grasp, and she collapsed beside her son.

Her husband rushed out at the sound of her cries. Once he opened the door, he saw Badr lying before him. He threw himself on the lifeless body, kissed his son, then pulled himself together and embraced his wife, their tears merging. He then carried Badr inside, and together they held their son, the three of them becoming one, as if offering their lives in the hope that he would awaken from that long, deadly sleep. But it was in vain.

Then a terrible silence descended as they fixed their gazes on Badr alone. As parents, that night was as dark as a womb swallowing all light. They sat in the room where Badr used to enter every evening, place his shoes by the door, and ask, "What did you cook today, Mama?" But tonight, there was no smell of food, no voice of life whatsoever. Silence sat with them on the third chair – silence heavier than the walls, clawing at their chests.

Umm Badr sat glued to the wall, her knees pressing together to keep herself from collapsing. She spent long hours recounting what had happened, she narrated the same story again and again – afraid that if she paused, she would forget the details and lose the vividness of her son's memory. Sometimes words poured from her like a torrent, and at other times they got stuck in her throat like a large, painful stone she could not swallow. Each time she told her husband how she dragged their son, how she screamed, how she fought the dogs, his hands would tremble, and he would stare at the floor, as if searching for Badr between the tiles, or looking for the footprints from when he was a child.

They mostly took turns: she cried while he remained silent; he burst into tears while her face turned to stone. Occasionally, they both wept together, quietly, as if afraid someone might hear them and reopen their wounds. For a long time, they sat motionless, in silence. They did not turn on the light or open the window. The night stretched endlessly, as if the house saw them not as parents, but as two broken bodies that had lost part of their soul.

In the deep silence, Umm Badr placed her hand on the spot where Badr used to sit every night. "He used to sit here… here he used to laugh…" she whispered in a broken voice.

Badr's father approached her slowly, as if afraid to touch the sorrow lest it shatter. They leaned against each other, as if trying to keep their spirits from fading.
The evening passed as such… an endless night.

Umm Badr remained in the corner, staring at the walls that had witnessed her son's first steps and now his still face, encapsulating the war and devastation.

That heavy night, filled with unspoken words, turned silence into a new language she mastered more than speech. She felt suspended between two worlds: one where she was a mother cooking and waiting for her son's return, and another where she carried a wound that would never heal and that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

She no longer thought about sleep or sunrise; all days were the same now that Badr was gone. Still, deep in her heart, she knew his memory must not be erased, and that he must not become just a number in the long list of martyrs. As she sees it, telling his story is the only way to keep him alive, and to tell the world that there had been a human being here – with a name, face, a smile, and a mother who loves him endlessly.

She raised her head and looked toward the door from which Badr was dragged at the end. As if addressing his spirit, she whispered, "Badr, I will always carry you in my heart… and as long as I'm alive, I will keep telling your story."

Her night ended not with an ending, but with the beginning of a long silence—a silence holding what no words could describe, except that her heart had lost its only moon, and the sky remained without a full moon called Badr.

Eight Wonders of the World

At a time when concepts have blurred and words have fallen short under the weight of reality, speaking about Gaza becomes an attempt to make sense of the incomprehensible and to write where description fails. Gaza is neither a place to be discussed from afar nor a fleeting incident in a news broadcast. It Is a full human experience, lived daily in painful detail. In Gaza, life is not measured by what we accomplish, but by what we survive, and time is not counted in days, but in the number of times a person teeters on the brink of death and returns burdened with even heavier questions.

This text does not seek to recount events as much as to tackle the human essence of what is happening. It is an attempt to see not only the rubble, but the human being who is within it; to hear the faint voice drowned out by the buzzing of warplanes and the clamor of political analyses. In Gaza, pain is not an exceptional event, but a constant presence that seeps into the smallest details of one's life – the way we walk, gaze, lose our voices, and wait. Everything here leaves a mark, and every mark, over time, becomes another burden that people carry in silence.

Writing about Gaza is neither an intellectual luxury nor a linguistic exercise, but a heavy responsibility. Language, after all, always lags a step behind reality. No written account can encompass all that was witnessed, nor convey the full extent of loss, fear, and disappointment. Still, it may pave the way for a deeper understanding or leave an imprint on the reader's consciousness. This text does not claim to possess the whole truth, nor does it offer ready-made answers. Rather, it poses questions rooted in lived experience.

Through these lines, we seek to portray Gaza as it is today; a city whose features are drastically changing under widespread destruction, and a people forced to redefine themselves in the face of total collapse. The aim is to see how people live, adapt, and maintain their humanity in a place where humanity is systematically undermined day in and day out. We seek to understand what it means to be a human being in Gaza, where survival has become a daily ritual, and where reality resembles nothing we had ever known.

Palestine should be added to the Seven Wonders of the World, bringing the number to eight.

We have been falling into an endless abyss since 1948. While we have been struggling constantly to rise, rebuild, and change our fate, yet we always find ourselves slipping from one pit into another, trapped in an endless cycle. Year after year, we pay the price for freedom with our own flesh and blood, always willing to sacrifice without limit. There is hardly a Palestinian home without martyrs, prisoners, and wounded, all for the sake of freedom and the dream of statehood and independence—yet we still await deliverance.

Patience has become our motto that we held onto so devoutly, so much so that it has ceased to be a virtue and transformed into a name. It is no longer something one practices, but something that one embodies. Still, neither deliverance nor relief has answered us. Patience has gone into exile, leaving us to endure hardship, deprivation, oppression, and betrayal by ourselves. This is where I am convinced that the Palestinian people deserve to stand beside the Seven Wonders of the World – for their limitless patience, and their endurance of horrors beyond words. Since the Nakba, wars have continued without cease, and intifadas have never ended. Is it conceivable that we endured six wars in just fourteen years!? Are we the world's only contractors, condemned to shoulder wars on behalf of everyone else? We seem to have become a testing ground for every weapon ever made. Are we doomed to live and die within this abhorrent conflict on a land that remains unchanged and will outlast us all? We will inevitably perish, and the Occupation will ultimately end. Every human being on this earth will be gone in a hundred years. Even those born today will likely struggle for freedom, endure suffering, then depart.

Is it our fate as Palestinians to be scattered across the globe? Those who remain on the land are met by a single, relentless destiny: death, imprisonment, wounds of war, or forcible displacement. No one is exiled willingly, and those who feel comfortable in their motherland would not leave it. More than six million Palestinians live abroad, dispersed in different countries, waiting to return. Meanwhile, they live and die as oppressed strangers, dreaming of the day they will return to their ancestral homeland.

We are being slaughtered by the hundreds each day before the eyes of world on TV screens, but the world remains passive, except for a few free voices who feel our pain and stand in solidarity, chanting: "Free Free Palestine! Stop the war on Gaza!"

Chanting has not ceased since the First Intifada in 1987. We barely catch our breath after one war before a more brutal one strikes. War here continues like the boulder of Sisyphus, hitting each time with similar destruction, death, and outcomes. For 820 days now, we have endured a horrific war of a scale and cruelty I believe history has seldom witnessed. It has taken the lives of thousands of children, women, and the elderly. Approximately 250,000 people have been killed or wounded, and thousands of others detained. These figures come from the Ministry of Health statistics and reflect only the bodies that reached hospitals. But what of the thousands still under the rubble, those buried in mass graves, and those who remain missing!? None of those are included in the official count. Only God knows who has died and who is still alive!

We need to know who was killed, who was arrested, whose limbs were cut off, who was displaced, and who was starved. Is it possible that there is even one individual who has escaped the Occupation's brutality? Not even the children, the elderly, the women, the trees, or the stones were spared. Even the air and soil were contaminated with carcinogenic uranium.

We need a new discourse – a rethinking of how we can pull ourselves back together, reclaim our rights, and carve paths to freedom, away from stereotypes and the repetition of the same mistakes. For the discourse to be renewed, our lives themselves must be rebuilt, yet Gaza seems far from that moment, as if it belongs to a completely different world.

Yesterday I watched a film based on a true story about a boy in Africa who built a wind-powered generator from a dynamo and a bicycle, and managed to pump water and save his village from starvation. In the past, when I watched scenes from Africa – such as the famine in Somalia, civil wars, and conflicts between villagers over food – I felt deeply saddened and shaken by the world's inequality and absence of

social justice. Oftentimes, I chose not to believe these scenes because they were too unbearable, especially the images of starving children, drought, and deprivation.

I used to convince that such films must come from a different world, and that it was up to you to believe whether it exists or not. But when I watched that film yesterday, I felt as if it came from Gaza. I was not at all surprised or shocked by the film's events. The scene where they closed the village's only school because students couldn't pay the fees reminded me of our own destroyed schools and the new study year (which should have started around this period). Seeing that my house is located on al-Madares, the Schools Street, I used to enjoy watching children happily go to school in new clothes at the beginning of the school year. They were always so cheerful, shouting near street vendors and waiting for buses to take them home. Their constant squabbles, a habit passed down from generation to another, also reminded me of my own frustrations with transportation. Throughout the study year, heavy traffic often blocked the street for over an hour, usually when children arrived to school at 6:30 a.m. and again at noon when they left. I often preferred to go by foot during those hours.) Oh, how I miss those times and those children…

Children are now dwelling inside schools, under the most inhumane and unimaginable conditions. Their situation is simply indescribable. People in general look more like dead men walking, their faces etched with an absence, numbness, anger, sorrow, fear, and anxiety all at once; even Pablo Picasso wouldn't be able to capture their expressions. I, too, fail miserably in describing this extraordinary situation. No words could describe the stench, sewage, toilets, and the numerous families crammed into a single classroom. How could one describe the clay ovens spread across the schools, as women and children bake over firewood? Or worse still, how about the numerous donkeys transporting people on a single cart as if they were a pile of meat!? To have donkeys become the primary means of transportation is itself an image from another world.

We have forgotten that electricity ever existed, and everything that once came with it, like refrigerators, fans, heaters, mixers, computers, and lights. Believe me, we have forgotten all of that in this "Gaza world," where death has become the most

prevalent, especially among children and women.

In this Gaza world, people walk barefoot as if it were perfectly normal, and no one even notices, because there are no shoes and no clothes. We wear only old and worn clothes, and the only things for sale are used garments from long ago. Of course, it is also "normal" to see hundreds of people in torn clothes lining up at the Takiya [community kitchen], carrying odd, scarred pots to hold whatever scrap of "food" they might find.

In this Gaza world, death has become a familiar routine. You might see a son who just buried his father leave the cemetery to go to work as if nothing had happened. Numbness has prevailed, and tears have turned to stone inside people's eyes.

In the past, when we spoke of someone passing on to "the other world," we meant death, or otherwise we used that term to imply outer space, the place of aliens, or some distant dream of living on Mars. But over here, women go to the other world simply when they carry out daily chores. Even the toughest men elsewhere in the world would think twice before carrying out these tasks. Who would believe that Gazan women can walk for more than seven kilometers while carrying a 25-kilogram sack of flour on their heads? Each time I see it, my heart pounds, deeply unsettled. I watch these women's faces with sorrow, mired in the folds of the flour sack they painstakingly seized, wresting it from the clutches of near-death.

No matter how eloquent I may be in describing my feelings, I remain incapable of explaining the many details of this tragic scene. Here all the colors blend with layers of anger, oppression, sadness, and exhaustion, alongside the stench of earth mixed with flesh, blood, and despair. Death in this place has rituals known only to those who have experienced them, amid bombardment, destruction, and massacres that defy comparison.

Adaptation is not an option in obliterated Gaza, but a necessity imposed by the harsh reality. The people of Gaza did not wake up one day and decide to adapt to this havoc. Instead, they found themselves surrounded by it from all directions,

forced to redefine life according to what was available, not what they wished for. Adaptation here was not a psychological luxury or superhuman strength, but a daily struggle for survival; a step over the rubble; and an extra breath in a city that struggles to breathe.

People in Gaza began adapting when the place itself lost its meaning. "Home" is no longer walls and a roof, but any space that offers temporary shelter. The street is no longer a passage to life, but a strange mixture of destruction and stagnant water—half rainwater that could not be drained, and half the cautious footsteps of people as they jump over potholes and debris as if performing a daily ritual their bodies had learned by heart. No one expects roads to be repaired, and the city has become both a path and a hurdle at the same time.

It seems that Gaza has adapted to this destruction. The city that was once bustling with life—with hotels, restaurants, towers, and illumination—has turned into open spaces of darkness. Hotels that once welcomed visitors have become tents for the displaced, and restaurants that once gathered people around tables are now distribution points or mere memories. The towers that gleamed at night are now broken shadows, and the decorative streetlights feel like a luxury from another era.

Nevertheless, people haven't stopped moving. A Gazan today walks differently in the streets, with eyes wide open to danger, and with a body well-skilled in evading, jumping, and going forward even when the path seems impossible. The children of Gaza play in the rubble, not because it is safe, but because childhood seeks any space, however confined. Women organize life amid this chaos, and men try to repair whatever can be mended – even if only to preserve a fragile sense of persistence.

Gaza today reflects its people more than ever before. The city has become a mirror to its inhabitants: burdened and wounded, yet still standing. Just as the people have adapted to its destruction, the city too has adapted to their presence. The city and people have grown alike in their astonishing patience and their extraordinary capacity to bear the unbearable.

Death here is not merely the cessation of physical movement, but an attempt to rob one's spirit and hope, imposing a life beyond human endurance. Mothers guarding their children's safety remain unbroken, relentlessly striving to assert their presence in the face of the most daunting and brutal challenges, defying all the hardships imposed by this accursed war.

Despite the daily torment with endless needs, we sometimes hear a mother cry out to check that she is alive, and that she can still feel pain, contemplate, and dream of life. You see her carrying her son and running to the clinic to treat diseases that we had never known before. And of course, the last thing she will find at the clinic is medicine. There is practically nothing there except paracetamol, and even a single tablet strip of that is given in the gravest cases.

Yes, all of us—men, women, children, and the elderly—have been brutally scarred by this carnage. Yet it is Gazan women who have carried the heaviest weight, especially those who lost their husbands, sons, brothers, and parents. Far too many are now without a breadwinner, left alone to struggle for survival.

How great you are, Palestinian mothers, sisters, and daughters! If even an iota of human conscience remains in the world, it would bow in reverence and kiss your noble heads. We stand helpless and in awe of your resilience and steadfastness.

In Gaza, the wheel of suffering and death keeps turning, much like the boulder of Sisyphus that he pushes to the mountain peak only to see it roll down again. He is forced to lift the boulder once more, but it rolls back yet again. Such is the torment we are undergoing while waiting for the war to end. With every glimmer of hope, the boulder rolls down yet again at the very last moment. In this endless cycle, life is worn away.

And in the shadow of all this, everything written in these accounts is but a glimpse of the harsh reality endured by our women during the war. Yet the reality itself, however eloquent the words, ultimately defies description.

As a witness who lived through this storm and observed the plight of women and their unending hardships, I can only offer a kiss of respect and gratitude to the forehead of every woman who stood with courage and sacrifice to sustain human life. Alas, they shouldered a pivotal role in protecting life. I pray that the war ends tomorrow, so that our women may return to something resembling life, and that they would be compensated, even if only modestly, for what they have endured during this unimaginably heinous war.

It is true that everyone who lived through the war has suffered unbearable fear, anxiety, insecurity, deprivation, disappointment, and psychological trauma. The hope is that much of this will fade once the war ends, yet tragically, this war will undoubtedly cast a long shadow on people's souls, and some scars will remain unforgettable. That said, there is sure to be a human rebirth – forged in fire, in tents, in patience, endurance, and deprivation—one who knows how to rise again like a phoenix; stronger, more resilient, and unbreakable.

We are not seeking pity in this painful scene, nor are we asking for more tears; we have already consumed enough sorrow. All we ask is that Palestinian human beings are seen as they truly are, without distortion or reduction, beyond figures and urgent headlines. We want people to understand that what we are undergoing is not romantic heroism or divine destiny, but a reality imposed upon us, which we are paying for daily with our lives, our bodies, and our deferred dreams. We have not grown accustomed to death because it is in any way easy, but because the only alternative is to lose all sanity. We do not endure because patience is in any way a comfortable option, but because it is the last thing left when all other options are taken away.

We are not a people fond of war or enamored with loss, nor do we seek glory amid the rubble. We are simply human beings who love life as others do, who dream of safe homes, ordinary days, children who grow up without fear, and mothers who are not tested by the harshest trials of existence. What is happening to us is not a fleeting scene in a news headline, but a lived experience that reshapes the human being from within, leaving unseen scars that will remain etched in our memory and soul.

The bombardment may one day cease and the warplanes may fall silent, but the effects of this war will linger within us for years to come; they will creep in the smallest details of our lives and in the ways we see the world, now that we no longer trust anything we had been told about justice and humanity. Still, in the face of this burden, our people still possess the will to survive, not out of empty defiance but out of a fierce attachment to life itself. We know life here is difficult, harsh, and unfair, yet it is still the life we have, and it is one cling to against all odds, not because we are immortal, but because we refuse to be silently erased.

Despite the terrible darkness pervading life in Gaza, people's dreams remain alive and stubbornly present. The desire to live has not been broken; it has grown stronger. People dream of a better tomorrow, not as a distant possibility, but as a natural right that must be attained. Some dream of rebuilding what was destroyed, and others greet each morning as a chance to start anew, nurturing hope in children despite the hardship. Optimism here is not a denial of reality but a conscious stance to confront it. Dreaming in Gaza is not an escape from pain, but an energy that urges people to hold onto life and to believe that every dark night, however long, will inevitably be followed by dawn.

Where did Gaza's Children Go?

When I ask myself, where have the children gone? I am not speaking of the nearly 18,000 children killed, nor the tens of thousands wounded in the war. I mean it literally: children are no longer seen in Gaza. They have been replaced by grown men in tiny frames, filling the streets.

Even the way they speak is no longer childlike. Ask one a simple question and they will fire back ten answers at once. And if you unintentionally upset them by humoring them as you would a child, especially if they don't know you, they may lash out, raising their voices, hurling insults with the fury of men five times their age! They certainly do not feel like children anymore. Tell one of them, "You're a good kid," and they would instantly assume you are mocking them.

You'd have no clue how to deal with that. If you try to get back at them, people will say you're "lowering yourself to a child's level." If you remain silent, you risk being insulted by a child and reinforcing their bullying language. It seems that the golden rule we were raised on, "respect your elders," has vanished along with the dust of destroyed homes.

We have lost both our childhood and our children during the war. And how could it be any different, after enduring intolerable trauma and calamities that could crush even mountains? Every human being has a breaking point, whether psychological or physical, and what the people of Gaza have borne, witnessed, and suffered in this war far exceeds human capacity.

