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أدبية ثقافية

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## Forward

**Dalia Taha**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

As the corona pandemic and lockdown began, the city emptied for the first time. Shops and cafes closed, work stopped, schools were abandoned and people and cars disappeared from the streets. The city was liberated from us human beings, but another force flowed into our place. We could feel it as plants unfurled, light swept over garden paths and grass sprouted from the sides of the road. Every day, I walked back and forth along the main street of At-Tire. Sometimes I walked to the Al-Huda gas station, which overlooks far hills and spacious sky, and would come to a halt, caught by the wind blowing through the trees. Each time the wind stirred, leaves whispered something to me. At home, we watched the news of the virus outbreak with horror. We bought masks and sterilisers. Every day we checked the corona global website for the mounting number of deaths in the United States and Italy. We read articles about failures to warn the public of the danger ahead, about failures that allowed the virus to spread. We felt angry at the occupation, which did not stop crushing us, even for a moment, in such dark times. We waited for the Pandemic Committee's daily evening brief. We listened, knowing that everyone in Palestine was listening at the same time. It was the beginning of spring and the world was blossoming with verdant colour. We felt that something unfamiliar was knocking at our door—Something we knew so little about.

This moment has come with much pain. The pandemic has revealed the failure of political machineries and health systems that put the economy before human lives. It has exposed the brutality of these systems and the cruelty of this world. It has reminded us of how the marginal, vulnerable and poor are sacrificed to protect the rich and powerful. It has thereby reposed questions brewing for decades and reminded us of struggles long held in abeyance. Where shall we begin? In asking this question, many concerns press on us and we should take this to heart. We should understand that there is no longer one emergency. Rather, all issues are urgent, holding all lives in the balance at the same time.

So, when I invited friends and writers to participate in this issue of 28 Magazine, I was myself unsure of what I was asking for. If it is impossible to write about one issue without losing sight of another, how can we answer the question, “where shall we begin?” This is why my invitation was open ended—because I am asking the contributors not only where to start, but also how. Can the writing show us a way?

The contributors answer this question in their own way. They affirm the necessity to write and, as such, the necessity of writing. To write is to look into the emergency and to understand how it is not necessarily what we think it is.

There is a certain magic to this world that we will never see unless we acknowledge that it is vast and mysterious. The world is ever revealing itself to us. We tend to forget this amid the preoccupations of our daily lives; worries about work and children, responsibilities towards family, friends and our city. However, just as we search for ways to live on this Earth—to farm and build and invent—we also seek to make sense of life philosophically or poetically. Why do we love and hate? What do we need in friendship? Why are we touched by hills?

The stories told in this issue of 28 Magazine come from this space of wonder. They emerge from a world that is for a moment what it is: an enigma. To recognise the world as an enigma, as something that has yet to be revealed, is an imperative all at once poetic and political. We can't hope for anything without recognising the world as a place still capable of enchanting us. Hope, in its political and revolutionary sense, is alive in a world still becoming, a world that dreams of a better version of itself. This world needs imagination, the imagination of dreamers who believe they can change the world. Without their dreaming, nothing can happen. We would have neither love nor art nor novels.

We cannot deny that we thought we'd see a glimpse of hope for the world at the beginning of the pandemic. For a brief moment, we felt hope that a better world could follow the crisis, a radically different world. This hope dimmed once it was confirmed to us that the ruling system has only grown more vicious during the pandemic. But perhaps it was good to take stock of the state of affairs, if it also reopened the question of what the future might hold, allowing us to believe again. The immediate form of this hope was emergence of new social and political movements in the world, such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.



If hope always had a place in this world, then writing must be physics of this hope. Through writing, we move with hope in its various guises; sometimes bright, other times fleeting and at times shattered. The stories in this issue of 28 Magazine remind us that we cannot re-envision the world without reconsidering the way we imagine, live, love and make friends. They remind us that we can choose to live as machines or as human beings who breathe, love, suffer, crave and dream of escaping. And they express an inescapable truth: that to really love in the full poetic sense of the term—that overtakes the narrow emotional connotation of the word—is one of the most radical acts possible in this strange world.

We all feel the burden to write from places being erased, often in the most literal sense of the word. But how do we write in the face of death? How do we write in the face of murder, erasure and displacement? How do we write in the face of a global pandemic? It is a difficult and painful time for writing. As Palestinians, we know that amidst a major crisis, we shy from talking about minor emergencies; and in the face of great pain, we do not know how to tend to small wounds. Perhaps literature reminds us that life happens in all its details, whether we see these details as being of political import or as banal and happenstance—whether we are weathering a murderous war or complaining about the lack of parking spots. The real gift of literature is that it is the gateway to other worlds. Not because what happens in stories happens elsewhere, but because these other worlds are the inner realms of the stories' characters and the perspectives from which they see and describe the world. Writing speaks not of another place, but of an other, and tells us this other is also us.

So, whereas the world always seems hemmed in by prohibitions, judgments and iron-clad identities, this world also flows and moves on, indifferent to us all. Sometimes,

we need to move in the opposite direction of the flow to say something new. We can do this by tending to the details of an inner world. Is not the gift of literature in such details? Is there a gift more beautiful than this? These stories in this magazine are passages to the inner worlds of other selves, entered through wondrous moments. Each text emerges from an isolation inside isolation. It is an isolation that is capacious, forward-looking and ever inviting, whispering to us, “Come wander; come try to be someone else.”



# The Starting Point

**Yazid Anani**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

I was not fond of my balcony that overlooks the valley of Tarfidia, or the valley of the land of loyalty. However, the view had always fascinated many of my visitors. In Beitunia, on the opposite mountain, there are buildings that people say look like sardine cans or matchboxes. I do not care much about these analogies because I think my apartment building is very similar to the matchbox buildings. The only difference is that my building is in the ‘posh’ neighbourhood of al-Tireh. Those attached to the ‘poshness’ of the neighbourhood are reluctant to criticise its buildings and other things. The magic of Beitunia buildings can only be seen at night. The black plastic water tanks on the roofs disappear and the array of black, infinite window holes turn into a spectrum of white, yellow and orange, shimmering like the lights of Tel Aviv on the coast—whose ‘beauty’ one can enjoy from my balcony, too. My balcony was my only contact with the outside world during the coronavirus pandemic. I kept the large shutters open, which was unusual for me. From there, I witnessed the quick passing of spring in the valley, with its fragrance and colours of green and yellow. And I have grown weary of the sunset behind the orange Mediterranean skyline, regardless of the colours and shapes.

During quarantine and while working from home through digital communication software, the question that always haunted us in the organisation was what we should do if the global disease and quarantine continued into next year. How are we to address the current context of the

corona pandemic and integrate it into our programs and work in the coming years? These questions stemmed from our realisation that the pandemic would leave deep social scars and alienation from what was intimate and familiar to us. We realised its inevitable impact on our future. However, unlike the history of epidemics in Palestine, this pandemic coincided with Israel's plan to annex the West Bank and move forward with the normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab countries. It also coincided with the deepening economic crisis, especially the decline in international aid and support to Palestine and the failure of the Palestinian political project.

Like everyone quarantined this year, I was curious about how my friends around the world dealt with the new system and how different countries adapted their systems of control, militarisation, health, social welfare, etc., under this health emergency. Through several Zoom sessions, conversations and discussions, I realised the eternal contradiction between the countries of the South and in Europe in terms of how they define 'crisis', how they link it to the corona pandemic and how they deal with it through the cultural field.

The more I listened to cultural workers from Europe and the United States, the more I became aware of the decline of western countries' awareness of the crisis in the rest of the world. The corona pandemic added another layer to aggravating long-term political and economic crises in the contemporary history of people of the South in general. A crisis is not new to the people of the South. For example, the massive explosion of the ammonia nitrate shipment that ripped through the Beirut port on the 4th added to the ongoing corona crisis. It also added to Lebanon's political and sectarian corruption and the outdated patriarchy of the ruling party, thus deepening the economic crisis.

As in Palestine, the current Israeli annexation plan is another link in the long chain of continuous colonial oppression of the Palestinians that have caused a fragile donor-dependent economy. Palestinian society has been divided into geographical Bantustans with no political vision nor horizon. Moreover, the outdated patriarchal political fractions are further entrenched. Fundamentalism and tribalism as a way of life increasingly dominate, and consumerism and neoliberal individualism prevail.

I have been reading coronavirus literature since the beginning of the pandemic. Several thinkers, artists and academics have developed perceptions and speculations about the role artistic and cultural institutions play in light of the current global crisis.

Whether the pandemic is natural or fabricated, some people have dealt with it from a perspective that sheds light on the unequal distribution of power and the monopoly of the state over the political decision in isolation from the people. This perspective emphasises the hegemony and tyranny of the state and investment companies on the one hand and the countermovement and demands for social justice and democracy on the other. Many post-structuralists have anticipated scenarios of more divided societies, whereby states fortify their borders to protect themselves. They also foresee an increase in the state's systematic internal violence using new, smart methods to undermine and silence the countermovement.

Others looked at scenarios closer to science fiction and George Orwell's novels. They predicted a future behind screens in gated societies where the corona pandemic would liberate humanity from its biological shell, transforming human life into digital life par excellence.

Another group examines the pandemic crisis using the concept of the Anthropocene epoch and humanity's significant influence on the Earth's geology and

ecosystems. They see capitalism as a project that attacks human biology and body, the air we breathe into our lungs and the food that nourishes our bodies.

Meanwhile, others called for an escape from the vicious circle of the cultural economy inhabited by a dependent funding relationship between donors, whether they be countries or other parties, and between cultural institutions, artists or cultural actors through institutional programs. It has imposed agendas that frame cultural work, entrench dependencies and accustom artists to the inability to work outside this systematic relationship.

Hence, this project came to life. A group of young writers from different Palestinian backgrounds narrates the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives while exploring their future and the unknown future of humanity, from each writer's perspective.



## **My Dear**

**Ala Qaraman**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

I can hear the sounds of birds—not seagulls, little birds whose twittering is drowned by the cries of the vendors and stomping feet of many passers-by. I can even see them, it has been such a long time since I have seen birds like ours and since I had heard warbling instead of a seagull's cries. I pause a little; I can feel a breeze while I adjust my mask and rub my hands with sanitiser and watch the never-ending Bosphorus. I sit next to the river, lost in time while watching schools of fish, groups of jellyfish, empty containers and fishermen. When I was bored, I walked around aimlessly, freely—or boarded the ferry and crossed the distance between two continents, each time conquering all borders and checkpoints and crossings. I didn't tell you before that I wouldn't do anything without exaggerating, giving it a Palestinian feeling. In Palestine, there is no place for ordinary walking; for example, in the ghetto where we live, each walk expresses a certain identity, whether we are walking in a mountain, or to go to pick olives or even between two cities. Over there, the only thing I knew about myself was that I am Palestinian and that we are Palestinians. The occupation allows us to move within only one framework: that of the victim. The Israeli occupation smashes our reality into smithereens and imposes thousands of procedures related to it. So, we grant ourselves our supremely Palestinian narrative without which we feel lost and faded.