I believe that all of us in Gaza need special psychological care. The lucky ones are those who may travel abroad, even for just a month, to regain their spirit – to catch a semblance of what normal life looks like, something most of us no longer remember, before they come back.

Children bore the greatest injustice, not only because of their innocence and lack of responsibility for what happened, but also because they make up the majority of those killed and injured. No child in Gaza was spared during the war. Their behavior is hardly surprising to anyone. Simply put, a child may be the only surviving member

of their family, or may have witnessed their father, mother, or sibling die before their eyes. Even more horrifying, many of their loved ones were literally torn apart. At the very least, these children cried at night from the intense starvation that ravaged everyone here.

I wish someone would conduct a study on the people of Gaza to see: how many days did they sleep during the more than 800 days of war? How many children screamed day and night at the ceaseless roar of missiles? Who can stop the children's cries? We all felt helpless. Indeed, Gaza's children grew up in an abnormal way: how could they not, when from morning till night they stand in long queues stretching tens of meters, waiting for a truck to deliver clean water to their neighborhood? Each water container the children carry holds around 15 liters, and everyone in these queues is between five and fourteen years old.

You wouldn't believe your eyes when you see them lugging containers of all sizes! Even grown men complain because they're too heavy to lift. If you're skeptical, just look at the photos and videos of water queues during the war, and you will see that everyone queuing or jostling for water there is a child.

These same children haul massive rounds of dough to bakers scattered throughout the streets to prepare food for the people. After supplying water and bread, many of these children go to work, often at small or large stalls, selling whatever they can find –from children's snacks like biscuits and chocolate, to vegetables, used utensils, and clothes– or they may roam the streets as vendors.

At lunchtime, most of them rush quickly from their stalls to the Takiya (community kitchen) to grab their family's portion – usually lentils, rice, or pasta, if available. The Takiya's queue is a struggle in itself; it seldom has a line. It more of a brutal battle for the survival of the fittest and fiercest amid the countless people waiting to silence their growling stomachs through the pots. This deadly crowding often sparks fistfights among children over who arrived first and who has the right and priority to claim their share of food; often the worst taste imaginable, barely resembling food at all.

Where have the children of Gaza disappeared to? It seems we have lost them, just as they have lost ourselves, in this horrendous war. School has slipped from their minds, and for most, it has become entirely unknown: They only enter classrooms as internally displaced persons, living inside them and forming the worst possible impression of the place. 'School' has turned to a spot where children age; they find themselves crammed with thousands of others, lacking even the most basic necessities, starting with the bathrooms. They are forced to stand in excruciating morning queues just to access the shared toilets, which resemble anything but, with filth covering the floors and even the walls, making it nearly impossible to stand. Imagine trying to urinate or defecate amid all that squalor after enduring long, grueling queues.

In the recollections of these children, 'school' became an overcrowded environment of constant fights and brawls, teeming with activity throughout the day, with street vendors circulating and people residing inside. It is a place where water trucks and aid from UNRWA[1] come and go, alongside assistance stations attempting to address the community's needs while clotheslines are stretched across the school walls. In such an atmosphere of indescribable misery and suffering, the children came to associate school with utter chaos.

How on earth will anyone convince these children to appreciate school or line up properly for the morning queues, even if the war is over, the buildings are repaired, and all the crowds have left the classrooms? I can only say: What a tragedy! Give us back our children! Give them the toys they've forgotten, if they ever even knew such things existed. The situation is so dire that even if you gave a child a banana, they might eat it whole, without peeling it, because they had never seen one before.

My granddaughter, barely four years old, once watched a video of a large shopping center full of shopping carts and baskets. Puzzled, she asked me, "What are these carts? What's this place? Do they give out food there?" Trying to explain it to her felt like describing something from another planet!

1 The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

Every day, we discover the extent of what our children do not know: simple things that they have never seen or experienced. For example, an amusement park. They have never been to a normal park, since all of them were destroyed. They have encountered neither snow nor ice cream, let alone a trip to the coast that stretches along the Gaza Strip.

The beach itself was transformed into camps for displaced people. The waves frequently swept away tents along with everything inside – including mattresses, clothes, and utensils. Even the sea, once the most beautiful thing in Gaza, has become, in the children's memories, a terrifying place capable of destroying them at any moment. After the war ends and the children displaced along the coast grow up, I am not sure they will ever return to the sea. For them, it will remain a trigger of danger, a frightening and uncomfortable place tied to irregular and painful memories.

Evidently, after the war, psychological reconstruction will be needed before physical reconstruction can begin. The world must therefore harness all its efforts to rehabilitate both the children and adults of Gaza, because it is humans who will ultimately preserve the reconstructed sites. The more I delve into the details of this war, the more I realize the magnitude of our catastrophe. Everything around us has become a problem. Even the things I thought were minor have revealed themselves, upon closer examination, to be major issues.

We are drowning in a sea of endless, multiplying crises at the political, social, and religious levels. Indeed, we need vast global resources to put Gaza back on the right track, to enable a dignified life like that of other people, and to save whatever we can for the future of our children; our most precious treasures; our raison d' être, so to speak.

Despite everything, we must never stop dreaming, and we must protect our children, for they are our future and our living dreams.

In the hours of the night, when things calm down and the clamor of the busy day

fades, children remain awake. Amid the rubble and city ruins within the remnants of what used to be called a "neighborhood," they seek some shelter to dream. In all the devastation, fear creeps into their souls like taut ropes encircling them from every side. Yet they still insist on dreaming and on carving out a small world—however limited, even if only for a fleeting escape from a childhood-robbing reality.

The pillow beneath their heads becomes a stage, a quiet theater for imagination. Around them, everything may be silent and broken, yet in their minds a small window opens onto another world. As if addressing their own shadows, they murmur to themselves, "Will I ever see the sea as I've dreamed? Will I ever run on the beach as I've seen in storybooks? Will I ever laugh fully, without holding back?"

The voices fade into silence, for even the slightest sound could instill fear or recall the absence of friends who perished, and dreams shattered before they could ever emerge.

Their dreams are not at all grand; they are not about fancy cars or modern toys, nor about a faraway land or a shining palace. They are dreams of a warm piece of bread, a small dog chasing a ball, a beach as it once was, or a small playground where one can laugh. They are dreams of playing a simple, easy-to-understand game, long unfamiliar. Day by day, more of these dreams are pushed aside, but they refuse to fade. Despite the rubble, devastation, and war, the child insists on continuing to dream.

During the day, small dreams turn into heavy responsibilities. Children carry water, stand in long queues, bring bread and firewood, and help their younger siblings. They try to be everywhere at once. They might laugh, perhaps even smile, but they are well aware that laughter is not easy here, and that smiling is rare. There is little space for tranquility. Nevertheless, they try to stay alive, stealing brief moments of joy when possible.

As for playing, that has become a far-fetched notion. A small ball on the ground could be dangerous, and a simple game may turn into a risk with unknown consequences.

Even a brief moment of fun requires extreme caution, as one must carefully consider the location, the people, and the missiles falling from above. Still, children every so often attempt to invent their own games, even if merely using a stick or stone to imitate a ball or a doll. A child still dares to laugh, even for a fleeting moment, and strives to create memories far removed from the calamity of death and destruction.

And as for 'school,' it has become another place where childhood disappears. It is no longer a space for learning, but a shelter overcrowded with internally displaced people. It is marked by disturbing noise, dirty toilets, endless queues, and daily battles to secure necessities. Each day spent there reinforces the child's perception of school as a place of chaos and suffering, rather than learning and play. Yet there is a small moment, a neglected corner, where a child may still retreat into silence, touch a book, and try to remember that there may be something called 'knowledge.' Children here experience death daily. They are constantly surrounded by havoc, witnessing friends and relatives die suddenly. Yet they also see small moments of humanity: they may share a piece of bread, exchange a silent smile, or let another child go ahead in line. These brief moments become tangible dreams, a ray of light in a world shrouded in darkness.

Even dreaming of food has become sacred, for every meal, every bite, and every taste carries immense value. Children here have long learned patience and waiting. They know anxiety well, but they also understand the importance of sharing. They also recognize how meaningful a simple smile can be when receiving something, no matter how small, for it reminds them that life is far from over.

As for the sea, it is no longer what it once was. What once symbolized freedom and play has become a site of horror. The waves now represent imminent danger, as the beach is filled with tents and rubble. Children who once dreamed of running along the sand now associate the sea with death and devastation. Yet there still remains an inner struggle, a powerful desire to return and reclaim a fragment of lost childhood, to tell oneself: "I am still here, and I will keep dreaming."

Such small dreams are no idle escapism; they are defiance in the face of destruction, a quiet resistance. Every laugh, every smile, every spark of joy cries out, "I exist; I have not yet vanished. I am still a child, in spite of everything."

Sleeping is another thing. Haunted by nightmares and painful memories, sleep is hard to find. But even if for a moment, many children have learned to find rest by drifting into imagined safe spaces where they may touch the shore, run freely, laugh, and eat ice cream. These simple pursuits may be all that remains of a disrupted childhood.

Children's dreams persist even amid rubble and ruins, water and bread queues, ongoing explosions, and traumatizing cries. Despite everything, faint remnants of childhood remain, with a soft giggle here, and a trace of hope there. In Gaza, a child becomes a teacher of resilience, showing us how to persist through pain, and how to carry on against all odds.

Children here are the future; they are our only hope. They are the ones who will carry the city's memory and reclaim the laughter and play robbed from their childhood. Like roots beneath the rubble, they endure, waiting to be nurtured and given their childhood back. In them lies the capacity to rebuild what the war obliterated.

Beneath the rubble lie countless dreams, hidden giggles, and enduring hope. This is where the children of Gaza remain, steadfast despite it all. They carry the weight of the world on their small shoulders, silently guarding what remains of our humanity through their strength and indomitable innocence.

“Zikim” … Vampires and Hunger Games

Among the aid centers scattered across the south, center, and north of the Gaza Strip, "Zikim" stands out to me, because this is where my children used to go. The Zikim crossing is a military-controlled border point in northern Gaza, the closest one to our home. Aid trucks transporting flour and coupon packages pass through it under strict orders from Israeli forces. Drivers must follow designated routes; they are commanded on when to move, when to stop, when stopping is forbidden, when to accelerate without pause until a certain distance, and when to slow down.

Hovering above, quadcopters closely monitor the trucks, ready to fire at any moment. Tanks and artillery are also set to shell the area. Snipers concurrently stand ready to shoot anyone who catches their eye—or even those who do not. Evidently, these killing machines are not there to regulate aid distribution but to carry out other orders issued each morning.

The trucks rarely arrive before nightfall; by then, they are often preceded by a massacre in which at least one hundred people are killed and hundreds more wounded–as though the Israeli army had set this number as a minimum target. Each night, the list of martyrs grows longer, and the living bid them farewell in places now known as "aid distribution death traps."

Every day, new widows and orphans are added to the list of the dead, along with countless injured, including those who lose their limbs. Every day, hearts are broken, and families are shattered by the loss of their breadwinners. All of this happens for the most precious thing in a famine: a single bag of flour. Obtaining it means that you and your family will survive, and failing to get it means that your life, and your family's lives, are about to end.

"Stop the ambulance sirens!" That was all that I wanted that night, knowing that my sons, Fadi and Thaer, had gone to the supposed "aid distribution" point at the Zikim crossing on Gaza's northern border.

That night was the hardest and most agonizing; the sound of ambulance sirens never stopped. It was the first time my sons disobeyed me and went to the Zikim aid zone, which I had repeatedly warned them against. My God, I was so terrified for them that my heart nearly stopped.

How I hated my cell phone that night. I looked at it a thousand times, horrified that someone would call me. I knew that those who go to aid zones leave their phones at home, fearing they will be stolen amid the massive congestion and jostling of hundreds of thousands of people in that narrow area called Zikim. There is only one meaning to someone calling you in the middle of the night: to deliver news that you would not wish on your worst enemy. Through the dark hours, my anger and resentment toward the world intensified. I hurled every insult imaginable at everyone I could think of, including my own children.

Thousands of scenes raced through my mind, and terrible thoughts and questions swirled relentlessly: Are they still alive? Were they wounded? If they are okay, why is it taking them so long to arrive? Ambulance sirens grew louder and louder in the darkness. I wished our house were not on the road leading to al-Shifa Hospital, so that I would not have to hear the disturbing sound of ambulances.

Every so often, I heard the voices of people approaching in makeshift vehicles; in cars, tuk-tuks, or donkey-drawn carts, shouting, "Make way! Open the road! We have an injured person! An injured person!" At other times, their cries were unintelligible, yet they pierced my heart. I feared my children might be among them.

I could not bear to stay indoors any longer, so I went outside and stood in the street. I was surprised to see many of our neighbors standing along the road, waiting for their children to return. Once I talked to them, they kept asking, "Do you have any news?" They were all worried, anxious, and afraid.

After a while, we saw three young men returning from Zikim. Their clothes and faces were covered in dust, yet they carried no flour, only their empty backpacks and sacks. I asked them, "How was it over there?" They answered, "It is death, Haj, it is death! There are hundreds of martyrs and injured people all around Zikim, and there are not enough ambulances for those lying on the ground."

They then asked me, "Is your son there?" "Yes," I murmured. "May God bring him back safe. Pray for him." Their words inflamed my heart. What should I do? Should I go there and look for my sons? And where could I search amid that flood of people? It seemed that the entire youth of Gaza were in Zikim – not only men, but women too, many of whom had lost their husbands in the war and had become their families' breadwinners.

The burdens of this war are heavy enough to shatter mountains. Some of these women would not return until the deepest hours of darkness, empty-handed. What tormented me most was the suffering of women, and above all, the deaths of countless children.

That dark night was unlike any other. It was as if all of Gaza stood along the roadsides, a road ceaselessly filled with ambulances transporting the martyrs and the injured in both directions. People's movement never stopped for a moment; everyone wanted to check on their children.

Helplessness wrapped itself around me; I did not know what to do. I had no choice but to wait… and then wait some more. My heart was worn out, my mind besieged by conflicting thoughts and anger at everything. I grew exhausted from standing in the street in vain.

It reminded me of our neighbor Ahmad, who had stood on this same roadside only days earlier, just as aimlessly. He did not know that his brother had gone to Zikim until, by pure chance, his eyes fell on a tuk-tuk carrying three martyrs to al-Shifa

Hospital. His brother Yousef was among them! He began screaming uncontrollably, his voice tearing through the night. His family rushed outside, crying with him. The entire neighborhood poured into the street to console them, to share their grief in this unimaginable tragedy; a single glance that turned their world upside down.

Exhaustion overtook me from standing in the street, so I went back home. I sat on my bamboo chair and decided to call my daughter. Her husband had gone with Fadi and Thaer, and I thought he might have called her to reassure her about the situation. When I called, she immediately asked, "Have you heard anything about Fadi, Thaer, and Awad?" I told her, "I called to ask you the same thing." "I was about to call you," she said, "to reassure myself about them."

I hung up, my mind racing, unable to quiet the storm inside me. I did not feel sleepy at all; every sense in me was turned northward. When will dawn break? When will this cursed night finally end? I thought of anyone who might have news, so I called Thaer's friend Abdullah. "Abdullah, do you have any news about Fadi and Thaer?" I urged. "No, where are they?" he asked. "They went to Zikim." "What!? Tonight!?" he exclaimed. "There are massacres going on in Zikim. That's what I've seen on social media and heard from people returning from there. May God keep them safe." I murmured, "You too, Abdullah." "Let me know once they're back, Uncle Abu Fadi," he added quietly, "Try not to worry."

Minutes and hours stretched endlessly, each minute eroding my heart and soul. I had no idea what to do. The street felt more bearable than home, even though my wife, son, and daughter were constantly trying to reassure me and ease my fear.

I went back out into the street and stood there, waiting. I asked people who were returning, "What is happening there now?" "No one is left," they said. "Everyone who was in Zikim has already come back."

What could that possibly mean? I shuddered. My heart nearly stopped with fear for my children, until my daughter told me that her husband, Awad, had returned– without any flour.

"Flour doesn't matter!" I snapped. "What matters is that he's okay… Did he happen to see them there?"

She said they had parted ways, and that Awad had not seen them since they arrived in Zikim together. The sun had risen and my sons were still not back.

My heart and blood boiled like a volcano. I frantically rushed back home to tell my family that Awad was okay. I told my wife that everyone had returned… everyone except my sons! A heavy silence fell over the house. I braced myself, and prepared to go to the hospital to search for them there. Just as I was about to step out, my son, Fadi, appeared at the door. He was carrying a sack of flour with great difficulty. I barely recognized him. His face and clothes were stained gray—a mixture of dirt, dust, and flour. Struggling to lift the sack of flour from his shoulder, he dropped it to the ground, his body trembling with exhaustion.

There was Fadi, by the open door, suddenly in front of me! I instantly embraced him, hugging him tightly as though he had been given a second life. He had escaped death—imminent death… for a bag of flour.

I seated him on the bench and asked him about his brother Thaer. "I didn't see him," he said, his voice breathless and broken. "Wasn't your brother with you?" I asked, shocked. "Yes," he gasped. "He was with me when the trucks arrived, but we parted ways when we started running toward them. As soon as the trucks arrive, dust fills the sky and flour spills under the wheels. People get run over and die beneath them." "Is anyone else still there?" I asked. "I don't think so, Dad," he muttered. "Everyone is back."

Silence fell over the house. We were certain that something terrible had happened to Thaer. It didn't make sense that he had been gone for so long. We wanted to go to al-Shifa Hospital to look for the wounded and ask about him, but Fadi urged us to wait a little longer.

Fadi sat down and began to recount that awful night. He said the Israeli army aimed to hurt and even kill as many people seeking aid as possible. He added that he almost died twice. At one point, he began to suffocate in the crush of the crowd as he reached the truck and tried to grab a bag of flour. The pressure of bodies intensified, and he found himself trapped between two fires: take the bag and risk suffocating or being run over by the truck, or step back and abandon the flour just to catch a breath and stay alive.

He opted for the latter. He stepped back, abandoned the sack of flour, and moved away from the crush of bodies. He managed to sit down briefly, but he could not stop thinking about his children, who had not eaten for weeks. In that moment, he made up his mind: despite all the dead and wounded bodies around him, he would either die there or return with enough food to quiet his children's hunger.

He resolved to head toward the other side of the truck; the side facing the sea road, which the Israeli army had strictly forbidden anyone to approach. No one dared go up there; quadcopter drones hovered overhead, shooting anyone who came near.

Fadi stood up, as though bidding farewell to the world, and set out to risk his life for a flatbread. He ran forward like an arrow, sprinted in the opposite direction, leapt onto the truck, grabbed a sack of flour, and charged forward with it, expecting bullets to tear through his body and leave him among the countless corpses on the ground – bodies he nearly tripped over. Only a few meters separated life from death, but those meters felt like thousands of miles, like an entire lifetime.

He thought of nothing but his children, waiting for the bread earned at the edge

of death. With the bag in hand, he ran as if possessed, coming back to himself only when some young aid-seekers stopped him and exclaimed, "Thank God you're alive! Have you lost your mind going to the other side? Is your life so cheap that you would risk it like that?" He gasped, "My children's lives are so precious that I would go this far for them."

Fadi had just finished telling his story when I heard a knock at the door. I hurried to open it, and there was Thaer, at long last! He looked even more worn out than Fadi. Yet he carried no bag of flour. I quickly embraced him, but could not get myself to look at his pale face. It was as if he had come back from the dead. "Where is Fadi?" he blurted as soon as he stepped inside. "What took you so long?" we asked him. He repeated, "Where is Fadi?" When we told him Fadi was inside, he rushed to his brother, hugging and kissing him, and broke into tears. We tried to calm him, "What in the world happened to you?" we asked, alarmed. "Thank God you made it."

He told us that someone had said they saw Fadi that night among hundreds of wounded people, lying on the ground with no one to carry him away. As soon as he heard that, Thaer rushed back to search for his brother in between the dead and the injured. He searched among the bodies for nearly an hour, but in vain. Completely exhausted, he turned to go back home.

But after walking for no more than 50 meters, he hesitated, "I didn't search the front areas near the army for the other corpses and wounded bodies. I must go back and make sure my brother is not among them. I must check, even if I die there."

So Thaer turned around, forcing himself to cross into the most dangerous and chaotic zones. The scene there was beyond horrifying: Hundreds of bodies lay scattered as if they had fallen from another world—some sitting upright, others lying motionless. Many faces were unrecognizable, coated in a pale white layer of dust and flour. The flour covered them to the point that the children's bodies looked like statues.

Their eyes were wide shut, their tiny hands extended, with no motion whatsoever. Hardly 14 years old… they were like ghosts swaying inside the rubble.

Thaer moved among the corpses. "Fadi! Fadi!" he called out, his voice raw and strained. He touched arms and shoulders, lifting heads to reveal faces buried under flour. Hair looked like clumps of dirt. Their clothes were coated in a gray-white layer, blurring the lines between bodies and earth.

Then he spotted a young man who, from a distance, looked like Fadi. His heart leapt. Trembling, he rushed forward and dropped to his knees. His hands were shaking as he brushed the dust from the man's face. The face was pale and still; the eyes were closed, the palms cold. He called his brother's name with a broken voice, but there was no answer. He searched for a sign– for anything; a distinguishing mark, a piece of cloth, a scar, the smell of an old keffiyeh—but nothing confirmed it was Fadi.

Once he realized that was not his brother, Thaer broke down in screams, sobs, and hysterical laughter. Similar voices surrounded him of people stepping forward then retreating, each person searching for a familiar face. The sight of the little children was harrowing beyond words: small bodies were coated in flour, their features seemingly erased by war, without a sound or movement except for a faint breath here or a distant sigh there. Medical teams were nowhere to be seen. There was no one to call in that moment. Only a suffocating silence remained, the space itself choking, broken by the buzz of drones and intermittent flashes of light.

Thaer kept frantically searching until he lost all sense of time. For fleeting moments, he would imagine seeing his brother as one of the corpses, but with each illusion crumbling, he would grow more brittle. At last, he returned home in despair, his eyes filled with grief. No certainty, no comfort, only a steadfast determination to not leave any corpse unchecked. That was the reason Thaer returned so late. He was the last living person to return from there that night.

That day, he decided that he would never again go back to Zikim. His life was too precious to be lost for a bag of flour.

I hugged my children and held them close. Then I went back and sat on my bamboo chair, the one I had grown used to. But I no longer had the capacity to think or feel any anger, fear, or sadness. I was as exhausted as they were, if not more. My strength faded from me. All I needed was a moment of rest from this utter madness.

A Child's Laughter is Worth the Whole World

The war has left nothing in Gaza untouched. It has left its mark on everything—stones, people, air, water, and even the souls and minds of human beings. With every passing day, we uncover new layers of destruction wrought by the machinery of war, but I believe the greatest crime of this war had been committed against children—the purest and most innocent, who bear no responsibility for what is happening.

International humanitarian laws and conventions clearly stipulate the protection of children from the horrors of war and conflict. And yet, in this war, approximately 20,000 children have been killed, and tens of thousands have been wounded. Just as flowers adorn gardens, children adorn homes, filling them with movement and life. Children purify our hearts and souls, and their innocent laughter brings us great joy.

This, however, is not my focus here. Instead, I want to highlight the profound changes we currently see in Gaza's children, like how they often look twice their age. A five-year-old child in Gaza seems to possess the mental and physical maturity of a ten-year-old. You will hear them speak like grown men, raising their voices and emphasizing certain words to appear tough. Don't be surprised if I tell you that many five- or six-year-olds in Gaza know how to chop wood with hammers, carry stones twice their size, and pound them into timber to make firewood.

Children also shoulder the daily chore of collecting water at dawn, filling large containers and carrying them home. To this day, I struggle to comprehend how a six-year-old can be so aware of his or her responsibilities and of the broader context of the war that we are enduring. It is equally astonishing how these kids have set aside, postponed, or abandoned their childhood altogether. They have lost the chance to ever play childhood games like "duck, duck, goose" or "hide-and-seek." Such

games frighten them, because covering their eyes could mean being startled by the sound of a missile destroying an entire neighborhood, or accidentally tripping over a landmine while running.

The children of Gaza have not attended school for nearly three years. An entire generation has been deprived of education. We repeatedly hear promises that schools will reopen, yet nothing happens. I often think of my grandchildren and how they will ever make up for the years they have lost. Children who should be in third grade are still stuck there, likely having forgotten what they once learned.

Even the language of children has changed. Their conversations can be shocking; they speak with the sarcasm of adults and demonstrate an unexpected sharpness of mind. For instance, after poultry had been unavailable in Gaza's markets for months, we finally cooked chicken again, and my seven-year-old grandson sat across from his dad and exclaimed, "Such a big deal about a chicken! You'd think we were the only people who ever managed to get chicken!" We weren't spared from his sharp tongue when he added, "I just hope it's not a rooster egg!" He kept teasing us until his father silenced him by stuffing a large piece of meat into his mouth.

Children are the future, yet I often wonder how they will integrate in their communities and what the long-term consequences of this war will be. Will their personalities change for the better, or will they grow more aggressive and confused? If they have already become men at this age, what will they be like in their twenties or thirties? Will they listen to anyone, or will rebellion and defiance be their way of life?

Before the war, I would smile at a child and receive a brighter smile in return. But now, when I smile at a child, I often see only a frown, as if to say, "What's so funny!?" It is as if all the burdens of the universe have been placed on their young shoulders.

Children's dreams have changed as well. The old question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" has lost its meaning, as if it belongs to another world. We no longer hear answers like "doctor," "engineer," or "teacher." Those kinds of dreams vanished with the first missile, becoming so remote that even children can no longer imagine them coming true.

The dreams of adults have changed too. It has become impossible to think about careers, travel, or long-term plans. The priority has become one's survival and caring for family. Parents feel that their dreams are no longer feasible, and that their personal ambitions pale in comparison to their new responsibilities. The question about the future has become a burden for both children who face pressure prematurely, and adults who feel incapable of offering any tangible hope. It is all about survival. Life has become a harsh game where fear and hope, imagination and bitter reality, intertwine. Dreams are out of reach here, yet they still whisper in the silent corners of the heart.

Children of war today do not dream of careers, but of survival. Their greatest wish is to sleep one night without fear, or to live in a house with a door that closes and a roof that does not collapse. Their dreams have shrunk to the size of their shadows in the light. At most, they dream of an unbroken toy, a schoolbag not buried under the rubble, and a walkable street free of debris and corpses.

We do not yet know what the features of this next generation may look like. Meant to be our extension, children are raised beneath the inhuman sounds of sirens, planes, and explosions. What will this generation turn into? What will it seek? Will the children of tomorrow rebuild what has been destroyed, or will they grow up carrying an unseen fragility?

All we know is that the war has stripped them of their childhood, leaving them with a vast emptiness called "the future." It is a generation born to dream, but that must first learn how to survive.
Streets and alleyways once overflowed with children playing in front of their homes and in public squares. Adults used to scold them and send them out through the front doors. We now long for those sounds. We miss their laughter and their playful teasing of adults. It seems that childhood in Gaza has been murdered. Yes, I know how harsh this sounds, but it is a truth we must face and prepare for.

During a Creative Writing workshop I conducted today, a heated debate broke out between two trainees, Ihab and Yasmeen, about how to raise children in times of war:

Ihab shared, "I let my son break timber, fetch water, and buy what we need from the house's vicinity. I want him to become a self-reliant man who will be able to live and adapt among his peers. We live in a jungle where the strong prey on the weak. I don't want my son to become an easy target when he grows up."

Yasmeen objected strongly: "The street does not educate children! It instills violence in them, making them more vicious and less mature. Throughout the war, I kept my children indoors and raised them away from the streets. Despite the challenges, I try

my best to raise them the way we were raised. I often hear my children using foul language they picked up from the street, but I constantly try to protect them from the negative effects of the war, to save them from the great chaos surrounding us."

As the argument between Ihab and Yasmeen intensified, I found myself standing between two opposing views of raising children under war. Ihab wants his child to grow rough so he would not break, while Yasmeen wants her children to remain flexible so they would not turn into stone.

I observed them for a long time. Neither was completely wrong, but neither was entirely right. The war had forced each of them to identify their own paths to survival: one throws his son into the street to make him stronger; the other pulls her children indoors to preserve what remained of their innocence.

At that point, I realized this was not merely an educational debate, but a cry of fear. Every parent tries to build a small shield around their child in a ruthless world. But the painful truth is that this generation will ultimately grow up bearing the scars of war, whether raised on the street or behind closed doors.

For Ihab and Yasmeen, each day of the war was a test of patience and endurance. Ihab tends to confront reality with strict rationality. He believes that educating children includes teaching them self-reliance and survival skills in the face of daily dangers, even if such realism costs them their innocence. He often pauses when he watches his son lift stones heavier than himself and wonders, with a sense of responsibility mixed with worry, Will my son grow strong enough to protect himself, or will he lose a part of his childhood?

Yasmeen, meanwhile, moves cautiously between discipline and compassion. She finds it important to shield her children from the street and its negative impact, yet she knows that isolation can also widen the gap between the child and the world. Their every action and gesture reminds her of their lost sense of security. She tries to give them some psychological stability, to plant hope in them and revive their laughter and eagerness to play, even as devastation surrounds them.

These two approaches are the last line of defense for children's innocence, as they search for a balance between the brutality of reality and the essence of childhood. They don't have all the answers, but they keep trying. Every moment with their children, despite the horrid environment, is an attempt to salvage something resembling childhood.

We wish that these children would suffer the least possible loss; that they grow up knowing that strength is not always physical, and that innocence is not weakness. We hope they will one day understand that, amid the massive destruction, we tried our best to give them something that resembled life.

Many of our relatives and neighbors have been killed. We ourselves narrowly escaped death many times. What tormented me most were the children's ceaseless questions, pouring down like rain: "Why is there war?" "Why did my uncle die?"

"Why did my friend Hassan become an orphan?" "Why did we leave our home?" "Why does my friend Youssef only have one leg?" "Why?" "Why?" "How?"

I think they already knew the answers, but they needed to confirm the fear, horror, and loss of hope and trust that plagued their minds.

After the 2014 war, we provided psychosocial support to 12,000 children to help them recover from its devastating effects. At that time, everyone came together, and children's mental and physical wellbeing somewhat stabilized. Life went on, and children returned to their schools and routines.

But today, they have no schools to return to–no life, no hope, no safety, and no way back to who they once were. Indeed, it feels as though they have forgotten who they are and where they were. After the long nights of war, survival became the only concern. They struggled to stay alive not only against the horrors of war, but also against the hell of famine and rampant illness, much of it unfamiliar to us, especially skin diseases. They also witnessed the scarcity of medicine, the destruction of hospitals and health centers, and the exodus of most medical professionals.

Some people declared the end of this war and the famine. But we remain trapped in the same situation; neither feeling that the war has ended, nor that the famine has truly lifted. Houses are bombarded and families are killed every day. Some food may appear in the markets, but people don't have the money to buy it, especially with prices soaring beyond reason. It is absurd that a carton of eggs costs 40 U.S. Dollars when most men are unemployed.

Who will bring back schools, playgrounds, and childhood to these children? Even the sea hasn't been spared; it is polluted with sewage and reeks of decay. Wherever you look, there is devastation. Gaza is now uninhabitable: no roads, no facilities, no schools or universities, no hospitals, no electricity, and no water. The situation feels hopeless. We are left with nothing but news reports that make us sick with anxiety, turning our suffering into a spectacle for fools.

As the saying goes, all talk and no action. Since the first week after the ceasefire was announced, the only news has been: "We will move to the second phase… We will postpone the second phase… America is pressuring Israel to move to the second phase… Israel refuses to move to that phase." It is as if our freedom and happiness are tied to this or that second phase. People's unspoken sentiment is "To hell with all these phases of suffering, whether Phase II, III, or IV."

Days, months, and years are passing, and people are still subjected to oppression. Their tents are drowning in ruthless rain that falls like flames of fire rather than mercy. It is as if the earth has feet that carry sleeping people away from their tents, so they wake up to find themselves on their mattresses but elsewhere, perhaps in the middle of the street. No one hears their cries, vanishing beneath the rising water. They cling to their children, holding on to them with all their might in terror that the raging torrent will sweep them away. They try to save what they can of their loved ones and their belongings, but all in vain. Their pots, clothes, and bedding are all carried off by the surging flood, leaving nothing but anger, tears, and unparalleled despair.

They scream loudly, disgruntled with this world and everything in it. I try to imagine the future of these children, and how these moments might one day fade from their memory. But I prefer not to envision it. The cries of hungry children pierce my heart even more than my ears, filling me with utter helplessness and weakness, and an unparalleled pain.

No words can describe what happened on one of those nights… but I will try to recount the incident:

Our houses in the camp are so close together that we often feel like we are living in one house. We can even hear each other's exhales. One day, our kind-hearted neighbor, Abu Hassan, went out to get flour for his starving children, who cried relentlessly day and night from hunger. They kept saying, "We are hungry, Mama." The children's cries didn't just tear our hearts; they tore us apart altogether. Who can bear the screams of a child asking for nothing more than a crumb of bread!?

Our situation wasn't much better. Like everyone else, we had nothing in our house to eat or to give our children, except our prayers, tears, and anger–which, of course, could not silence their hunger. Some things in war are worse than death. We faced death many times during the long days of the war, but we never felt pain the way we did for Abu Hassan's children.

Umm Hassan, his wife, tried to silence her children. "Your father will be back soon with flour," she told them, "And I will make you delicious bread." We prayed with her that Abu Hassan would return quickly, and with a bag of flour, so that he would quiet his children's cries and ease our frustration and sorrow.

But after midnight, we heard the phone ring. Umm Hassan answered. Moments later, she screamed to her children, "Your father passed away!"

She wailed in anguish beyond comparison. We had never heard cries of agony and despair like hers. Umm Hassan wept, but her children kept screaming, "We are hungry, Mother!" "Your father is dead," she replied, and they repeated, "We are hungry, Mama!"

We ran to their house to offer our condolences and try to calm them. However, the children did not understand anything… or maybe they did, but hunger had completely overtaken them. Shortly before dawn, a group of young men brought Abu Hassan's body wrapped in a white sheet that looked like a sack of flour, along with an actual sack of flour. They placed Abu Hassan and the sack of flour side by side and left.

The children went toward the sack of flour, unaware that their father was in the other sack. Umm Hassan threw herself upon the body, clutched him with desperate force, and cried out, "Why did you leave us?"

The children were still crying from hunger. One of the neighbors stressed, "In spite of everything, the little ones must be fed. They are about to die of hunger." So she baked some loaves of bread and fed them.

In the morning, we carried Abu Hassan, buried him in the cemetery, and returned home. Something truly changed within us after that burial. It may have been one of the hardest days of the war. And since pain is not measured by time, that night carried the weight of helplessness of an entire nation – if not the entire world. No words could describe what we felt that night; it was like a thousand and one nights of extreme sorrow.

It is always children who break my heart or bring joy to it. Since becoming an adult, the suffering of children and elderly people has saddened me the most, and their happiness has brought me the greatest joy. Knowing that many of my closest friends are decades older than I am deepened my pain during the war, since most of its

victims have been children, the elderly, and women. Women, too, carry stories so heartbreaking that language fails them.

Thousands of children lost their fathers and mothers during the war. Just a few days ago, I visited an organization to ask for their help in having children perform at the inauguration of the "Gaza Children's Film Festival." They told me that all the children there were orphans who had lost both parents. There were forty children there. I had seen one, two, and three orphans before, but never so many together. It was beyond shocking to see forty orphaned children gathered in one place, each of them having lost both parents in the war. With overwhelming love and compassion, I felt an urge to embrace these children, to reach for the stars and place them at their feet.

Questions raced through my mind: "How can I help them? Should I create a theater group and train them to tell their stories and carry our voices to the world?" Alas, these children will forever remain etched in my memory. One day, I must return to my friend with good news regarding them. I must do something for them!

The greatest tragedy in Gaza will not be solved by foreign aid alone. We need to embrace one another and extend a hand to those in need. I often think about winter; it has not yet arrived, yet many areas in Gaza are already flooded. How on earth will we protect the people? A catastrophe is unfolding before our eyes, and we have not taken adequate measures. Thousands of tents have been placed right on the beach, and just as many have been erected in low-lying areas that collect water – places unfit for shelter.

In past years, it sometimes rained for five consecutive days. But at this point, if it rains for three days straight, thousands could die. I therefore believe that the only solution during cold weather is for people to take shelter in homes that have not yet been destroyed. We must help one another to survive! We have all fallen into this abyss, and we must work together to stay alive.

Every night I wake to the cries of my granddaughter, Salam, who is only three years old. She says, "Woosh… there is a woosh," frightened of something. Every night, my wife and I try to comfort her, "There is no woosh, sweetheart," we would say as we hold her close. But she only calms down when we turn on the lights, carry her, and walk around the house until she feels safe. This happens every night at bedtime.

Often our phones are completely dead, and we have no source of light at night, so we try to illuminate the room with a worn-out battery. But this is not enough to stop the baby from crying. "How will we banish the 'woosh' from her mind and from our neighborhood?" we wonder. There is in fact a "woosh" in the sky, a "woosh" on the ground, and a "woosh" in the sea; the "woosh" surrounds us in every direction. I am almost certain that all the residents of Gaza are haunted by that "woosh" as well.