When I left Palestine, you were still not part of the picture. Isn't it very strange that I reduced 30 years of being in

Palestine into only two suitcases? My mother, father and sister cried, but the cats didn't pay any attention. While we were driving the car from Nablus to Jericho, I felt a slight tingling, as if I were on a high swing and falling to the ground. Since early morning, I waited at the border crossing with my passport and exit permit stamped, I paid many taxis, I sat on the bus and waited, then got off. I always avoid getting off the bus first in Israeli areas because I feel that if I make a mistake—like stopping, walking too slowly or too quickly—I might end up dead. So, I let others lead my footsteps and avoid touching the plastic strips. It was not yet the time of corona but I still felt disgusted. I glide lightly between them. The soldier points his gun at me and I look at his weapon—at its cold, black nozzle. I follow orders and count. This has always been my secret trick—counting.

I count my breaths because taking many gasps mean that I am attacking the oxygen here and the oxygen isn't mine. I follow the people and then stand in the middle of a space, finally ending my hesitation because a soldier is staring at me. I present my papers, laissez passe and permit, and ponder whether to say "good morning" and "god give you strength" or just "good morning" and whether to smile. I present my papers and say, "Here are my papers," and stand there. I can't really see what is happening behind the glass screen. The female soldier sitting there hands me my papers. I follow the line and have my documents stamped once more, hearing the sound of metal bullets—three bullets and I escape death. I am almost free; on the plane, I close my eyes and don't look behind me.

No one knows me in Istanbul; no familiar faces see me and I don't have familiar faces to look back at. Not even the language is familiar. A feeling of loss gradually seeps into my heart. Strangers ask about my identity and it catches up to me; then I am only the daughter of a stolen land.



Israel has oppressed me and I have wronged it and we have changed places. Or which one of us is the victim, who has stolen whom? Did they steal my place, or did I steal theirs? To which land do I belong? The one whose birth certificate I carry, or the one whose passport I hold? Or the third whose identity I was given? All eyes can see me but all they can conceive is a story—a story with multiple versions and different branches and I do not own any of it. I have no heroic story to protect me from defeat or from my unsettled reality and I cannot escape from the fact that I am Palestinian. I wanted, when I came to this never-ending city, to wake up, to drink coffee, to listen to music and to decide that I no longer wanted to stay here and to pack my bags and leave to another place. Somewhere where the fact that I am Palestinian cannot affect me. But I have been stuck in Istanbul for six months now, unable to move neither forwards nor backwards—I was holding a temporary passport, my residency permit is over and my application for renewal was refused. I am currently an illegal resident waiting for a visa to enter Europe and I have one dream: to reach you.

I am plagued by fear and I change it like I change my few shirts. I left half of it at home and carried the other half here with me. My face is not mine anymore. I wake up at three in the morning and open my eyes in fear. I close the door and windows again and watch the cat's light breathing while I console myself with reality: I am here, outside the place. At nine in the morning, I carry my bags and coffee book and wear another face, but I am afraid that because of it I will suffer from loneliness, that the vehicles will fill up with water, from my heart, from others around me and from the Other. Even though I have perfected this very well, I am afraid of the trains when they go underwater and of being unable to perfect reading the maps in the summer. I rent a car and carry what is left of

me, wandering the streets for hours outside the city—no one stops me when another car turns near me or when I end up in a wrong street or when I travel up a mountain or when I decide not to go along a road or when I draw the map of my own character. It is not full of darkness, but I am afraid of the sound made by an army helicopter or when I take a wrong turn, so how am I going to heal myself from this fear to reach you?

I realise that there is no way to get to you—I dream of holding your hand all the time while crossing the distance separating two continents and of laughing together. I want to take you home with me and dream of the scenario of our love—we met five years ago and ended up engaged. Our grandmothers would say, “those who are unlucky end up together!” as you are unable to visit my home and it is most likely that I am unable to visit yours. And when we are finally able to bring children into this world, they will inherit their mother’s strange nationality and maybe even her passport and from you, your heavily loaded memory, your sarcastic laugh and your height. They will never know what a home is, neither mine nor yours, and the question wells up in my heart: Where is our home? And how can I take you there?

I spread in front of you all the identities that have given me freedom—those that you don’t possess and all the long letters in which I explain to the Europeans my claimed Palestinianism. However, the occupation has not done what the Syrian government’s henchmen have, you say to me, and this is the only irony that enrages me. This is not an apology, justification, cancellation or even a historical mention concerning the higher rate of suffering. I barely escaped death there, but the occupation doesn’t want my death, but instead keeps searching for methods to suppress and obliterate me and erase my simple human capabilities, such as taking you home with me.