In times of war, exaggerated political statements are often made about humanitarian, health, and educational conditions to mobilize public opinion to rescue people. But in this war, everything described and proclaimed – and all images and videos shared – cannot capture even half of the catastrophe in Gaza, where almost everything had been wiped out.

If the war has truly ended, it is crucial to begin reconstruction swiftly. It is also vital

to reopen all crossings, deliver medicines and aid, rehabilitate hospitals, resume education, support the poor, and provide housing units for people living in the streets.

Amid all this havoc, children remain the heartbeat of the war, and every cry and pang of hunger reveals the fragility of their small world. Abu Hassan lost his life, but the cries of his children did not cease. This reminds us that survival is not merely the endurance of the body, but the resilience of the soul. Ihab and Yasmeen try to protect their children by building fortresses around their stolen childhood. This instills in them the strength to endure, even if this means postponing their dreams or rendering them unattainable.

Above all, laughter has become the most precious thing. Walking through rubble to secure the simplest necessities, such as a cup of water or a loaf of bread, has become our daily lesson in life. The war may have altered children's dreams, but it has not erased the need for love and warmth, nor has it severed the innocence that still shines on their faces, despite it all.

At the end of each day, their recurring questions, their anxiety and fear, and their faint hope continue to weave together the future of these children, in the hope that one day they will grow capable of restoring life, even amid the rubble.

We must see these children in ordinary situations: sitting in classrooms, wearing beautiful clothes, playing games, going to parks with their families, and swimming in the clean seas, like other children around the world. We wonder when their innocent laughter will return—laughter that once illuminated our hearts and made our world brighter.

Mutawa’ is Collapsing

Upon my return to Deir al-Balah as a displaced person, my young friend Mutawa' welcomed me warmly. I have long wanted to ask him about what happened to him… about his face, and physical condition. Stuck in my throat, I couldn't bring myself to voice that question until yesterday afternoon, when we happened to be sitting together under an acacia tree in front of the house. The tree, torn in two by shrapnel, had also suffered its share of the bombardment.

Mutawa' and I sat watching the return of the displaced to the north as trucks crawled along the road, overloaded with people and their belongings. This was a sight worth describing: people were squeezed together among their household furniture; sofas and bedroom sets, suitcases, clothes bags, and kitchen utensils. The trucks were so packed to the brim that there wasn't even room for a single cup of tea. The hardest part to witness was entire families being loaded into the trucks.

It would have taken a miracle, or some ingenious way of thinking outside, inside, above, and below the box to somehow create space for entire households, often ten people or more, inside the wretched back of a truck. The driver would load the children first, searching for the nearest seat and tossing them towards it. One by one, these children were literally stacked among the furniture, with only the head (or part of it) visible. Like watermelons, the children were thrown into the truck's cargo, packed until it reached full capacity, as if they had become part of the cargo itself. This made it difficult to distinguish children from the furniture unless one looked closely, or until one of them moved their head.

Then there were the adults: men and women. The men climbed onto the furniture, each carving out their own tiny space. They were stuffed into unbearable positions for the entire journey until they reached their homes in northern Gaza (or wherever else). A man might remain perched on a two-centimeter-wide wooden edge of a truck for the whole trip, which, depending on traffic, could last anywhere from two to six hours.

As for the women, the truck driver made sure to spare a small space for them at the front of the trunk, usually no more than 20 centimeters by one meter for all the women combined! "Figure it out yourselves!" He would say, often tying them to

the furniture so they don't fall on the asphalt along the bumps, potholes, and the war-scarred roads.

As such, the journey of displacement begins with this absurd, surreal scene that defies human imagination and description.

In Gaza's way, Mutawa' and I would watch and comment on everything until the truck departure. We saw the great joy on the faces of the returnees and noticed the smiling children repeatedly poking their heads in and out of the furniture, like fish flickering through the sea. There is a vast difference between the expressions of internally displaced person as they leave their homes and those upon return. The former encompasses the pain and bitterness of separation, while the latter is marked by joy and a longing for reunion. The contrast between the two is as stark as heaven and hell.

The truck moved slowly, heading toward our beloved Gaza City.
At that point, I looked at Mutawa', with his frail body and sunken eyes ringed with dark circles. Before my first return to the north, he had the physique of a bodybuilder as he was devoted to sports. His eyes once brimmed with life. I worked up the courage and asked him, "What happened to you, my friend?"

He paused for a moment and lowered his head before uttering, with a hint of shame, "It is famine, Uncle Abu Fadi." He then added, "Famine nearly killed me. I lost 30 kilograms! I used to weigh 90 kilos, and now I'm only 60. It's really stuck at 60. I've been under close medical supervision and receiving treatment for months now."

I asked him, "Tell me what happened in detail." He began to confide, "I was simply walking inside my house when I suddenly woke up in a hospital, with an IV bag above my head. I don't remember anything… I was later told that I have severe anemia, and I've been like this for three months now."

"Thank God you survived," I managed to say, "You must eat well now that we have some available products, like beef, chicken, fruits, and nuts. It's true that their prices are still high, but a condition like yours requires special care."

"Uncle Abu Fadi," he conceded, "I have no money at all. I cannot afford even a single vitamin pill. Yes, I've heard about, and seen, the foods you mentioned, but I can't pay their price! I'm still suffering from the effects of starvation, and my condition is deteriorating. My greatest fear is to die and leave my parents and siblings on their own. As you know, my father is quite old. All I keep thinking about is: if I die, who will pump water up to our apartment? You know the building is full of tenants, and they're constantly competing over the extremely scarce water. Who will run the household errands? They have no one but me. I can't stop thinking about my family and what will happen to them if I perish. I feel so ashamed when people stare at my emaciated body… how it used to be, and how it has become. I always try to avoid the question, 'What happened to you?' I'm embarrassed by my weakness and helplessness."

He went on, "The war didn't just destroy our homes; it killed our spirits. I always say that those who die are relieved. I often wished I had died after that incident, because of my helplessness. I used to dream of going abroad to study; I'd made my travel arrangements just days before the war. Then the war broke out, and all crossings were closed. Now you need 5,000 dollars per person to be able to leave Gaza, of which I could only afford transportation and departure fees. My dreams faded away along with the thousands of people who were killed. My story will merely fade into one of the countless brutal and harrowing stories filling every corner of Gaza."

He continued, "Uncle Abu Fadi, who am I that people would pay attention to me? Here, everything is scarce–except for sorrow and grief, which have grown as vast as the universe itself, relentless and unstoppable. We still try to dream, but our dreams are always shattered, like the waves refracting in the sea of Gaza, which has itself suffered the ravages of war. Even fishermen's boats have been destroyed. The sea no longer witnesses the joyful songs of sailors returning at dawn with their abundant catch, nor the cheers of children on the shore as they await their fathers' return, seafood in hand. Since the outbreak of this war, I feel the sea has become deadly silent, like an old man scarred by trauma, displeased with everything, finding no meaning in life, and seeing no difference between joy and sorrow. It is like a living corpse that has chosen silence. In the past, the waves used to rise and crash against the shore, reaching heights of six meters or more. But it has been a long

time since I saw such high waves. It seems that even the sea has not escaped the state of brokenness and confinement."

After listening to Mutawa', I got up and left our sea-laden discussions. My thoughts turned to my family. Now that the war was supposedly declared over, I wondered whether to go home or wait a little longer. I examined the '20-Point Plan,' but each clause in it seemed to require another twenty points of explanation. Nothing in that 'agreement' was clear, except for the release of the Israeli prisoners handed over by Hamas. The rest of the agreement, however, was fraught with 'mines' – hidden dangers.

I had to decide whether to take the risk and go back home. "Could it be that the war was truly over?" Perhaps the problem lies within us, I wondered. After more than two years of suffering, it was difficult to believe that the war would ever end. One option was to wait a little longer, sparing the exorbitant costs of moving back and forth between the north and the south. This constant indecision weighed heavily on me, my children, and my wife. Yet my wife never stopped insisting that we return as soon as the war ended. Surely, we all longed to go home. But since that announcement, more than 38 people have been killed across Gaza, with over a hundred injured. The situation has remained deeply unsettling, with developments growing increasingly volatile. Clashes subsequently resumed in Rafah, and two Israeli soldiers were killed. Israel may well be preparing for another round of escalation, repeatedly threatening to return to war.

Every night, I stay awake until morning, reading the news and following every political analysis, hoping to find some reassurance that the war is truly over and that it will not resume.

I eventually made up my mind. I am going back home tomorrow, I decided. We can no longer tolerate being away from home, our warm embrace, forged over years of blood, sweat, and tears. Home is where my children grew up, the cradle of our memories. Home is not merely a homeland, but the true meaning of freedom, safety, and reassurance It is the small sanctuary where one can rest freely.

Internally displaced persons are deprived of that. It breaks my heart to see those who lost their homes, now living on roadsides. I believe sorrow has become mutual in the Gaza Strip; people see their own suffering reflected in the eyes of others, bound by shared grief and remorse.

Anyone visiting from outside Gaza would hardly believe their eyes if they ever stepped near. They might finally understand why we keep writing: no matter how much we try, we can never truly convey our reality. Those who wrote or made comments about the war from outside Gaza may come to realize that they were living on another planet, for our catastrophe is indescribable. They may also discover that even after the war was declared 'over,' many people are still dying of starvation. As the saying goes, the people of Mecca know best its narrow streets.

I was in the middle of writing this text when I had to stop, because we decided to return home. We arranged for a truck driver to take us back to our house in Gaza… in installments. My children and I had carried all our furniture with us when we were displaced to Deir al-Balah. Sure enough, we now had to pack everything, wrap the mattresses, and dismantle the cupboards yet again. This was strenuous work that took us three full days, especially since we had built a makeshift kitchen on the ground from tin panels we had brought from Gaza City.

Once the truck arrived, we loaded some of our belongings and headed home. After unloading everything, front and back, the driver returned to bring my kids and the remaining furniture. Meanwhile, my wife, the rest of my sons, and I collapsed on the floor; we were too weary to move a muscle, drained by all the arduous work and the long and grueling journey.

As exhausted as we were, the moment we stepped inside the house, our souls felt revived. For the first time, we began to grasp that the war was truly over. The feeling of finding your home still standing amid so much devastation is impossible to describe, especially knowing that my daughters' homes had been destroyed. This home was our only refuge left.

Every time I got out of the house, I worried about its safety; "Ah, ah," I would sigh

in relief whenever I made it back and sank into my bamboo chair. I don't know what it is behind this chair and this ritual. Even before the war, whenever I returned home from a long journey, I would surrender to that chair as if it were a device for releasing negative energy and washing away fatigue.

My sons, together with their belongings, also returned that night. Once again, we were all together at home. As soon as my daughter-in-law arrived, she unexpectedly went into labor. She gave birth to a baby boy, whom they have not yet named, just three hours after. Our joy was twofold: coming home at last, and welcoming our cherished newborn.

Returning home safely felt like winning the lottery. I was seized by the urge to embrace every corner of it. In Gaza, if your house is still standing amid all the obliteration, you are incredibly lucky. Everything in it felt precious. I reinstalled the bedroom, arranged the sofas and restored the kitchen. The house began to breathe again, like an embryo stirring to life.

I did not sleep that night. The walls seemed to breathe with us, slowly, like someone returning from a long journey in darkness. Every corner of the house seemed to watch us in astonishment, as if it could not believe we were truly back. We were no longer just a passing dream in the memory of cement.

As usual, I sat on my bamboo chair, my old companion who had seen it all with me and understood my silence. The smell of dust mixed with the newborn's scent filled the house, like a strange blend of death and life, as if all of Gaza had given birth in that moment.

I heard the baby weeping in the next room; it was a soft cry that pierced my chest like a spear of light. I did not move. I just listened, thinking: This child does not yet know fear. He has not heard the roar of missiles. He has not experienced displacement. He does not know that the room where he was born was a potential target for an airstrike just weeks ago. His crying alone was enough to bring the house back to life. I told myself, Perhaps God sent him as a small reminder that life is still possible, despite everything.

I opened the window at dawn. The air hung heavy, like an exhale from weary lungs. I looked up at the sky and saw a reconnaissance plane spinning tirelessly in small circles. The sky wasn't blue; it was as gray as the ashes of a hearth extinguished long ago. I began to hear the calls of distant muezzins; their voices overlapping, each striving to lift the prayer across his neighborhood. But the power outage made the loudspeakers falter, so the sounds came fragmented; they were more like wails than calls to prayer. Still, I felt a strange reassurance, perhaps because the call to prayer meant the night had passed and that a new day, however difficult, had begun.

I stepped onto the balcony. The streets were almost empty. Some neighbors had returned yesterday, just like us. I saw them dusting off their doors, pulling up their tattered curtains, and laughing bashfully, as if apologizing for their long absence. Our neighbor Abu Shadi stood in front of his house holding the remnants of a broken tree from his garden, trying to replant it. I looked at him and thought, What a stubborn people! Even dead branches are replanted here, as if defying the world to bear fruit again. He smiled at me from afar and called out, "We're back, Abu Fadi. We are back!" "We're back," I replied, "but we don't know for how long."

I went back inside. My wife was arranging the blankets, whispering incomprehensible words, so I did not want to disturb her. I approached my eldest son. He was staring at the ceiling. "What are you thinking about?" I asked him. "I'm thinking about what we'll do if the war continues. Where will we run next time?" His words cut like a cold knife. I had no answer. I gathered my strength and said, "Inshallah the war will not resume." But deep down, I knew this war would not end. It merely sleeps between the walls, waiting for someone to stir it awake.

After breakfast, I walked through the neighboring streets. I wanted to see whether the nearby grocery store was still there, and whether the baker was still alive. Every step felt like walking through an open-air graveyard: Walls riddled with holes, broken street signs, and the smell of smoke rising from the rubble several days after the destruction. An elderly woman stood in front of a house, cleaning charred stones with her bare hands. She looked at me and said: "I used to wash my son here." I did not know what to say. I bowed my head slightly and walked away.

I returned home carrying a small bag of bread and canned food. As I opened the door, I heard our newborn crying loudly this time. Perhaps he was experiencing his first hunger, or maybe he was frightened by the silence of the large house. My daughter-in-law was holding him. Smiling, she said, "We decided to call him Ramez." I sat beside him and looked at his tiny face. His fragile features seemed to speak for all of us: our fears, our patience, the dust of long journeys. Ramez, I said in my heart, Do not grow up so soon. Grown-ups suffer a lot here.

In the evening, we all sat together in the living room. The electricity was still cut off, so we lit candles. The air was damp and heavy. We had a long conversation: Who will fix the ceiling? Who will fetch water? Where should we begin? Everything felt difficult, yet our eyes lit up with a hidden joy — the joy of survival. My youngest son exclaimed, "Baba, let's go to the sea." "The sea?" I laughed. "The sea is tired, my dear. But God willing, we will go there soon." I said this, but I knew the sea, too, was silent, and that even if we reached it, it would stare back at us with a quiet anguish, with a pain echoing our own.

I then sneaked onto the balcony. The wind was cold, and candlelight flickered in the windows of the few houses that had survived. A ray of life was slowly returning. I heard the sound of another truck arriving — perhaps another family returning, or displaced people passing through. No one knows.

I thought of my friend Mutawa', who had not visited us yet. I decided I would see him tomorrow. His unnaturally thin figure was still etched in my mind, along with his weary voice when he said, "It is famine, Uncle Abu Fadi." I wished I could find him a job or sit with him and talk about our days before the catastrophe. I sat down and composed a letter to him in my mind:

Oh Mutawa', we are back home, but everything feels different. The walls still stand, but people are exhausted, and dreams are buried under the rubble. Let us sit together and talk and laugh like we used to, under that acacia tree that was torn in two.

The candle went out suddenly and darkness filled the room. This time, it was not fear, but a strange peace that I felt, perhaps because we were home. I remembered what I had told myself yesterday: If your house is still standing, you are among the luckiest. This time, I added a new phrase: And if your heart is still beating after all this, you have survived by a miracle.

At the second dawn after our return, I woke to the sounds of children in our neighborhood. They ran through the rubble, tossing stones as if they were balls. I watched them from my window and thought, These are the only remaining truth, and they will revive this place with their small steps. One boy ran up to my door and said, "Uncle, can we help you by sweeping the street?" I smiled, "Sure, but watch out for the glass." They began gathering stones and sang a simple song they had learned at school before the war; its lyrics were about homeland and return. I laughed to myself: Even the songs here know no other subject.

That evening, when everything had calmed down, I sat down to write what had happened. My attempt has been to capture these moments before they dissolve into the noise of the days to come. Writing has become like oxygen to me: if I don't write, I suffocate. I write to remember that I'm alive, and to leave a trace for the generations to come.

Perhaps little Ramez will one day read these lines and know where we came from, and how we survived. I write to tell the world that we are not seeking heroism. We are only yearning for a day without bombardment: for a night of ordinary sleep without fear, and for our house to still be standing tomorrow.

I raised my head and saw the moon rising slowly, its face pale but luminous enough for me to catch my reflection in the windowpane. I barely recognized myself, yet I smiled and uttered softly, Thank God we are here. Then I closed the notebook, put the pen on the table, and sank into my bamboo chair. I began to breathe calmly, waiting for a new morning to arrive–a vibrant morning, gentle and shy, much like the face of Ramez.

Between Basma and a Loaf of Bread

In a wave of unconsciousness, bereft of awareness, you find yourself thrown in a split second into saving a person's life. Collapsed in your arms, the responsibility now lies with you to revive and save them from the brink of near-death hunger. It might sound simple, but I assure you, this is dead serious. This case involves two contradictory forces: the unconscious, and the rescuer. The first has completely passed out, lost all sensation, and is lying on the ground, almost dead. The other, the rescuer, is now charged with bearing all that life requires from awareness and fortitude to revive the person. This is it. If left unconscious, this person might pass away.

Two forces intersect here: life and death. This is the predicament I faced less than two weeks ago, and it was imperative for me to reconcile them. But that is secondary. The focus here lies on how you feel as a rescuer, and how the unconscious person may feel once they awaken. In other words, it is about the meaning of life and death, what's in-between, and the mixed emotions these moments bring. Here, glimpses of war, starvation, injustice, and inhumanity flash before your eyes. It might have you curse the world and everything in it, as well as the circumstances that brought us to this point.

Let me tell you about the two incidents of fainting I encountered, and that I poured all effort to tackle successfully.