**My dear,**

**I know that you will laugh now at my childlike complaints about the world and that you will spread in front of me all the identities you own, your expired passport, your torn identity card, your valid residency permit, your application for Turkish nationality, a map of immigration—a very detailed and illegal map. My heavy Palestinian presence seems like a pigeon that a magician conjured from his sleeve and left to its own devices to fly in the theatre. So, I am embarrassed to invite you home. I now take refuge in my memory as it constitutes my only identity, as you take refuge in your memory. However, I feel like revolting against all that I have written above, and want to exercise Palestinian self-centredness. This self-absorption allows me to inform you of moments that are merely repetitions of perilous times related to my personal tragedy. I cannot escape, as my Palestinian identity has stuck to me, no matter how much my papers deny it. It represents the face through which I see the world.**

**I stand in my/your dream, in the middle of a road that sometimes seems familiar and at others unfamiliar. The cold nozzle of the gun is very smooth; I feel as if I cannot breathe and that I am drowning. In the street, we stand facing each other, you and I, passing through this world. I extend my hand towards you, but we are mere passers-by heading to an impossibly faraway chamber.**



# I laugh because I don't know what else to do

**Hamza Hasan**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

A Palestinian friend was sitting next to me and said: “Did you hear the news about the explosion at the Beirut port? It was colossal.” I was not interested in the word ‘explosion’ or the adjective describing it, but the word ‘Beirut’ felt closer to me. I logged onto the internet to search for news about Beirut and Lebanon. There were a number of news items with “Beirut” and “enormous explosion” in the title. Something stirred inside me, maybe an old explosion in the Gaza Strip caused resounding sympathy for Beirut; I felt that there was something fishy about this disaster. It was not the time for any more tragic events as we are facing a cunning virus that is colourless and faceless and has placed all our lives in doubt. “Will we still be here tomorrow?” “Am I alright?” The questions increase day after day and the worry grows like germs. It is not safe outside and it’s like a ticking time bomb inside. The world is waiting for the moment when all this will crumble around us, but we know that our future will be worse. However, even ‘the worse’ doesn’t want all this to happen. I left Gaza—or more appropriately I should use ‘survived leaving’, because it was not at all easy. We had to pay a sum higher than \$1,000 to pass through the Rafah crossing into Egypt. Then we had to think about what we would do afterwards. I don’t know who gets all this money. I paid the sum to the owner of the travel agency so that my name would be placed on the travellers’ list without too

much effort or suffering, and despite that, I was stranded for over 30 hours in the Egyptian hall to have my passport stamped so that I could to enter Egypt. This is life's comedy! I escaped annual wars because I am ill equipped and cannot fight planes, tanks and loud sounds—my body cannot bear it. This body sleeps sweaty because electricity has abandoned our city and it wakes up thirsty. There is no work or any desire to continue, no life. Our bodies sleep and wake up as if that is their only function. Then came the idea of escape to survive in a better place—a place that respects the human body and its needs, such as electricity, water, work and dignity.

It is not easy for a person who has left Gaza after those long and tedious battles, so that their body can rest, to ignore words like 'explosion, victims, wounded, injuries, the dead, martyrs, a massacre, an aggression, shooting, fire, horror, missile, illness, war, darkness, displacement, dead bodies, hunger, poverty, rubble or the dead' or hear them with unstirred emotion! They are still not used to forgetting such words as they are immersed in meaning in their daily lives. Movement to them seems horrifying; so do loud sounds or enclosed spaces, as they remind them of the past. The world in itself seems horrific and all we can do is to get used to the fear.

Fear of what? Fear of the repetition of an experience even when not part of the cause. For example, the terrible scenes from Beirut revived within me the war scenes, sounds and rapid movements that I experienced in my life

and especially during the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip. I still suffer from these experiences to date. I call this a repetition of bitter moments. My sadness and fear was not connected to Lebanon: the fear was of the things that awakened within us. Fear controls the world—it is the solution and the problem, like wood and fire.

Today, after almost two-and-a-half years of trying to survive outside Gaza, I was stranded in Cairo. By coincidence or through necessity, I became another stranger in a city full of strangers. I was searching there for the usefulness of my life, which was resembling that of a lazy rabbit. I presented my papers several times for permission to leave, but there is an incomprehensible bureaucracy and any small mistake in the papers can keep you stuck in the same place forever. After a third attempt in which I was successful in obtaining a tourist visa, just before reaching the 'gate of salvation', the Coronavirus appeared and my plane ticket was transformed into a thing without value. In reality, we all lost our value and became like rusty wheels; we have nothing to offer and nothing to receive. Only harmful insects are running wild everywhere and now power was transferred to the dust. Even one touch has become lethal, even a wrong breath has become lethal—a kiss, a cigarette, matchsticks, air particles, strangers, the surfaces of desks, everything around you has been transformed and inanimate objects are ready to steal the minutes of your life.

After deciding to remain in Cairo until luck came once more to knock at my temporary door, I started to leave the house only once or twice a week. I wore a medical mask and went out to buy bread, water and some other food items to survive during this quarantine far away from the clamour of viruses and diseases lurking in the stones on the streets. After I bought everything, I would hurry back

home and wash my hands according to the international ministry of health's instructions, but I was not used to doing this before the Corona pandemic; then I would fall back into a state of boredom once more. Actually, I am one of those people who prefers to stay in my room for as long as possible. I do not like to go out unless I am obliged to or need to, so I was used to the idea of quarantine. I called it "running away from miserable faces." However, people don't like to follow orders imposed on them, so I started looking for any excuse to go out. This is human nature, we like to do things of our own accord, otherwise there is no real purpose for our existence and individuality. Therefore, we start wanting to compete with the virus imposing an unwanted boredom and the duties we don't want to perform.

What can we do? Adaptation, here, could be desirable, but adaptation to what? Wearing a medical mask and spraying alcohol every few seconds while praying that your cough is not due to the virus playing cards inside your lungs?

The idea became undesirable after a time; all thoughts change in a single moment or they disappear.

Everyone now has something to be envied for, such as owning the sensitivity to absorb all that is happening, as not everyone can take the amount of bad news that we hear about on TV or through the internet. To own a piece of bread, a glass of water and have a ray of light is a great mercy, since many do not have them during this pandemic. Just consider the situation in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and other places, especially those categorised as being below the poverty line. What can we expect from them while they are facing a virus that does away with everything? One can expect nothing! I think of Gaza, which has felt the brunt of the virus. Gaza has suffered from diseases, wars, poverty, hunger, lack of electricity

and water, unemployment and unfair treatment by the Arab and international communities: I think the virus will obliterate it without doubt.

What I want to say is that I am used to suffering and complications: as far as I am concerned, they have become laughable. I laugh because I don't know what else to do, everything has become comedic. To become free from a prison to enter a wider prison—that does not mean Cairo is a prison—but places you enter and then can't leave become a prison in the philosophical and scientific sense.

What are our houses, then? I think our houses mean that you can be clear-minded while living your last moments in a world that seems bored of its duty in the universe, and to find one address where you can register an appropriate residence. We who have no real or clear addresses, we are the children of erroneous times and spaces.





# End of the World Scenarios

**Raed Wahesh**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

Right after the explosion at Beirut's port, we saw images of people running in panic, as if it were the Day of Judgement. Their horrified faces hid behind masks.

Those people running perhaps soon realised, and so did we, that wearing masks in a dying city is merely surrealistic.

Maybe it is not so. Whoever survived an explosion minutes ago needs their dusty mask to survive, too. They need a dusty mask, like the dusty humans, objects and city, to endure another death. A death they know is better than the one that suddenly came out of the blue.

Maybe it is neither this nor that. The people running in the streets of wounded Beirut did not feel the masks on their faces in the first place. Something still undefined, which we call "normal," is what made them wear the masks and run. They did not think about it, as if they had put on their shoes.

The scene of Beirut ripped apart sums up all that we think of horror. Beirut has always made us feel that it is the only Arab city for everyone; a capital for everybody. We naturally found in it all that we imagined freedom to be. Perhaps Beirut invited and allowed the chance for that to happen, unlike elsewhere. Therefore, everyone in the East feels that they have a share in it and they have an appointment with it. In the collective imagination, Beirut is close to what city and civilisation mean. All of this makes us, together and with one another, desperately and submissively say: Everything is over.

The scene of Beirut after the blast is apocalyptic. It is not the apocalypse of our dreams about freedom, cities, and life, nor of the Arab region that only promises its people disasters and catastrophe. However, it is the apocalypse of the world. It is true. The image of Beirut at the height of the pandemic, while there are still suppressed revolutions in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon, at the height of economic deterioration is an end-of-the-world one. I cannot think of a better metaphor than the apocalyptic cloud that intensifies the horrors that we have known in one second to make out the most terrible forms of endings that the mind can imagine. Not only horrors in terms of destruction, ugliness and cruelty, but in terms of feeling that humans are the contributor. The feeling of powerlessness, weakness and marginalisation that a human has felt all their life will give them a great deal of guilt. They remained silent, distanced and waiting, or tried not to be silent and wait, but failed before themselves and others.

It is an atrocious ending that whoever witnesses will consider a crime they committed themselves.

The coronavirus pandemic started in China and had a major impact in Italy, Brazil and other countries. However, it did not ring the death knell with such cruelty anywhere except in Beirut.

Since the beginning of Covid-19, everybody has said that we are entering an era of pandemics. They said that other viruses will choose dates and places to emerge. This means that, in general, people are talking about the beginning of the end, but not the end itself. Beirut, however, had something else to say, a final word. We, the children of the East, have mastered dealing with catastrophes. We can read it in the apocalyptic clouds, the fragments of houses, the scattered pieces of glass, smoke, dust, blood, screams and the astonished eyes of those who suddenly found

themselves in hell. We can read and understand all the indications. The destruction will only lead to destruction and pain will only bubble up to burst into a huge blast.

Beirut said: Tyranny is a curse, sectarianism is a curse and corruption is a curse.

Beirut also said: Either kick out or burn those who are doing all these things.

Beirut knows, however, like we all do, that this is not at all easy. When these people sense that they are about to be expelled, or see the early signs, they will start the fire.

The fire at the end, the fire is the end.

Their stay is a fire and so is their departure. This is exactly what has been declared in Syria since 2011: “Assad or we burn the country.” It is also what is happening in and to Iraq since the waves of protests began in 2015. These protests turned into a revolution in late 2019 that soon got washed up.

So, it is fire. The fire, the end, nothing else. This is what they say in and across the land of the East. This is also what we hear day and night by those who claim to put the fires out. Everyone knows that fires have always been there, ready for the zero hour.

Hence, we are certain that we are facing an end-time scenario. To make room for a beginning of any kind and to suggest a different path, there is no solution except for destruction, nor any purification except for death.

It is an end, unlike religious endings that are open to new beginnings or final salvation. It is an end that involves absolute devastation and destruction.