The first incident involves a young woman named Basma, who is a relative of ours. She is as beautiful as the moon; her cheeks are always blushing from shyness. Her eyes are brown and wide, it is difficult not to stare at their enchanting beauty. But she seems to have an incessant urge to withdraw from society. Were it not for her outstanding grades in high school, her family's praise of her good humor, and her intelligent remarks to their private gatherings, I would have thought she had a tendency toward isolation and introversion. She is careful about everything she

does in front of people, whether strangers or relatives.

One day, shortly after our own displacement to Deir al-Balah, we happened to be sitting in their home. We went to check in on them and see how they were doing now that they moved here. They lost their home in Gaza City at the start of the war, so they opted to stay in Deir al-Balah. They had no intention of going back to Gaza City, where rent is much higher and it's increasingly difficult to find an apartment or even a plot of land.

Since my family's return to Gaza, we hadn't been able to visit them or have them visit us because travel was too difficult and roads were destroyed. We were finally sitting together in their home, having tea and chatting pleasantly. We shared our memories and situations we underwent since we came back to Gaza. We talked about the places that got bombed, the people who were killed and those who survived, and the hardships of starvation.

All of a sudden, Basma fell from her chair, the tea tray still in her hands, with cups scattering like a tower struck by an unexpected blast. Within seconds, Basma drifted out of this world. Her mother screamed, her father stood frozen, and her siblings shouted and cried.

In the blink of an eye, Basma transformed. She shrank so much she looked like a helpless child, the glow of life drained from her face. The rosy color faded from her cheeks, replaced by pale yellow, and her pretty eyes got dim. No one had a clue what to do. They all looked lost, so I immediately asked her father to lay her on the ground, to try to speak to her, to pinch her ear… but she didn't wake up. Then I asked him to lift her feet and urged her mother to bring some water to splash on her face with a touch of cologne or fragrance, or even a slice of onion to hold near her nose. They all did as they were told. I gently slapped her feet to push the blood

back up to her head. A few moments later, Basma woke up.

As soon as she opened her eyes, I put my palm in front of her. "How many fingers can you see?" I asked. "Five," she replied. She woke up, I realized. "Thank God you're okay, Basma," I exclaimed, "You scared us to death!" Everyone let out a sigh of relief and calmed down a little.

This incident might seem simple and passive in comparison to the horrors witnessed in Gaza, amid all the death, destruction, displacement, starvation, and lack of necessities of life. Still, it affected me deeply, because I felt as if she were my own daughter. I was overwhelmed by this feeling and was utterly saddened and worried about her.

I could not help but think of how this shy girl, who used to timidly hide half of her body behind her mother's chair, could suddenly transform into an unconscious, helpless body on the ground! I will never forget her look of complete astonishment once she regained consciousness, and when I asked her how many fingers she saw (to which she answered: "Five,") and her bewilderment when she saw her parents thanking me for the help she knew nothing about. It seemed that questions raced through her mind on why her legs were raised up, why everyone had gathered around her, and why they were saying: "Thank God you are okay!" Eventually, she was told that she had fainted. Her cheeks regained their natural blush; life returned to her; and her family began gathering the scattered teacups.

Her family tried to find reasons for her fainting without any connection to famine. They tried to justify it by saying things like, "She's been working in the kitchen for days," "She worries constantly about the war," "She keeps watching the news," or "Her blood is weak." They came up with a million excuses, avoiding the real reason, which is famine, perhaps out of fear of being accused of negligence or stinginess in

front of us or others. Although everyone had lost a great deal of weight, endured similar suffering, and faced starvation and deprivation, many were ashamed to admit openly that Basma had passed out because of famine and the abject poverty afflicting most people, amidst soaring prices and severe food shortages.

Everyone's food, if available, consisted of roughly three items: Duqqa (mixture of herbs, nuts, and spices), lentils, and falafel, along with a loaf of bread for those who can afford it. The cost of 1 kilogram of flour would sometimes go as high 150 shekels (50 USD), meaning that the family breadwinner would need to dedicate around 1,500–2,000 USD per month only for bread to survive.

Basma's collapse felt like the whole world was falling apart. I felt the world crumbling before my eyes as she fell to the ground. Alas, each death from famine in Gaza represents the death of human conscience. What absurdity – what madness – has humanity reached in oppressing and inflicting injustice against its own kind!? Even animals in the wild show more care more for one another, hunting only when they are hungry. Unfortunately, it seems that animals have more compassion toward each other than many human beings!

Basma knew she had fainted due to extreme hunger and frailness. As soon as she regained consciousness, she and her family realized that she could only survive by receiving special care. Here I pose some questions: What is Basma thinking now? How have her views of the world, herself, her family, her homeland, and the Occupation changed? Does she see things the same way after teetering on the brink of death? Will shame, helplessness, silence, deprivation, and fear continue to control her?

I assure you that many of Basma's thoughts and convictions have changed immensely since she awoke from what looked more like death than fainting. This is Gaza, where life and death tightly intertwine with one's soul, while our spirits oscillate between

the two. Here, souls could be gone or restored in the blink of an eye. Alas, human lives have become so worthless, leaving us utterly helpless.

Before pressing the button to launch missiles and bomb houses full of starving children, an Israeli pilot on a warplane might be enjoying a slice of pizza or a large hamburger. Yes, that's how I imagine the scene: they are killing and starving us with such coldness, ease, arrogance, and inhumanity. Starvation is one of the cruelest forms of slow death, a death shrouded in hunger, deprivation, oppression, frailty, pain, and anger. Yes, these are the feelings of the starving person, feelings that I have myself experienced, as I underwent these same emotions.

This is a slow death that creeps into your body and destroys all its systems without you realizing it. It then begins to decay, unable to endure or survive without food and nutrition, and ultimately, it falls into total collapse. The strange thing is that once the body enters a state of anemia and severe deterioration, it becomes difficult for it to return to its former condition except through special care lasting for long months. Until today, even after the war ended and lots of food entered Gaza, people are still falling and collapsing in the streets. After all, the poor, who constitute the vast majority of Gaza's population, can no longer afford any of this food, as numerous people (especially during the famine) went bankrupt due to the ridiculous rise in the prices of flour and other available foods – if any.

When the war ended and food items such as fruits and meat finally entered Gaza, most people could not afford to buy them. It is worth noting that these goods are still absurdly expensive, although people try to console themselves on the slight improvement. For example, a kilogram of tomatoes used to cost as high as 200 shekels during the famine, and now it is 40 shekels, so people might think it "has become cheap," but such prices are still considered terribly expensive. The same applies to all other items. A chicken – if available - used to cost 200 USD during the

starvation, and its price now is 60 USD. This begs the question: Who, other than the affluent, could afford a piece of chicken at that price?

This takes us to the second fainting incident I encountered, which was a week ago.

I was queuing for bread in front of a local bakery in al-Shati refugee camp. It is not a bakery in the conventional sense; it's technically a cylindrical oven, with a one square meter area, containing a rotating tray inside on which loaves of bread are placed. Once the cylinder slowly completes full rotation, the loaves of bread would be ready.

This so-called "bakery" was the one and only spot that offered bread in the camp. It was open around the clock, 24 hours a day, with just five employees, and yet it was expected to feed the entire population of al-Shati camp, which had numbered over 200,000 before the war. The massive loss of life, widespread displacement, and home destructions may have reduced that population to 150,000.

I stood on the queue for bread for about 1.5 hours, surrounded by the large-scale destruction and dust filling the street. As usual, thoughts raced through my mind as I watched the workers toiling tirelessly. They kept their eyes on the long line stretching for tens of meters. Their somber looks were like silent apologies, as if to say: "You see us here doing our best. There's nothing more that we can do. Please bear with us."

At that stage in the queue, you may start to wonder whom to pity more: those enduring the ordeal of waiting for a simple piece of bread, yourself included, or the workers who, like programmed machines, are laboring without pause as they turn the Saj (the dome-shaped griddle) and pulling the flatbreads out with a curved iron rod. People were repeatedly approaching the vendor, pleading to get their hands

on just one or two pieces of bread and take off. They were overcome by unbearable hunger and could not wait any longer to quiet their rumbling stomachs.

As I wearily stood there and watched, I considered more than once to leave the queue. But I was also hungry, and my family was waiting. Everyone needs this bread; there is no food without it. I thus decided to stand with the resilience of a soldier who, having erred, was ordered by his commander to endure long hours under the scorching sun.

I was finally next in line. The man before me was quite frail, wearing ragged clothes, and it seemed like he hadn't taken a shower in months. His face lacked any visible features; he looked like a ghost, or the remnants of a human being. As the vendor was preparing this man's bag of bread, the man suddenly passed out, his face hitting a stone from the debris of the surrounding destruction.

I immediately cursed the day I was born! "Why am I always the one who faces such situations?" I wondered. My heart ached with sorrow and anguish for my people. I lifted his face to see if he was bleeding, assuming his collapsing body might contain barely a cup of blood. Fortunately, I found only a few scratches, so I laid him on the ground and raised his legs up. He eventually regained consciousness.

Of course, the line had disappeared as chaos took over. I advanced toward the vendor, begging him to give that man his bag of bread, but the ten shekels he was about to hand over had fallen from his hand. The vendor asked him: "How much do you want?" The man held out his hand: "Ten shekels," he pleaded, but his hand was totally empty. "It seems that the money fell from my hand," he said to me.

I looked down and found the money; two 5-shekel coins. He was quite lucky, I thought, because the vendor didn't have any change. The 10-shekel coin, as well as

any old currency or one with a scratch as tiny as a pinhead, had been cancelled and would immediately get rejected.

This cancellation has led us to a suffocating and seemingly deliberate crisis – as if we need more of them, or as if we don't already have enough crises to make our lives miserable. Buying and selling in Gaza has turned shopping into a curse, not a pleasure.

At long last, the man took his bag of bread and sat a few meters away from us. He retreated to devour a bread of life, as if counting on it to restore the strength he needed to make it home and deliver bread to his children.

I also took my bag of bread and started to walk back home. I watched the refugee camp streets I grew up in, searching for distant memories and fleeting dreams amid the overwhelming destruction. This was by far the heaviest and bitterest bread I had ever carried, weighed down by the weariness, oppression, and tragedy of an entire people.

In Gaza, a piece of bread is not just bread; it is the heart of life; the razor's edge between pulse and absence, between silence and screaming.

Lined up queues, jaded faces, emaciated bodies, and adrift eyes are all seeking for what can no longer be seen, aside from that piece of bread. As the sun scorches the earth and dust fills the lungs, every step forward becomes a test of patience, and each breath turns into a gasp of both hope and fear.

Amidst these queues, a person becomes like a ghost to oneself. Looking around, everyone is terribly quiet. Yet their silence echoes like a deafening roar: It screams of hunger, deprivation, and the futility that gripped our lives. Once it reaches out

to grasp a flatbread, the hand cannot help but tremble. The coin slips through the fingers, like the lives vanishing in the war, and the hopes shattered in an instant. Much like life itself, bread becomes hollow. A flatbread, or a tiny bag of bread, now carries meanings more profound than words, battles, or bombardments. Ultimately, those who find no bread today will become shadows dissipating amid destruction, amid the cries of their children and their unborn hope. And those who actually manage to get bread will carry the weight of the world on their shoulders; they will bear the burden of life's futility, knowing that others around them are starving, and that humanity itself is but a fragile notion amid this devastation.

A hand reaches across the void to offer a flatbread to one in need, as if giving away a piece of one's own heart, while pleading: "Stay alive, if you can." Here, bread is more than food; it is a plea, a cry, a human grasp; it is a testament that life is worth fighting for. This is a moment of witness, and in it, you will hear the echo of footsteps, of hearts, and of souls collapsing and rising again.

In this very place, bread shines like a beacon, casting its light into the darkness of futility. Meanwhile, the shattered city surrounding us, with its destroyed homes and its sidewalks' overbearing dust, encompasses the backdrop of an eternal scene. This is a scene where humans struggle to live, standing before life without any weapon but hope; the hope for bread, for peace, and for humanity which still breathes in their hearts, against all odds.

Here, every flatbread becomes a testimony; every smile etching on one's face after recovering from hunger becomes a tiny victory; and every passing day becomes a triumph over slow death. Amidst the poverty, devastation and famine, every single thing gets tested and redefined in Gaza; whether it is life and death, existence and futility, or hope and fate.

Puzzled Souls

Before narrating a certain experience, I feel compelled to briefly reflect on our general condition. This situation is no longer an exception; it has become part of our daily lives without us realizing it. The war did not only change places; it also changed people from within. It reshaped feelings, disrupted the rhythm of lives, and created vast spaces of silence inside our souls. We carried on with our daily duties as though all were fine, yet beneath the surface runs a deep fracture—one neither visible nor explainable in a passing phrase.

We repeatedly exchange the question, "How are you doing?" to which the answer immediately arrives: "Thank God, I'm fine." This reply has grown distant from the truth. It has hardened into a defense mechanism, or an attempt to sidestep this question without descending into its painful details. The truth of the matter is that most people in Gaza live in a state of inner confusion, a lingering perplexity shaped by trauma, denial, psychological fatigue, and the constant effort to endure. No one wants to appear weak, and no one has the luxury of total collapse. Life, despite everything, still demands that we carry on.

In this context, safe places are quite rare, and spaces that allow people to speak candidly are even more uncommon. For a group of young men and women to sit together—not to analyze recent developments or exchange casualty figures, but to speak about themselves, their feelings, their losses, their fears, and the few moments of joy that resemble survival—may sound simple at first glance. However, this is a profoundly impactful act. In this context, speaking is not a luxury, but a pressing need; an attempt at healing, and an effort to understand what has happened and what is going on.

Writing, theater, and storytelling are not merely artistic tools; they are also forms of psychological rescue and ways of opening the "closed windows" of the soul. When a person is given the opportunity to tell their story without interruption, without judgment, and without haste, the heaviness within begins to shift. Perhaps this will not resolve the tragedy, and the pain will not disappear, but the simple act of acknowledging and sharing the pain can ultimately reduce its intensity.

This is the essence of our experience. It is neither a traditional training workshop nor a structured academic meeting; rather, it exists first and foremost as a human space. A space where we begin to redefine what it means to be human amid such devastation, and to give disconcerted voices a chance to step into the light, even if they do so broken, hesitant, or heavy with tears. These are not isolated stories, but glimpses of a collective spirit fatigued by war, still attempting to find some meaning, or at very least striving for a place to vent.

I would like to share a personal experience I had two months ago with a group of young people aged 18-40, focused on writing monologues and short stories. As usual, I prepared carefully for the first session, knowing exactly what I would explain and how I would conduct it. We began with introductions, after which I explained the concepts of monologues and short stories. The goal of this workshop was to help them narrate their war-related experiences, compile these stories, and submit them to the supporting organization for publication in a book – provided they met the required standard.

I planned to ask the group members, at the end of the session, to talk about their saddest story or most painful experience arising from the war.

But in my experience as a director and theater instructor, I have always been ready to tear up the script, improvise, and work with whatever the situation demands. And this is exactly what happened. As soon as they finished introducing themselves, most of them were eager to speak, with an overwhelming desire to unburden their hearts and minds. So I said to them, "You are quite different from most trainees, who are usually shy during the first meeting. Do all of you want to speak? Go ahead, Ihab, tell us what's on your mind."

Ihab is one of my former trainees in theater. He is a talented actor for whom I directed several plays, so I had assumed I knew him well – until he began talking about his martyred friend, who seemed to have been more than a brother to him. He emphasized the moment he received the news of his death, which made him weep bitterly. This was the first time I had seen him cry. In that moment, I felt that

this person was not at all the same Ihab I had taught and worked with for over 15 years. I let him cry and release his sadness and grief.

"Sir," he said through his sobs, "this is the first time I cry for my deceased friend."

I did not stop him and said, "And this is the first time I see you cry, Ihab. Go ahead, weep for your brother! Some people we meet in life deserve our deepest tears, and their memories remain with us forever."

He wiped his tears and continued sharing stories and memories of his friend; how he had been the first to teach him to play the organ, and how they had spent beautiful nights playing, singing, and celebrating together. I asked him more about his friend to help him move through this ordeal.

He then confessed, "This is the first time I sit and share this with people who understand, without interruption. I desperately needed this workshop, not only to learn how to write monologues, but to sit with you, to listen and be heard, after having had enough of the unbearable sounds of drones, missiles, and children's cries. From now on, I will train my ear to listen more to relaxing music and beautiful words."

The rest of the students later told me that this was also their first time sitting in such a group, listening to others' experiences and speaking freely as human beings. This surprised me, because throughout the war I had been surrounded by family and friends, visiting one another, since I was aware that everyone in such circumstances needs connection and support. I tend to avoid sadness and tears, especially in first meetings with students, so I tried to shift the general mood. Yet I soon realized that I also needed to provide them with psychosocial support, as their current state might prevent them from focusing on new things in creative writing.

I therefore asked them to tell us about things that made them laugh or feel happy during the war. Muhammad shared the first story, which had slightly more humorous scenes than sad ones. But it was remarkable to see the students' reactions and their

bursts of hysterical laughter at Muhammad's story, along with their comments which were even more sarcastic than the story itself. They couldn't stop laughing. Of course, I laughed with them as well, because I frankly needed that atmosphere too.

Then Abeer told us what made her happiest. She had lost her husband and parents during the war and now lives alone with her young children. She said:
"I live in Jabalia refugee camp, and as you probably know, the camp was completely destroyed. Its streets were obliterated, and everything around us lay in ruins. But when we got into the car to move south, it was the first time in months that I saw a paved road, with trees lining both sides. This was on Salah al-Din Road. I was beside myself with happiness that there was still a road in Gaza that had retained its beauty, and that had not been destroyed. I put my hand outside the car window to feel the air, bringing back childhood memories. I remembered riding in the car with my father, teasing him by sticking my hand out the window, and how he would gently scold me to pull it back in. All at once, happy childhood memories flashed before my eyes, my father taking me to the swings, my mother pushing me as and I clung onto the ropes, going up and down. I felt like I was flying high in the sky, soaring with pure joy."

She fell silent, and we all fell silent as well, waiting for her to finish her story. I asked her to continue. "The story is over," she shrugged off. I asked her, "What made you happy within this story?" She blurted: "Salah al-Din Road." So I asked, "Did Salah al-Din Road make you happy?" to which she answered: "Yes."

Everyone burst out laughing at Abeer's story. I asked her: "During the war, did you feel happy in any moment related to a human being?" Her response was: "Honestly, I didn't feel happy for a single minute during the war. But when you asked us to remember happy moments, I couldn't recall anything except the time when we were being displaced to the south."

Their stories were achingly sad, especially when you realize the great tragedies of our youth. Can it really be that there is a human being in this world who has not smiled or experienced a moment of happiness for more than two years!?

I asked Abeer, "Didn't you have a moment of laughter throughout the war? Didn't you feel happiness even for a second?" "No, I didn't," she burst out, "but I was never sad either."