However, it is an end that looks like our fears. It relates to the tales of the religious and the concerns of the secular. It matches scientists’ prophecies of what is yet to come and digs out of their deepest anxiety what they do not understand. It is the end that unites all these adversaries,

whom each thought possessed a scenario of the perfect truth.

The Day of Judgement scenario is visible in this part of the world as tyranny is as rude as the inebriated. Tyranny speaks from the bottom of its heart without fear. The same also dwell in the parts of our unhappy world that are said to be democratic. They are, however, doing the same thing there as our tyrants here, their thieves, merchants, sheiks and trumpets without giving our foolish speech. Perhaps the most obvious example of their tyranny is the clean images of the planet shared during the lockdown. The planet seemed as pure and clear as the lung of a person who had quit smoking for years. It appeared beautiful that every one of us felt obliged to fight to defend it. The serenity and beauty are results of factories that stopped working. Those who start the end fires stopped working. However, that did not last long. They have risen again to put the major countries at a crossroads: life or the economy. life or the economy: It is perhaps the worst trade-off in the history of civilisations. What is worse than presenting these two choices is choosing the one that favours the interest of a group of people at the expense of a planet's right to live, and at the expense of people who have the right to protect themselves from the pandemic until it goes away.

The lockdown ended. Factories went back to spewing their venom. The policies of neoliberalism resumed devouring the world's resources, forcing its citizens into poverty. We shall never forget that they demanded compensation from the state on the pretext that their losses have exceeded the limits. Also, they pushed to return to their industries and policies that led the world to be an ideal place for epidemics and a space for oppression and injustice.

We are well aware that the world is confidently moving towards the end. Perhaps, since the beginning of human consciousness, the world has been on the verge of shutting

down. Humanity found itself facing the idea of the end which it sometimes saw the night, and at other times the winter and the death of viridity and warmth. Just as there is a day after every night, and spring after every winter, so there is a life behind every death.

The first human myths about life and death were born in this context. These myths made considerable progress with the story of the death and resurrection of God. They sum up the history of human attempts to solve or understand impermanence in Eastern culture. However, as the general question about human fate persists, religions had to present their credentials through the idea of a redemptive resurrection that carries us from one place to another. They, consequently, had put an end to the fear of death by describing it as inevitable and turning it into a mere journey.

Science, too, is busy talking about the end. It includes scary scenarios that major countries refuse to face or take moral responsibility. Science coming through means that the religious fiction about the end of the world has not been fulfilled. It can, however, come back with a different end that is more explicit, identifiable and recognisable, and can be accurately understood through data and numbers. Science says we only have 15 years to save the world. We can catch up if we change our behaviour and the way we live. It is the last opportunity as there is no turning back. The temperature of the planet will rise. This will eventually cause the ice at the poles to melt. Thus, ocean water will rise and drown islands and countries. The world will become two contrasting parts like night and day, snow and fire, a hot and dry desert in the south and a cold wetland in the north.

We have only 15 years in our hands now. We can use it to make our planet live longer and offer the next generations a place worthy of life or leave everything as it is and dig our own grave.

Fifteen years require us to make significant changes in our industries, economy and daily life. This includes food, drinks, transportation and work. The pollution caused by gas and oil especially in transportation and industry, cutting down rainforests to secure areas for raising animals and excessive use of agricultural fertilizers to secure animal food for the meat industry, burning forests on purpose to assume control over those areas and the emissions that emanate from various household appliances we use all increase the risk of global warming.

We can now see this clearly and explicitly. Sweeping endings are ready or almost ready. They need some time to play the role assigned to them. On a similar note, there are also small endings. These endings occur within our own lives under the influence of bigger ones. They are sometimes triggered by an internal motive that has nothing to do with the outside world. The difference between the two is that the major ones occur once, in a completely destructive, apocalyptic manner, while the minor ones strike over and over again. The minor endings repeat themselves tirelessly, taking on destructive aspects at times, and forms of despair, frustration or alienation at other times.

Shelter-in-place revealed the root of corruption in the contemporary human self. One's home is the physical manifestation of their individual identity. It is also the first intangible space for it. Rejection of or complaining about staying at home it is a result of forcing people to sit with themselves, which they found to be imperfect. In this sense, rejecting or complaining about staying at home

was only a search for an escape from the self confronting its imperfections.

It also seemed to be the end of modernist promises of a reasonable world and capable individuals who live on their own, for their own. It seemed as if we suddenly discovered that we live on one planet as groups, not as individuals, and that an incident in the Far East will determine the fate of hundreds of millions of people who have thought that they are far away. It seemed as if we just discovered that we are closer than ever to each other and that our fates cannot be separated, despite the slogans of dreamy individualism.

The home represents the space of self-identity. A human creates themselves independently of others in the crucial stages of their life under various influences from others. They then join society to influence and be influenced, and to excite and get excited. However, if they do not make up their mind on whatever opinions, attitudes and concerns, the outside world will only offer masks or help patch up an erosion without offering an effective solution. This is because the inside—the soul—as well as the home, is a space in which a person answers all their questions. It is the space to experience intense confrontations with one's concerns, fears and desires, and to start a conversation with the self who does not seek to discover or unravel its potential and values. Therefore, they seek in this place to recreate themselves in an image of what they want to be.

The confrontation will not be satisfied with the superficial, but continues to haunt later, albeit intermittently. After enduring this difficulty, you will find your first well-defined features, your psychological and internal expressions. Just like you are identifiable by your external expressions, you will love to be identifiable by your internal expressions. You will also bring these expressions out with other people. It is quite natural to expect another person similar to you.