I tried again: "But how about the loss of your parents and husband? Didn't you feel about that!?" "No," she said firmly, "because they got martyred. They are still alive with us. I didn't even cry for them, and they never cross my mind."

I asked her, "Did you love your husband?" She answered immediately, "I adored him completely." I was surprised, "But how come you weren't sad for his loss?" Her answer was firm again, "Because he didn't die." Here I realized that she was in complete denial of that incident, and that she still does not want to believe that her husband and parents had passed away.

A girl named Hanan, who was not part of our group, was sitting on a chair at the corner of the tent where the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate was hosting us. She appeared to be studying on her laptop, yet she was quietly absorbing the stories shared by the group. At certain times, she laughed shyly, and at others she cried but tried to hide her tears. After the meeting ended, I approached her, introduced myself, and invited her to join our group. She immediately rejected, "No… no," her face blushing with embarrassment. In a hoarse, stammering voice, she added, "I'm not good at speaking. The youth in your group are quite courageous, but I am shy, and I do not want to speak." I reassured her, "Believe me, you need this workshop as much as they do, if not more. Let me help you!" "I don't want to," she refused categorically.

As we were talking, her uncle—an artist and a friend of mine—arrived and properly introduced me to her. "This is my niece," he said, "She is very intelligent and was the valedictorian in high school." On my way out, I said to her, "Think about it. Our next meeting is here on Wednesday. It would be great if you joined us." In my work, I always aim to find people who truly need psychosocial support, and I sincerely hoped she would come on Wednesday. It might help her recover from the intense trauma experienced during the war.

Then came the following Wednesday. I usually arrive at the training venue before everyone else, and I was pleasantly surprised to see her sitting there. Once everyone arrived and our meeting began, I asked the students to share their saddest moment during the war. After much hesitation, Hanan spoke.

She recounted her story about her only friend and her friend's mother, who had been like a mother to her. They were neighbors, so they spent most of the time together, either in her family's or in her friend's house. But one day, her friend's house was bombarded, killing her friend and her entire family.

After that, Hanan could no longer bear to stay in her house. Each day, she would sit beside what remained of her friend's home, now reduced to rubble, above the unburied corpses of that family. Many times, she would sit there and speak to her friend, hoping for a response, even a single word. She would also speak to her second mother, longing to hear her voice one last time. She kept on doing that day in, day out. Her parents tried to prevent her from returning to that rubble, but to no avail. Eventually, her parents moved south, hoping to leave the entire area behind and distance their daughter from her friend's mortal remains.

She told us that their house had been destroyed completely while they were in the south. In fact, their entire area had been wiped out. She spoke at length and nonstop for a full hour. This was the first time she shared her story since that incident. We ended the workshop half an hour late. I thanked Hanan for trusting us and opening her heart about her friend and her friend's mother.

My aim here is not merely to recount stories, but to allow the reader to live moments from the daily lives of Gazan youth. These moments offer deep insight into their psychological state, the circumstances, and the immense pressure and suffering they endure. Honestly, I don't believe there are any young people anywhere on the planet who suffer as much as Gazan youth. They search for even the smallest glimmer of hope that could bring them a moment of joy, even if it is only a street that retains traces of its former beauty. Their dreams are as simple as the laughter they have lost and the tears that have run dry.

Yet, something has deeply changed in their faces and the tone of their voices. I believe that everyone living in Gaza now is different from the rest of the world. People here carry a particular gaze, a posture, and a tone – something inexplicably altered. I personally see that if the residents of Gaza were to travel abroad, they would be immediately recognizable as Gazan survivors of war.

Oddly enough, after the ceasefire was declared, my wife and I were in a shopping center when a jeep suddenly pulled up. Several foreigners of different nationalities, affiliated with the United Nations, stepped out. It was clear from their appearance that they had just arrived to Gaza. As they walked around and shopped, everyone stared at them as if they had come from another planet! In that instant, a vast and unspoken distance emerged between us and them—a difference I still struggle to describe.

Before the war, Gaza was full of foreigners from all over the world; we never felt such a divide. Even now, we are still unable to fully grasp the depth of what we underwent, the consequences of which will likely last for decades, if not more. I returned home thinking about these young people and the future awaiting them. As the saying goes, "Youth are the foundation of the future." The world is now preoccupied with reconstruction, with questions like, "Who will clear the rubble? Who will rebuild? Who will supervise this process?" In my opinion, we must first and foremost rebuild the souls! Above all, we must restore hope to the people of Gaza – especially the youth – that they may live in peace. We must learn to think about tomorrow without fear, confusion, or insecurity, because building a human is far more difficult than rebuilding a structure.

How can we bolster their resilience and help them recover from all they have endured? Another pressing question is: What future awaits them when an entire system of life has been erased? Young people normally work in education, healthcare, public and private institutions, trade and commerce, tourism, construction, art, and culture. But all of this has been destroyed in Gaza. Who could blame these youth if they consider leaving Gaza in search for a better life where they could find some opportunity or even a flicker of hope?

That question is immense, and I believe that no one can truly answer it at this point. People continue to follow the headlines day and night, waiting for a breakthrough that might restore life to Gaza, but nothing has happened yet. Every morning brings new casualties and more homes reduced to rubble, even after the war was declared over. Each time we think the Occupation has taken enough of our blood, its arrogance only grows further. Throughout history, wars have ended with diplomatic efforts – except in Gaza, where rest of the world intervenes in our affairs and decides our fate while excluding us, as if we were backward, ignorant people incapable of determining our own destiny. But we are not. We have scientists, writers, artists, doctors, and engineers. There are more than 14 million Palestinians worldwide, many of whom have made remarkable contributions and influenced humanity at large. The Palestinian people continue to dream of freedom and of living with dignity like the rest of the world.

As I pondered these questions, I could not reach any conclusive or reassuring answers. Instead, I stumbled into heavier and deeper questions. I realized that what we are undergoing today is not merely the aftermath of a passing war, but an open wound in our consciousness and soul—a wound that will require a long time to heal and genuine efforts at recovery. The young people who sat before me and spoke, cried, and sometimes even laughed, were not searching for miraculous solutions, but an acknowledgment: a space where truth could be spoken without fear or distortion.

What I witnessed during that workshop confirmed something essential: the greatest danger lies not only in physical destruction, but in the accumulation of suppressed emotions, bottled-up feelings, unspoken stories, and deferred sorrows. When people are denied the chance to express themselves, their trauma becomes a constant burden, shaping every aspect of their lives and affecting all their decisions, relationships, and visions of the future. This is why conversations about reconstruction cannot be limited to stones, roads, and buildings; they must begin with the people themselves – by restoring the individual's trust in life, in the future, and in oneself.

The youth of Gaza do not lack the will, intelligence, or creativity. What they lack is a reality that does not consume their psychological energy at every turn. They are

besieged by fear and uncertainty, as well as by the absence of safety and prospects for life. Nevertheless, they still try, each in their own way, to cling to something resembling hope, however fragile, fleeting, or simple it may be.

This experience made me believe even more strongly that true investment must be in human beings: in mental health, in culture and the arts, and in creating safe spaces for dialogue and expression. Ultimately, building the human being is the foundation of any real progress and the only path to breaking the cycle of recurring violence and destruction.

We may not yet have clear answers about the future of Gaza or the fate of its youth. However, we do have the capacity to listen, to hold space, and to acknowledge pain rather than ignore it. Perhaps this is the most important thing we can do at this stage: to remain open to dialogue and to allow troubled souls the chance to untangle their inner chaos, as a small step toward healing in a long but crucial path.

Perhaps nothing more is required at this stage than this simple act: to be there for one another, and to give ourselves the right to be weary, to weep, and to hesitate. Healing does not arrive all at once; it is comprised of small moments of honesty and attentive listening. And when a person finds someone who truly listens to them, they begin – slowly but surely – to reclaim their voice, and with it, a part of themselves that the war tried to erase.

Freezer

When a tent turns from a temporary solution into a long-term fate, and when rain turns from a blessing to a test of survival, humans experience a profound shift in their relationship with nature and with themselves. This text was written in a moment of extreme fear, in a city ravaged by a war that rendered it unable to sustain the basics of life.

This is neither a description of a sudden drop in temperature, nor a narration of harsh weather conditions. Rather, it is an attempt to illuminate the human experience when people are left completely unprotected as they face the cold, rain, and wind with nothing but their bodies.

Winter does not arrive alone in Gaza; it carries with it the haunting prospect of tents, displacement, and loss, awakening questions that find no answers: Who will protect the homeless? Who hears the voices of those drowning in darkness? This writing conveys fleeting yet agonizing scenes where fear and helplessness intertwine, while tranquility recedes into a distant luxury. It is the voice of one who witnesses a recurring tragedy, sensing that time turns in a closed cycle, as if history insists on repeating itself in even more ruthless forms.

This text does not seek to elicit rapid sympathy or solicit attention, but to record a candid testimony of an unbearable reality. This story is written from the perspective of a troubled observer, who cannot retreat or bring about charge, but who resorts to words as the last remaining means of survival. It is a prelude to entering a world where rain becomes a danger; silence a betrayal; and writing a final act in the face of oblivion.

I have been overtaken by anxiety and sadness for days now. The incoming news about the approaching cold spell was so unsettling that I lie awake at night with insomnia, haunted by the tents scattered far and wide in every corner of Gaza, filled with displaced people who have lost their homes.

These tents are merely pieces of cloth; they offer no protection neither from the heat nor from the cold. As coastal dwellers, we remember placing tents on the

beach for just a few hours as a cover when changing our wet clothes. But never in our wildest dreams did we imagine seeing tents as far as the eye can see, like a forest of oppression and despair.

Too many have lost their homes during the war to be counted, all the while driven for two years from one fragile refuge to another. These tents remind us of our bleak memories of the Nakba of 1948, engraved within us and now compressed into yet another catastrophe, except that the second is even darker, more devastating, and more ruthless.

"May God protect Gaza and its residents," those were the words the weatherman stated of the coming storm. It was said to be the most severe in recent years. This left me frightened and deeply worried for the people. The storm was expected to begin on Wednesday, December 10, 2025, and to reach its peak on Thursday night, with extremely high sea waves. I thought about the tents pitched directly on the beach: What will happen to them? Who will rescue these people if the waves swept them away? I doubted anyone could help them if the high waves struck at night.

With all the doors firmly shut, the cries of those living in tents would go unheard. Pulling their tents tightly closed, their screams would be unable to reach beyond their immediate surroundings. The whole world has been warning of a potential disaster that could befall everyone in the tents, yet these calls have gone unheeded. Across Gaza – municipalities, organizations, officials, civil society, and governments – voices have been pleading: "Save the displaced people in the tents before the storm strikes and brings disaster!" But to whom do these appeals go to; which responsible entities do the people call on for help? I have come to realize that the displaced are left alone to face their fate, without any true help.

I went out that day to see if I could assist some people, even if only a few. But when I reached the first set of camps not far from my home, I found some men and women preparing for the storm by placing small stones at the edges of their tents. One man placed a sandbag around his tent's perimeter, and another tried to close the torn holes of his tent. They were doing such things simply to convince themselves that

they had done everything possible to protect their families. I wished I could take some of them in, but unfortunately my house was already full after my daughters' homes were destroyed and they moved in with us.

When I walked toward the south of the city, I saw a set of tents pitched in an area below sea level, like a ditch. I was surprised they were still there, in such a flood-prone spot, but it seemed there wasn't an inch of empty space left in Gaza to place their tents. I returned home, burdened with nightmares and a sense of helplessness. My wife noticed my grim face. She asked, "What's wrong? You look different." I could not hide my worry, "The news of the storm is not reassuring." She said, "Man, you haven't slept in two days, as if you were the mayor!" I answered sarcastically: "It seems that if I were an official, I would be sound asleep now."

Night fell, and the storm began with heavy rain. My first thought was my daughter, living in the upper room torn open by a two-meter hole from the bombardment. I texted her to come down with her family to my apartment, to escape the rain and cold until the storm passed. They all came down and found space in the living room, where they laid out their mattresses and slept. But I could not sleep a wink. I stayed up all night, watching TikTok videos from different incidents. How could I possibly sleep? The first video showed five children clinging to a tent wall, water rising above their chests, while their father cried out, "Where is your brother? Where is your brother?" He kept repeating the words as if the water had swallowed the child and carried him away.

Another TikTok video showed a man screaming in anguish while carrying his soaked child, pleading to the world: "My son has a serious chest illness, and this extreme cold and freezer-like tent will lead to his death!" He cried out: "Where is the world? Where are the officials? Where is human conscience!? My children will die and I am completely powerless! All our clothes and belongings have been swept away by the water; we have nothing left." He ended his message by shouting: "Where is the world!?"

While scrolling on TikTok, I also saw a hellish scene of hundreds of tents engulfed,

torn apart, and carried off by rain and wind. I felt as if my head were about to explode. I asked myself: Are we human beings like everyone else? Is there no world watching us? Do they not see these images? More than twenty people died during that storm, not to mention hundreds injured and thousands suffering from severe colds. According to the Statistics Committee, 58,000 tents were torn away, leaving their dwellers homeless.

This reminded me of Mahmoud Darwish's words about "being on our own"—and it felt exactly so. No one sees our tribulations. It seems that even if a million people died that night, the world would wake up the next day moved for a moment – saddened, angry, and condemning – then go back to work, sip their coffee, and watch the news or the Arab Cup matches. The humanitarian catastrophes and appeals during the heavy storm in Gaza, and the collapse of dozens of buildings, were beyond indescribable.

According to news headlines, the storm was expected to end on Friday. I was supposed to travel to the south on Saturday but chose to wait a little for the storm to subside, so I went on Monday instead. That morning was sunny, but at 11:00 a.m., it began to rain heavily, as if the sky had turned into a giant bowl of water pouring onto the ground. The rain was ceaseless, and the more it went on, the more tents were flooded. After finishing my work and returning, I witnessed a ruthless outpouring of rain on displaced people.

I was riding with a group of people in a trailer towed by a car. This vehicle, resembling a livestock carrier, had two seats facing each other and was covered by a leather tarpaulin, with a window-like opening in the front to let in some air. We sat on the opposite benches, each accommodating six people. The driver took the coastal road, which had become almost like a river. We feared the car would break down or the engine would stall in the torrent of rain above and below us.

During the perilous journey, I watched some tents being blown away while others were drowning. Whenever the driver sped up, more rain poured in through the trailer's opening. I bore the brunt of it, the water lashing my face like icy stings.

The trailer grew colder than a freezer, and I was soaked from head to toe, even my underwear clung heavy with water. I have always considered winter to be the harshest season, for it reminds me of the bitter chill we endured in our old home in the refugee camp, where water leaked everywhere. My sense of solidarity with the displaced people living in those tents greatly softened my anger over my soaked clothes and the freezing vehicle.

We struggled to move forward as the road was terrible. Quite literally, Gaza was drowning. Before we reached the port area, we encountered a torrent near the Nabulsi neighborhood that had submerged numerous tents. Mothers carried their children, fathers clutched the few belongings they managed to save, and people battled to walk through the relentless downpour, rain hammering their heads like a scene out of hell.

The driver wanted to turn onto a side road because of the extremely high level of water on the main road. But once we turned in, he stopped a few meters before a shocking scene: the water had spread across the road to the scale of a Roman amphitheater! Overtaken by the flood, it was impassable for cars and pedestrians alike. Our only option was to return to the main road and take the risk; either the engine would stall in that vast pond, or we would make it through.

The driver slowly went back and moved forward with great care, our hearts trembling at the sight. Water pressed in from both sides, seeping toward us from beneath, while people outside were still fighting for each step through the flood. A few vehicles crawled ahead of ours, inching forward with the same fearful caution.

Fear surrounded us in every direction. We were terrified that one of the cars ahead us would stall, blocking the road and forcing us to stop. This would mean our car would be submerged and grind to a halt. The sight of the children there was more heartbreaking than the freezing cold itself. I can still feel the rain spraying through the open window, stinging my face and body. This scene felt like something from a horror movie. The palm trees along the roadside were nearly uprooted by the brutal wind, and the tents were shaking, their fabric tearing and lifting off toward some

final, unknown destination. I watched that scene in dread, my body aching from the bitter cold. Some tents literally flew high into the sky, as if swallowed by demons, vanishing without a trace. Then came the screams of women, men, and children, piercing the thunder and lightning. We most certainly heard the roaring rainfall and the blaring honking of cars, but the cries for help were the loudest of all.

Those who lost their tents began running in every direction, desperately seeking shelter from rain. Our car was completely packed, and I could almost hear the heartbeats of the man sitting next to me, terrified that our vehicle, moving at a snail's pace, would break down. Everyone was panic-stricken, and we all wondered what we would do if the car stopped. I decided that if it broke down, I would get out immediately and wade through the water until I found shelter, while others might choose to remain inside. Finally, we reached a shallower stretch of water, and the vehicle emerged unharmed.

I saw a man carrying his three children: one perched on his shoulders, the other two clutched in his arms. He walked hurriedly, trying to soothe them: "We are almost there!" He seemed to be one of the displaced people whose tents were blown away. I wondered, "Where is this man going?" because only moments earlier the tent where he had sought shelter flew far off, as if it, too, wished to escape this ordeal. "Hush, my children, be patient, we will arrive soon." The children's clothes were so wet they clung to their bodies, and they were crying bitterly, yet I saw no tears in their eyes. Perhaps their tears were mixed with the rain, or perhaps the extreme cold kept them from falling.

Women carried the few cooking pots they managed to rescue from the furious river. I now came to realize why I hadn't been able to sleep for three consecutive nights, as this accursed storm was beyond frightening. I found myself sharing their agony amid that nightmare. In general, I feel that great knowledge is a curse that afflicts its possessors and compassion turns into their torment, because having those qualities would force thousands of questions upon you about justice and injustice, mercy and crime, humanity, human rights, and equality. My head nearly exploded when I saw the people moving in all directions, not knowing where to go. I wouldn't be

exaggerating if I said that my journey home from the south in that vehicle was among the worst moments of my life. The road seemed endless, as if the car moved but had stood still. Under ordinary circumstances, the distance between Deir al-Balah and Gaza takes no more than thirty minutes. After the war and its destruction of roads, it will require at least an hour. But on that day, we drove for two hours and we were barely near the fishermen's port, trapped in the ceaseless rain. I must add that the relentless downpour slamming into the window on that vehicle was even harsher than the torrential rain outside. It struck my face like someone scooping water and hurling it at me with all their might. I was going mad, until finally a young man offered me the seat next to him to spare me from the merciless rain.