This is because the confrontations you went through make you sense those who are similar. You will find yourself in circles you know suit you, and most importantly, you know why.

Interactions with others will become positive, whether it leads you to love and friendship or enmity. Each of these meanings needs a coherent, solid structure. However, at a time of consumption, falsehood and illusion, and at a time of relationships strongly shifting towards imitating things and machines, the necessary confrontations will be postponed in favour of spending time shopping or drowning oneself in video games. Accordingly, the encounter with the other will be precisely what makes the ending of the self and causes the person to fall into emptiness, time after time, endlessly. It is the worst of endings because it never ends.

During the lockdown, everyone feels the need for everyone. This need is somewhat strange. Everyone needs everyone to hide their lostness in the crowd. The crowd is a shell for self-disruption and a utilitarian postponement to face the anxiety of existence. It allows a person to return home to quickly meet themselves to talk about their simple and comfortable conviction that they are not alone—a good enough response to all existential questions.

To be alone at home with all this time offers accurate answers, from you to you. Questions about who you are, your capabilities and the values on which you base your being. Home and aloneness are the first thresholds of identity formation. After that comes joining society with a complete self with well-defined features, capable of taking and giving.

As previously mentioned, the imperfections that staying at home reveal will not be repaired from the outside. If homes export all these imperfections outside, it will create a dysfunctional society full of holes.



The small community each of us built was not the mirror that defined ourselves. Society gives us an identity; however, it is false as it is based on an individualistic view. People perceive you as the party animal, funny and charming, or the unfortunate good guy. However, corona and lockdown indicate that this is not enough. You will not be yourself unless you create a special identity in your inner space. This can only happen with introspection. As long as you need others to give you a mirror that represents what you want from this existence, you will misinterpret the meaning of that mirror and call it an identity. Look at you now locked in the house without others. You neither explore your true self nor recognise what you want.

Thereby, the lockdown represented the end of small things. First, it revealed the crisis of individual identity and the unwillingness of people to explore themselves. Second, it excluded others as a partner in our life. Instead, it distorted their role into a mere mirror of the false consumer pleasures that have become the only thing we do since major companies convinced us that their products are the missing part of our identity. This has caused us to move away from the fact that humans are one. Therefore, human experiences were isolated and the world was divided into borders of a different kind that are difficult to penetrate. These are the borders that our illusions have fabricated about each other.

The lockdown acted as a probe to test the strength or friability of emotional and marital relations. As recreational activities stopped due to closures, the rates of violence against women and children have increased. This means that many men, as they are often the perpetrator in this case, see going out as an escape from the predicament of couplehood. Their leisure is some sort of escape. When the lockdown trap caught them, they were exposed; therefore, they confronted all their life choices with violence.

**Complex crises: Lockdown for people who do not want each other and a lockdown between people who want each other.**

**The disease has opened our eyes to pain everywhere. Besides women and children, refugees live in the worst conditions and are subjected to the most heinous types of treatment. Homeless people sleep on the streets and survive on humble offerings. Workers are at risk of losing their jobs with no guarantees.**

**The disease magnified certain problems and made them visible. Although death is still the best measure of quality of life, our eyes have opened wide to the pain of injustice, even in death. It has long been said that all are equal in death. We, however, found that we are not. Death is less common among those who have money. They have access to healthcare and medicine. Besides, it is less common in countries that have equipped hospitals and health insurance for all their citizens than in countries that have failed to even build a hospital.**

**In Coronaian terms: modern times have made death hypocritical and biased.**

**The Internet helped us a lot during the lockdown. We can no longer deny that. It has played a crucial role. It also reduced the number of people in our lives.**

**Urgent questions that haunt us: What would have happened if the pandemic took place 20 years ago, for example? Would adhering to safety measures increase the chances of our survival? Will life continue while businesses and institutions are shut down? Isn't the Internet a blessing that deserves appreciation and honour? How are we going to spend this long, boring time?**

**There is no doubt that our way of life made it easier to deal with the pandemic due to the lack of physical contact. But**

perhaps this virus would not have come in the first place if our life was not like that!

The old and young came up with scenarios of the end and the Day of Judgement. We live at a time in which the logic of science matches the religious prophecies to the point that we sometimes forget the boundaries between the two. We think the scriptures came from laboratories, or we consider scholars to be priests in the temples!

Passing the narrative from the old to the young makes it more relevant. The Islamic texts describe several events happening before the major signs of the Day of Judgement. This is correct and logical, but my simple hypothesis is that the great end is a complete end, a final one without return. The small end, however, is one explosion after another. It does and does not end. It is like the human self-conditioned to seek more and strive for better. Since the dawn of time, humans were cursed with the pursuit of perfection. They made weapons, houses, cities and civilisations. Then, they created the death of everything.

All human actions are motivated at the deepest level by the desire to be the best and perfect. A person knows in their heart of hearts that they are controlled by relativism. They know that their perception of perfection is relative because of that and will remain so. However, a person without this incentive that stems from the scarceness of relativism is not human. This is the greatest tragedy. They are the creator and destroyer of everything. Or, they implant the annihilation of things into the basis of their structure. Can I say that the minor ending started there? Right at the beginning? I do not know!