The car pushed through the shattered roads of Gaza City, where not a single meter remained untouched. All was devastation, mirroring the souls of the people steeped in profound sorrow. Finally, we reached the Legislative Council building, or what used to bear that name, for it had been erased from the map and turned into a taxi stand. The driver dropped me in the middle of a torrent, leaving me exposed to the downpour with nowhere to take shelter. I stood there, frozen, waiting for any vehicle that might offer me a ride.

Suddenly, a large bus, built to carry fifty passengers, pulled up beside me, and stopped to shelter me from the rain. The moment the door swung open, it felt as though the earth itself had split open, as a surge of men, women, youth, and children spilled out of the bus at once. I was pushed inside by the crush of people. Only after I sat down did I breathe a little, for the first time in hours.

A few minutes later, the driver dropped me at a point close to my house. But the area had become like a raging river, separating me from my home. I stood there for several minutes until another driver arrived, and I paid him to take me to the other side of the street, across the newly formed "river."

It was a small distance, no more than twenty meters, yet entirely flooded. Once we crossed it, I hurried home.

I immediately changed out of my soaking-wet clothes and dried myself. Then I lay down on the bed, shivering. I asked my wife to put another blanket over me. She was quite surprised and worried that I might catch a cold, considering that I have a weak immune system. She sat beside me to hear what had happened, as I was in a wretched state. I told her about the children and their incessant crying, about nature's fury against the tents of displaced people, and about the thousands of people who battled to walk under the torrential rain. I muttered, "I don't not know whether that man has even reached home yet." "Which man?" she asked. "Never mind," I replied. "I do not want to worry you."

The journey on the bus was excruciatingly long, laden with different forms of our people's suffering. It may be many years before our ships find their way back to the port. That night, when I closed the house door, I did not feel that I had reached a safe place; only that I had escaped temporarily. Escape here does not mean deliverance; it means leaving one scene only to enter another that haunts you entirely. I lay on my bed, my body still trembling. What troubled me most was not just the cold itself, but the faces I had left behind in the streets—their voices still ringing in my ears—and the sound of rain, no longer "winter music," but a relentless siren of loss.

I realized that the real catastrophe was not the storm or nature's fury, but the cruel desensitization to pain, the belief that "what happened tonight might happen again tomorrow, and the day after, without anything changing." I fear that the tents will remain there, and that children will grow to know dread before knowing how to play, and that people will keep searching for shelter that does not collapse with the first gust of wind. Meanwhile, the world will keep watching from afar, offering only comments, then scrolling to the next page.

In Gaza, stories do not have clear endings but remain open to even harsher possibilities. There is no comfortable ending to this text, just as there is no fair ending to this story. All we have are people trying to endure one more day, to save their memories from erosion, and to cling to something that resembles dignity amid this destruction.

When I finally closed my eyes, I did not only pray for the rain to stop, but also for my heart not to grow accustomed to this scene—where misery becomes ordinary, tents become permanent homes, and silence becomes destiny. The most dangerous thing that can happen to us is not drowning in water, but drowning in apathy and indifference. We must remember that what we are experiencing is not normal and must ever be treated as such.

Amid this overwhelming scene, a question lingers: how can a person preserve their humanity when pushed daily to the brink of despair? In Gaza, resilience isn't measured only by slogans or endurance, but by small, stubborn attempts to remain psychologically intact despite the sense of brokenness. People here are not asking for miracles, only for basic safety: a roof that will not fly away, and a night that can pass without dread. Reality has imposed a cruel equation, where danger comes not only from the sky and the sea, but also from the absence of justice and the feeling that one's life has been deferred to oblivion. These moments, however fleeting they may seem, leave deep marks on memory, reshaping a person's relationship with themselves and the world. Perhaps this is why speaking out has become a necessity rather than a luxury; a last-ditch effort to affirm the truth before it is swallowed up by habituation, and before pain is reduced to a figure or passing headline that no one pays attention to.

Happiness

In times of war, words lose their essence, and basic concepts are recast in harsh, bewildering ways. In a reality burdened by destruction, the concept of happiness, once associated with tranquility, abundance, and fearless laughter, curdles into an ambiguous notion, even summoning a moral question: Do we have the right to laugh amid such anguish?

This text neither seeks to justify laughter nor to embellish tragedy. It aims, instead, to draw close to humanity in moments of weakness, contradiction, and brutal honesty. It is an attempt to document what is rarely documented: the small details that keep people psychologically alive amid devastation, and the fleeting moments that may resemble happiness, even if not so in their heart. The stories here are recounted not as amusing tales, but as testimonies to the human capacity to cling to life, even when besieged by loss, hunger, fear, and burdensome memories.

When we met for the first time after the war ended, I told my friends, "We've had enough of sorrow and weeping. Let us try to smile."

"How can we smile," they asked, "when all this war has shown us is pain?"
"There must have been at least one small grin that escaped you… one moment when happiness touched you," I urged.

Most of them dismissed the idea. "We do not remember," they said.
I tried again, "Search deeper in your memories and imagination. You must find that smile!"

Muhammad offered, "I can tell you something that happened to me at the beginning of the war, but it's very embarrassing. Please do not laugh at me!"

"Why not laugh?" we challenged. "Our aim is to laugh! If it's too embarrassing, then spare us…"

He replied: "I will recount it anyway, just to spite you!"
We fired back, "Then you'll have to bear the consequences."

Muhammad began: "One day after the war had just started, I was in a deep sleep at home, wearing shorts and an undershirt. My bedroom door was closed, and I was disconnected from the world. Suddenly, someone pounded on the door shouting: 'Open up, it's the army!' I opened the door and found the house full of Israeli soldiers. They beat me, dragged me out, and threw me into a military truck. I was thrown onto its metal floor, icy cold compared to my warm room. I started shivering from the cold, as if they had thrown me into a freezer! The soldiers started gathering young men and threw them into the truck. Shortly afterwards, we were about forty men piled on top of each other, and the truck took off. At first my mind raced with conflicting thoughts: 'Will they take us somewhere far away and shoot us, or will they put us in detention?' I hoped they would only detain me. The faster the truck went, the colder the air became. There was no tarpaulin to protect us from the wind, and the cold seeped into my bones… I almost got frozen! I stopped caring about whether I was going to be detained or get shot in the head and dead. The cold seized every thought, ripping through my bones like sharp knives. Even the air I breathed was painful in my lungs. The truck's metal floor felt like slabs of Siberian ice. Suddenly, I felt a strange warmth seep through my limbs and spread across my body, and it brought me comfort. At first I did not know the source of that warmth, but there was a suspicious smell. I turned to the young man beside me and asked, 'Did you urinate?' Through clenched teeth and trembling lips, he begged me to keep it a secret. He said he could not control himself because of the extreme cold and fear, and that he had urinated on me without meaning to, and that he was ashamed. I told him it was okay, yet part of me wished it would continue because

of the warmth, as the cold was killing me… Sometimes, the things you would never imagine enduring, the situations that you hate most fiercely, can be the very things that save you. And sometimes what you believe will make you happy can end up killing you. The truck eventually took us to jail. They locked me there, and I was released a year and a half later, finding myself in the midst of famine."

There are so many contradictions in Gaza, and we all live them unconsciously. The reader may wonder, What's so funny in that story? Yet people in Gaza have grown sarcastic about everything, after most of us lost all that we had. Throughout the war, we have been running from one pit only to fall in another, larger one. For more than two years, we have been moving from one sorrow to the next, displaced again and again, often brushed by death, as if the world itself had ended. Nothing has settled, and until now, we have not found peace. Our eyes remain bewildered, our steps hesitant, our thoughts confused, and everything has become thrown into doubt.

And yet we search, in the midst of it all, for a life that resembles life, and we try, despite everything, to share laughter. The war is over, but we have forgotten laughter. While Muhammad was telling his story, we burst out laughing with the yearning of a mother meeting her son after years of absence, or a farmer longing for rain on his parched soil. Many things dry and crack besides the earth: Lips grow parched and feelings fall numb. And once death becomes a familiar scene we witness every day, everything else becomes ordinary.

We received Muhammad's story like a gift from heaven, a chance to reshape our souls. We laughed from the heart, tears of joy streaming from our eyes— tears we had held back since the beginning of the war. Our hunger for laughter almost matched the craving we had felt during the famine for a plate of Nabulsi Knafeh! Everyone wanted to devour a piece of that dessert and share their own funny or

personal story, including Ihab, who said:

"One day, I went out to gather firewood for cooking in a tree-filled area next to our house. While I was collecting branches, I found a heavy gold bracelet with a snake's head clasp, known to us as a 'snake bracelet.' At first, I felt uneasy, but I looked around and no one was there. My feelings were torn between joy and fear. I was anxious because I had heard that gold had become very expensive, and that such a large bracelet would probably be worth a fortune I could ever earn in my entire life. I carried the firewood on my back and hurried home, changing the bracelet's hiding place several times along the way—sometimes it in my right pocket, sometimes in the left. At one point I even slipped it into my sock, but it wouldn't stay, so I put it back in my trouser pocket."

"No one had ever robbed me in my life, yet on that walk back, I felt as if the entire world might wrestle me to steal this precious treasure. I don't know how I reached home that day, but I kept telling myself, 'I must sell it immediately to buy food for my children.' The only problem was that the nearest gold market was in Jabalia, and I didn't have the money for transportation."

"I went to my brother and asked him to lend me some money, but he flatly refused. I was burning to reach the goldsmith's shop and learn what the bracelet was worth. I needed his help with the transport fee, and I knew he had a little money from his work as a barber. So, on my way back from collecting firewood, while a few customers were waiting their turn at his shop, I took out the bracelet and placed it in front of him. His mouth fell open in astonishment. 'Where did you get this?' he asked. I told him that I had found it while collecting firewood. He narrowed his eyes and warned me, 'I hope you didn't do something suspicious."

"I swore to him that I found it by chance between the tree leaves. Perhaps it had

been blown away from a bombarded house, or fell from the hand of a once bride whose body was torn to pieces. 'I have no clue how it ended up in the woods; I simply found it, and there was no one there,' I explained. 'Okay,' he said. 'I will give you twenty shekels for your transport departure and return."

"I took the money, and upon leaving the barbershop, I ran into my younger brother and decided to take him along with me. I thought to myself, 'We will pay 20 shekels for two persons' departure, and after selling the bracelet, we would have abundant money on the way back."

"When we got to the goldsmith market, I told my brother: 'Take the bracelet and go inside that shop. Ask for his offered price and get back to me so we can compare and find the best deal."

"My brother went inside, and I stood next to the door. But upon presenting the bracelet, the goldsmith screamed at him: 'Out! Get out of here! Aren't you tired of this!? Every day a different person with the same kind of copper bracelet!"

"My brother got out scared, stressing that the goldsmith insisted that it was made of copper. 'That's impossible!" I cried out. 'This man does not know enough about gold! Let's go somewhere else."

"We went to an adjacent goldsmith, showed him the bracelet, and asked him about its value. 'Sorry, I don't buy copper," he said indifferently. 'This is fake Chinese gold, and people come with this type of bracelet every other day. Good luck."

"I stood there wondering how we would return home, as we didn't have money for transportation. I asked the goldsmith if he would buy it at any price, but he stressed that 'it is not worth even a Shekel."

"We walked back home frustrated and arrived more than an hour later. Then we sat down contemplating about the simple things we would have done had we sold the bracelet…"

Ihab fell silent, and so did everyone else. We did not know whether to laugh or be sad. But since the gathering was focused on laughter, I asked him: "What did the first goldsmith say to your brother?" He exclaimed, "He yelled at him saying: 'Get out of here!' Get out!!'"

Everyone started laughing, and the cynical comments emerged. A participant noted, "It seems to be a very famous bracelet; everyone who goes to the woods finds it!"

Another asked: "What did you do with it, Ihab?" to which Ihab replied: "When I went back to gather firewood the next day, I took it out furiously and threw it deep into the woods."

Everyone was amused, commenting, "It will most likely return to the same goldsmith with someone else."

Then Mahmoud said, "I have a story that made me happy." I quickly stepped in, "Ok everyone! Let us all listen to Mahmoud and hear about what made him happy! This poetic verse describes Mahmoud best. It fits him perfectly: 'My luck is like flour scattered over thorns. The barefoot were told to gather it in the wind. But when the task proved too hard for them, they asked, how can you make happy the one whom God has made wretched?' Go on and tell us your story, you wretched soul," I said jokingly, and everyone laughed.

Mahmoud began: "This story took place in the first months of the war. Everyone was receiving coupons except for me, although I am unemployed and have children.

I kept telling myself: 'Be patient; perhaps something good will come out of it.' Then one day as I was browsing on Facebook and TikTok, a message suddenly popped up on my phone. I rarely receive messages, so I quickly opened it. The first word said: 'Go to…"

"For those of you who don't know, this "Go to" is like a go-to code in Gaza: All aid and charity organizations begin their messages with 'Go to… Go to this or that chief's house… Go to such-and-such shed…"

"And so I ran to the go-to address and, all the while imagining the shape and type of coupon I might receive. There are different types of coupons one could get: some are worth $500 U.S., while others do not exceed $10 U.S. Upon arriving, I found a long queue. I stood there and learned that the coupon I had received was for seven boxes of food supplements. The cost of each box was only $2 U.S., meaning that the entire coupon was worth only $14 U.S."

"It occurred to me that if I had gone there and back by public transport, it would have cost the same amount. But it's okay, I told myself, and I decided to wait a bit. "I eventually received the food supplements and returned home clutching the seven boxes tightly. Upon entering, my wife asked: 'Why didn't you receive the coupon?' I held out my hand and said, 'This is the coupon ration."

"She was surprised, 'Children's supplements!? I've never seen a coupon like that in my entire life! Oh God, how unfortunate."

"I gave each of my children a box. As soon as one of them opened the box and took a bite, my phone started ringing. I was told that our house had been bombarded and my apartment was fully destroyed."

"I hung up and continued looking at my son as he took his food supplement. My wife noticed my disturbed facial expression and asked, 'What happened!? Who just called?' 'Nothing,' I said, "It just seems that our stay here in Deir al-Balah will last longer.' 'Be honest with me,' she pleaded, 'Did they say anything about our house getting bombed??' I nodded in agreement, and she sat down, weeping bitterly."

Mahmoud paused and looked at us, then he continued: "That moment had been the happiest I experienced during the war. I don't know why, but I had that strange feeling as if I had compensated for those boxes with my own house. God damn those supplements and damn the day I was born! To hell with this endless war. When you lose your home, the war never ends for you. You see, your house is a small homeland… How can one live in the larger homeland when one can't find a foothold or ceiling under which no one in the family can feel safe!? Since that day, we have moved dozens of times between tents across Gaza, both in the north and south. You know what? This is the first time in over two years that I am sitting down, like a normal human being; sitting, listening and talking among normal friends."

Mahmoud fell silent, and so did everyone else.

I broke the awkward silence, seeking to restore a cheerful atmosphere away from the prevailing sadness that we had sought to escape in the first place. I said to Mahmoud, "Honestly, my heart trembled when you raised your finger and said you were happy. This surprised me a lot because I know you have been unlucky since you were born!"

Everyone started laughing, and so did Mahmoud, and the room got lighter.

Then Lina intervened: "I will tell you about my happiest moment. This was during the Israeli siege in the north, when no one could even open their house door. We

were completely short of food, and the intense hunger crawling on our stomachs was so bad that we even had to eat tree leaves to survive."

"One of those days, I was sitting on bed at home, reading a novel. I dozed off unexpectedly, so the book fell from my hands behind the bed. I went under the bed to pick it up, and I suddenly saw the greatest surprise: there was one orange lying there! I looked around and no one was there, so I picked it up and stared: half of it was covered in white mold, the other half intact. It looked like it had been lying under the bed for weeks or months, as if waiting to save my life."

"I subconsciously rushed to the restroom, locked the door, sat on the toilet seat, peeled the orange, and began to devour it with relish. The taste of the orange affected me instantly; it was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted and ever will! I picked out the unmolded slices, one by one, until the entire orange was consumed. All that remained was the peel, and I started eating the pulp inside of it, sometimes even eating the peel itself."

"I had to hide the 'trace of the crime,' so I gathered the moldy slices and threw them out of the small bathroom window that leads to the street. I washed my hands and entered the room, then went under the bed, picked up the book, and drifted off into reflection. My mind was rebuking me for what I had done: How could I possibly eat an orange by myself while my younger siblings and parents were starving inside!? What a shame—I should have shared it with everyone! I hated myself at that moment, and I will never forgive myself for what I had done.

"But at the same time, I realized how precious life and survival truly are. If someone had asked me, 'If you find an orange amid famine, would you eat it alone or with family?' I would have answered without hesitation: 'With my family of course.' But reality is different; there seems to be a vast difference between theory and practice.

It's like a scenario where a family falls overboard from a boat, and everyone will ultimately strive to save themselves from drowning."

"I wondered: 'Am I a heartless person, or was the desire to survive stronger?' But the moment I devoured that orange is one I will never forget. It was the happiest moment of my life, and it permeated my entire being. In fact, it was the only moment in which I felt truly happy throughout the war."

By the end of that session, we did not find a clear definition of happiness, nor did we reach a philosophical conclusion covering all that had been said. Nevertheless, we realized one thing with painful clarity: happiness in war is exceptional, and it does not arrive whole, pure, or dignified. Rather, it is a fleeting 'stolen' moment that is sometimes embarrassing or even painful, yet real enough to keep a person standing. We also learned that laughter in this context is not a sign of frivolity, but a last form of resistance, and that sarcasm is not a mockery of life, but a blind attachment thereto. In Gaza, we do not laugh because we are okay, but because the alternative is collapse, and because the human heart will suffocate if it finds no air to breathe.

We left that evening carrying stories that mirrored our wounds—still unhealed, yet at least not alone. We realized that each of us has their own "orange," "fake bracelet," or "fleeting warmth in a freezing truck." We also understood that these small details—however trivial or harsh they may seem—have helped keep us alive this far. The war is not truly over, even when guns fall silent, for it lives on in memory, loss, and dread of tomorrow.

Still, we may have partially broken the war's grip that night as we sat like ordinary people, and we talked, laughed, fell silent, and cried unabashedly. Perhaps that was happiness in its simplest form—to feel that you are still human, still capable

of feeling, remembering, and speaking out. We may not have homes, safety, or a clear future, but we possess stories that, when narrated, can lighten the burden of life. At some point, we realized that happiness is not the opposite of pain, but its temporary companion. We will keep seeking happiness, knowing it will not save us, because it grants us one more push to live through another day.

Houses

Houses have many faces, and we encounter them every day. Like people, some are merely passing acquaintances, while others turn to friends, relatives, and neighbors. On rare occasions, however, you may come across a special kind of person, perhaps by chance or through work, whom you instantly feel close to. You find yourselves bound by mutual respect and warmth, as if you had known each other for ages.

You might meet this person once a year, but when you start talking, you feel like you had never been apart, as if you had stayed up together just the night before. They confide in you what lies in their hearts, and you feel they are your brothers and your only friends.

This is the case with my kind-hearted friend, Muhammad, Abu Qusay, or as the colleagues in the arts community like to call him, "Choko." He has worked in drama for many years as a sound technician, production assistant, assistant director – whatever is asked of him, he delivers with brilliance and deep expertise. He is tall, fair-skinned, handsome, witty, married, and the father of three children: Ghazal, Qusay, and Sham.

I saw him after we returned from our latest displacement, following Trump's "end of war" declaration. I was conducting a creative writing workshop, and he happened to be sitting there by chance. I almost didn't recognize him at first glance. He had become noticeably skinnier, and his face had changed, as if the war had swallowed him.

It was instantly clear to me that the war had taken its toll on my friend Muhammad. He seemed to need to vent and take some of the load off, so I decided to help. This was not the Muhammad that I knew—the man who never stopped joking and who loved life in all its forms. He had many hopes and dreams and always shared them with those around him. He was honest, at times to the point of bluntness, but always with a pure heart.

I remember one time when I brought him along with me as I was filming a scene for a TV series. I was delivering a line that included a sentence with some political implications. Once he heard the dialogue, Muhammad, who was the sound technician and was not supposed to challenge the director, jumped in and expressed his objection. Like a living conscience, his rejection confirmed my own discomfort regarding that specific line. I asked the director to remove it, and he agreed without hesitation and deleted it in the edit.

I said to Muhammad, "I am running a creative writing workshop for a group of young men and women. Why don't you come sit with us? We want to chat, and I would love to hear your news!" This was my little trick to help my friend; it was my way to draw him into the session so that he would open up and break his choking silence.

He initially refused. "No, Uncle Abu Fadi, I have work in two hours." he said. I grabbed his arm and stressed, "We'll be done in two hours; the whole session won't take more than that."

We went to the nearby tent and sat in a semi-circle. The group and I welcomed Muhammad, and after brief introductions, the workshop began. I asked everyone to recall a scene that had brought them the most joy during the war. Everyone was surprised by that question; they had expected me to ask about what had saddened them the most. They began sharing, and we had some good laughs throughout the session. Our first meeting was filled with joy; we wished it would never end.

Our meetings continued after that. When we got to the fourth session, I asked all of them to share what had saddened them the most during the war. All of them spoke, one after the other, except for Muhammad. His answer was different, as if his grief was unlike any human sorrow. In a broken voice, without trembling or

tears, he said, "Uncle Abu Fadi, nothing hurts me anymore. I've lost the ability to feel anything anymore, no matter what happens. It seems that I've become numb."

Hearing him speak was like watching him release stones that had accumulated in his chest over the years:

"Since the day Hamed was martyred, my mind got split in two: Half of it recognizes what happened, and half of it refuses to believe it. I felt like I was standing between wakefulness and madness, between sleep and screaming. I can't believe that Hamed is gone. He was the kindest person in my life, my brother from another mother. He was my support, my backbone, my friend who never left my side."

Muhammad had been building his dream home—a small apartment in a residential complex—and it took him four full years to complete it. He poured all his savings into every brick and beam of the house. His friend Hamed was always the first to answer the call for help. He never complained, as if it was his home to build, not Muhammad's. They were best buddies. Even Muhammad's children loved "Uncle Hamed" more than their real uncles, especially Sham, his eldest daughter, his first joy. He would look for her before anyone else, and she would run toward "Uncle Hamed" the moment he entered the house and cling to his neck.

Muhammad sighed and continued:
"The day he was martyred is engraved in my chest. I ran to their house, but technically there was no house–only a crater. The ground itself looked as if it had been bombed a thousand times. 'Where is Hamed?' I asked. 'Don't ask that,' they said. I shouted, 'Where is my brother? I want to see him!' They said, 'It is better if you don't see him.' When I persisted, their neighbor approached me and whispered, 'Oh Muhammad… Hamed has no head… His body is almost torn apart. They are looking for his head.' That voice did not fade… It kept slapping the heart without end. They took Hamed

and his wife, children, parents, and nephew to the hospital to issue mass death certificates. An entire family was wiped from the records."

Muhammad carried on: "Hamed had a son, Ahmad. I was more attached to him than to my own children. My kids were sometimes jealous of him because I loved him so much… Oh God, even Ahmad is gone!"

His voice trembled for the first time. "They kept searching for Hamed's head until they found it in the neighboring area, blown dozens of meters away by the strike. They placed his head in the shroud and sealed it, so that it would not move. No one bid him farewell."

"On the day of their collective burial, only little Ahmad's body remained intact, without a scratch, as if he were sleeping," Muhammad paused, and then proceeded: "I carried him… I held him tightly. I kissed his cheeks and his forehead. I felt my heart stop. It was like embracing Hamed himself. I kept holding him until they pulled him from my arms while they said, 'May his soul rest in peace.' We buried him… and I buried my heart with him. Until today, my heart is still there, playing with Ahmad and guarding Hamed's grave."

Muhammad returned home a different person; one he no longer recognized. When his wife met him at the door, her face was pale with worry. She urged him to flee immediately. "We must move south… our children's lives are not a game," she pleaded. He shook his head without a word.

In that moment, he made a decision beyond his strength, and that was to abandon his lifelong dream. He had to leave the house he had built brick by brick.

As he expressed it: "From that day on, everything became meaningless. There is

no more anger, no sadness, not even pain. I just need to protect my family. Death surrounds us from every angle, especially in my area—al-Tawam, north of Gaza. Houses collapse there every night, and dozens are killed."

Muhammad and his family only managed to take few clothes, and he was the last to leave the house. He stood at the door for a long moment, his gaze neither affectionate nor longing, like someone searching for a feeling that would not come. The last thing his eyes rested on was the bedroom; the place that was supposed to hold meaning no longer did. He finally closed the door quietly, with a calm that felt like surrender.

As such, their journey to Nuseirat began. "We went to the home of a relative who welcomed us with gentle warmth amid a merciless storm," Muhammad shared. "Although it may have felt like a haven for a moment, yet in my heart, I had lost any sense of refuge. We stayed there until the Israeli army called, ordering us to evacuate the house immediately before it was bombed. We rushed out, and everyone was checking on the children, with eyes terrified, except for mine. I was not afraid, and I did not tremble. I watched them with the detachment of someone performing a task."

Muhammad proceeded to share, uninterrupted: "We took only a bag of documents – birth certificates, ID cards, contract for the house, and some of the children's clothes. Nothing mattered to me anymore except fulfilling my duty as a father. The value, meanwhile, had evaporated long ago.

"I left without fear or trembling, without the instinctive anxiety that often ignites the heart of a protective father. I called to my family coldly, 'Let's go,' as if reciting a memorized line and not confronting possible death. My wife followed, and we stood at a distance from the house. Minutes later, a missile tore through the air, thick dust

swallowing the place. The house was gone, erased as if it had never existed.

“I stood there watching the rubble, neither stunned nor broken—just empty. It was the first shelter I had ever lived in, and the first thing to collapse before my eyes. All I felt was that a phase had ended, and that I had to move on to the next, like someone performing a tiring job with no choice.”

He carried on: “We first sought refuge through an organization that gave us a tent, then moved to a displacement camp crowded with tents crammed together, with a narrow stretch of fabric that resembled neither a house nor even a shelter, merely a fragile illusion separating us from a predatory world. There was someone distributing water and food, just enough to keep us alive.”

“Life was horrendous inside the tent. It was a living hell; an earthly version of a place that changes you forever. A lifeless piece of cloth wrapped around you like a shroud, offering neither cover, nor warmth, nor protection. Everything in it reminds you that you are not fully alive–nor dead enough.”

“By day,” Muhammad explained, “the tent is like an open oven; by night, it turns into the dark belly of a demon breathing around you. The air is heavy, with the smell of dampness and fear, and the darkness thickens with every touch of the tattered fabric. You feel exposed on all sides, with nothing to shield you, nothing but emptiness pressing on your chest, as if you were suspended in a bottomless pit.

“Dogs roamed around the tent like guardians of this hell. They moved in loops and came so close that their barking seemed to pierce our bodies. Planes were above us, rats below us, and drones hovered over our heads, their buzzing like relentless torture. Even when the wind blew, it shook the tent with such force that made it feel as though hell itself was roaring in our ears.”

Muhammad witnessed all of this without a flicker of fear. He stood in the middle of this inferno like someone accustomed to fire, no longer able to distinguish its sting. He looked at his three children shivering under the blanket—poor children who believed a piece of cloth could protect them. Their faces carried pure terror, the kind that strikes you at once, without instruction or preparation.

For a moment –one known only to those burned from within– Muhammad smiled. A brief, faint smile crossed his face like a passing shadow. He remembered filming sets where the director would call out instructions for the actors to 'exaggerate the fear! Open your eyes wider! Make your voices tremble convincingly!' A bitter laugh burned inside him, because he knew the fear on his children's faces was something no actor had ever captured. Not even the greatest could imitate that kind of terror—the raw panic clawing up from the heart of a child trapped in an incomprehensible hell.

He thus moved among his children like a body performing what must be done – nothing more. He knew, as a father, that he had to protect them, but he himself felt no protection, no fatherhood. He felt nothing but duty, moving through him mechanically.

The tent was hell. And Muhammad lived in it without fear… not out of courage, but because something inside him had already died before he arrived:

"We kept waiting for the day we would go back home, even if the war did not stop. The dream of return became the only thing floating above the swamp of hell. Talking about it became a hope we clung to so we would not drown. Our entire life narrowed into one question: When will the truce begin?"

"But the news did not reassure us. Many houses in our area were bombarded. We

could only check on our apartment by waiting for news or contacting those who had stayed behind. When the [Israeli] army forces finally withdrew, they left tremendous ruin and devastation behind. I called our neighbor and asked him to take photos of our apartment. When they arrived, our joy was indescribable: The pictures showed that the building and our apartment were intact, with only minor damage."

"Our apartment had been a carefully crafted dream that Hamed and I meticulously designed. I still remember our last purchase: beds and wardrobes for each child. They were beyond joy that day; they jumped on their beds as if they were trampolines."

"The day we returned home was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. More than a million people moved north—women, children, the elderly, youth, even animals—all pushing forward to go home. I raised my boom mic high to meet my brother-in-law, holding it like a flagstaff in the heart of war. I don't know what compelled me that day to turn on the microphone and listen to the crowd. The first thing I caught was a man saying to his friend: 'Listen… if we get separated, meet me at Abu Tawila's… the guy with the broom.' I laughed, despite everything. Even amid devastation, people still found space for humor."

"Another man was consoling his group, 'Please hang in there… the road is long, but we'll rest once we reach home.' The closer we got to Gaza, the more people repeated the same phrase: 'Wow, there is nothing like the air of Gaza… it revives the soul."

"During the tiring journey, some sat facing the sea, filling their lungs with its breeze as if it were medicine restoring what the war had stolen from them. Every so often, someone would approach and beg me not to lower the boom pole, as they had told their relatives to follow it as a marker amid the flood of people. I became a moving marker, a walking meeting point for people, the first anchor in history that walked on two legs."

"With headphones on, I listened to their dreams, their longing, and their voices trembling with both exhaustion and triumph. I recorded every single word."

"Nothing compares to the day we arrived home," Muhammad continued: "Even the horses and donkeys, monkeys and birds, all jostled along the same path, as if life in all its forms longed to return to its original place."

"I raised the boom mic on high volume whenever I lost someone, or someone lost me. I listened to the voices overlapping in my ears: laughter mixed with tears, sighs of fatigue, wishes, and names being called out in fear of disappearing in the crowd.

"The air of Gaza filled everyone's lungs. I saw people lifting their heads to the sky from sheer longing, breathing it in like a thirst-quenching drink. In those moments, I felt that I was not merely recording a sound, but the memory of an entire people returning from death to their homes. I kept that recording as a testament to the great joy of return, to our endurance, and to our unbreakable love, despite all we had endured.

"We reached our apartment exhausted, as if the road had been an endless wrestling ring. I put the key in the lock, turned it slowly, and the door swung open. We did not enter a house, but a dust-covered paradise. Everything was coated in black layers of soot from bombardment and smoke. Dust filled the place as if time itself had stopped at the threshold. The floor, the walls, even the ceilings were buried under a thick layer of ash, reminding us of everything we had lost, of every moment when something in our lives had collapsed before we managed to return to it. We couldn't find a single inch of space to sit. Every corner was scarred by destruction, and every window testified to a long, brutal silence—the silence of rubble and speechlessness of a life brought to a halt.

"Gently, as if afraid to wake the sorrow slumbering on the furniture, I took a piece of cloth and wiped the chairs lightly, careful not to stir the dust or shatter the silence overshadowing the place. I touched the table and felt the splintered wood amid the smell of smoke and ash that permeated everything. All was shattered, yet every object still insisted on being our home. I looked at the tangled curtains, the scars of shelling on the walls, the cracked tiles, and every corner carrying our torn memories. I sat on a crooked chair, closed my eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and aimed to trace back some semblance of life into the place."

"We sat there speechless, without eating or moving—simply being, trying to grasp life. My wife asked, 'What do we do with all this dust?' I smiled and said quietly, 'We will catch our breath… then clean the children's beds and let them sleep on them.' Every word I uttered felt like casting a spell on the place, an attempt to breathe new life into the house, despite the havoc."

"We moved between the rooms, brushing away dust, trying to find a way to make the place familiar. Everything was wrecked, but our own sounds—our muffled laughter and slow movements—created a small pocket of life among the ruins. We lifted clothes from the tables, adjusted chairs, and mopped the floors ever so gently, as if we were rearranging the moments of our lives."

"I do not know how we slept that night with our faces and bodies covered in so much dust. But it was our happiest night since we had left the house. For the first time in two years, we felt safe. No barking dogs, no buzzes of drones, no trembling. The house, with all its dust and brokenness, returned to us and quietly embraced us after our long absence. It carried what remained of our lives and memories, patiently enduring with us in the fragile remains of tomorrow."

"But like everything beautiful, the truce ended. The war returned, harsher than ever, with prevailing hunger, deprivation, and disappearance of food, especially flour. The Israeli army immediately ordered us to head to the south, threatening to destroy the entire city, and in fact began doing so. People fled like a torrent, each striving to save their family. I arranged a truck to take us south, and we returned to the same tent, the same torment, the same merciless repletion of days."

"We tried to check on our home every day. Friends said the building was still standing, but the news was heartbreaking: Al-Tawam, al-Jalaa, al-Amn al-'Aam, al-Karama… every surrounding area destroyed. When the army retreated slightly, I begged a relative to go and see the house. He told me that the building was badly hit, some walls were damaged, but that our apartment was still habitable. He sent photos, which got me thinking: 'As long as the roof is still there, we will restore it better than before.'

"Before the month ended, Trump announced the end of the war and that people could return home. We couldn't believe it, but we clung to hope. Before returning, given the scarcity of all products, I made sure to buy three buckets of paint I found in Nuseirat to repaint the apartment, and got into the truck with my wife, children, and simple belongings."

"But once we entered Gaza, we could not imagine the scale of destruction, especially at Tal al-Hawa. The truck barely pushed through the rubble. We passed al-Nasr Street, previously known as the "Italian" area, the devastation there was beyond comprehension. Still, despite the wreckage and desolation, my wife kept talking about what she wanted to fix in the house: the leaky faucet, the paint colors she changed her mind about dozens of times; she discussed every small detail with the children. They laughed endlessly – it was such spontaneous and pure laughter that I had not seen in two years."

"I quietly watched the joy on their faces and heard their laughter filling the truck. I felt something inside me melt for a moment. Despite the destruction and suffering engulfing everything, and in spite of the rubble and silence devouring what remained, these laughs created a tiny, brief, yet real space of life inside me.

"When we reached our neighborhood, I didn't recognize it. I tried to convince myself that we must have been lost, but upon looking closely, I saw remnants of the curtains hanging from our apartment walls, and scattered pieces of wood from my children's beds."

"Our building—which we had dreamed of and designed brick by brick—was now a pile of concrete."

"My wife and I stood there, speechless and stunned, staring at a sea of rubble before us, as if Gaza had turned into a desert, not of golden sand, but of gray ash. I did not dare approach the house or touch anything. I just stood there, startled, unable to move or speak. It felt like everything around me had stopped, as if time itself had shattered above the rubble."

"'What should we do?' the truck driver asked me.
"I answered him quietly, as if the words were coming from someone else, 'Go to Abu Iskandar's house… the family home. We can stay in the room upstairs… until… until we die and find peace."

"He steered the truck through the rubble, the wheels stumbling over stones and a broken bathtub, climbing up between collapsed buildings until we reached the family house. It was still standing, by chance, surrounded by pyramids of debris. The entire city seemed to have transformed into a graveyard of stones and ashes. We went up to the roof and sat there watching the horizon. Every corner of the city

has been telling stories of ruin and loss. The streets were deserted, and the volume of collapse was so severe that shattered houses nearly touched. The sky stretched above us—gray and heavy, and we inhaled its smoke and dust."

"Sitting there, I realized the starting point we had returned to was not what we had dreamed of. We were actually below point zero, in a land filled with shattered memories and devastation. Everything was lost and broken, yet it all still carried the echo of our existence. I remembered my life before all this. I was a young man at the age of 22 when I started building the house and shaping a small dream that would hold my family. Today, I am 40 years old, with my wife and three children in my arms. But the house we knew is now no more than an image in memory, as the wrecked city around us is the only reality."

"Yet one thing remains: we are alive. Our children are with us. My wife, who suffered through every hardship with me, is still by my side, steadfast against devastation, resilient in the face of death surrounding us on every side."

"We sat on the rooftop, gazing at the ruined city and the gray sky stretching above us. Despite the debris and rubble, we felt that life was still there. The city cried out in desolation, but hope, although faint, was persistent. It still pulsed within us, reminding us that the journey continues, and that our duty, no matter how difficult the days, is to live, to protect those we love, and to rebuild what remains, piece by piece, even if everything around us had fallen apart."

Editorial note

The usage of the word ‘martyr’ in Western discourse usually refers to someone who dies for their religious, fundamentalist, beliefs, in common understanding with the Christian tradition or religious extremism. However, in the Arabic language and Palestinian context, the word (shahid, meaning ‘witness’) is much broader and refers to anyone who dies violently in the context of struggle or oppression, including civilians killed in conflict, as a way of honouring their sacrifice. Therefore, when Palestinians use the word ‘martyr’, it isn’t inherently about religious fundamentalism but about recognising loss and resistance; a nuance often lost in Western interpretations.