# Merely Staying at Home

**Ahlam Bsharat**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

Before the movement restrictions were imposed between cities and villages due to the pandemic, I used the excuse that I was busy to cover up my desire to not stay at home. I want to make a comment here:

This is what I thought about all the time but I did not talk about it openly. However, the fact that I did not express my thoughts does not mean that I want to turn it into a subject of defence.

Defence of what, anyway?

Of staying at home, merely staying at home?

## Defence of the right of time in space

I was used to going back to my village every week when I first moved to Ramallah in 2011. After two or three years, I started going back every two weeks and during a crucial period in between, I visited daily, using public transportation. I used to wake up very early for months and stand in the middle of the village in front of Tabash Well on the main street—even during the cold winter mornings, when the loneliness stung. After I bought my own apartment, I started using the term ‘busy’. The excuse worked; I also said, “I can’t take the public transportation to go back to the village.” But this ‘busy’ state was useful in its persuasiveness. It was cutting like a scalpel, appropriate as an excuse. The word ‘useful’, even though it has a loose meaning, describes any work done by an individual for a certain establishment; one that makes

the person a slave of another, such as committing to a job. Any job anywhere as a commitment does not mean obtaining a salary for slavery. And even if a salary is paid, what is more important is guaranteeing the slavery itself, then the pay is transformed into a chain. If we think about it, the chain is not more than an accessory that completes the role of the slave and its justification. Everyone seeks to define me, like all the others; in this way it is easier to deal with me when I resemble the person speaking to me or who expects me to give a result, or an answer if one asks me or merely holds a conversation with me.

**The aim is that we become copies of those who leave their houses**

Servitude within a group indicates another acquired gain: one of fakeness. Then this indicator is connected to another word: useful. If you are busy, then you are doing something useful, which means that you are within the safety range. But for how long can the words 'safety' and 'usefulness' be used alongside 'busy'?

In my case, 'busy' could be used for one month at most. The result was affected by the virtues of the group I was dealing with as I did not live alone; and if I did live alone, I would live in isolation within a group such as a family or friends, or in a number of groups at the same time. Lonely amongst everyone, even those I do not have direct relations with. Alone with the supermarket owner just because I buy my bread and eggs from him. Alone with

the Ford minibus driver to whom I pay three shekels every time I go from downtown Ramallah to my neighbourhood. Whether I was going to take this minibus depended on the number of vehicles on the transport line, the number of times I went out of the house, the number of times I used public transportation and the number of coincidences that made me ride this particular minibus. Despite all that, this driver furnished my loneliness as he was sporadically there.

### **The reality is that there is no completely lonely person**

I was 'busy' in this way in August 2017, but the real story was that I got stuck in Lebanon due to my Palestinian passport. A young, newly employed security officer (as I presumed because of his jerky movements and flushed face) took one look at it and then looked at me as if he had found fresh prey. He was trying to prove to his masters that he was 'useful'. He caught an Israeli border crossing stamp on the cover of my passport. Of course, I did not transform into a bird and fly over the borders to land in Jordan (the eastern part of occupied Palestine) without Israeli soldiers catching me (in the same way that the employee had caught the stamp) and having stamped my passport, proving their role in reducing my loneliness.

Both of them—the employee who had found the stamp in Beirut and the soldier who had placed it on the 'Allenby' bridge—were slaves to their jobs, and since they were working for an employer, both had to do 'useful' jobs as long as they were receiving payment in return for messing around with moving my loneliness between two cities.

I had travelled for a book signing of my novel *Ginger* with the artist who created the art on the book's cover—the Lebanese painter Maya Fiddawi. Maya drew the dog *Ginger*,

the cat Kasha and Clemence in her orange dress—and her mother Um Murkus in her embroidered Palestinian dress. One day, Maya said excitedly, “Why don’t we have a book signing together here in Beirut?”

So, we signed it at the Ta Marbuta Cafe in al-Hamra Street in Beirut.

Sometimes I get involved in things due to my restlessness and love of adventure. But in reality, I like to stay home. So what has driven me out there? Outside the house?

‘Out there’ and ‘home’ are two different places, so who drove me from one place to another?

What was this force that moved me?

It was as if life had become a mere place without time and the moving force was unimportant.

**What is important is here and there—inside the house and outside the house.**

Being ‘busy’ was not related to what I had travelled to Lebanon to do. I had made up a story and told my family that I had returned to Ramallah with a hectic schedule, while I was actually in Beirut visiting the General Security offices every morning in an attempt to save my passport. Many friends and volunteers kept pushing for the passport’s return until it reached the personal desk of the General Manager, Mr. Abbas Ibrahim, at the General Directorate of Lebanese Security. My friend the Iranian poetess Miriam Haidari went with me once and my Qatari friend Hanadi came another time. Both had come to Beirut to meet me, but to no avail, as we ended up just going back and forth to the General Security offices.

The practical explanation I gave my parents was that I was busy in Ramallah preparing for an imaginary conference, which meant that while I was living one day to the next

with my hopes restricted to simply regaining my passport in Beirut, I was protected by the word 'busy' to mean doing useful and safe work in Ramallah.

Whatever made me leave my home?!

**Look at the question. I can only find one place in it.**

This means that exiting a place I know is like going into a void. The exit method is unimportant, whether downwards or upwards, whether by pushing at the sides of a place or going out by turning the key in the door and hurting it.

At this point and while looking back, I find that it was not such a big lie. I told the truth to only one of my sisters to free myself from others' worries. The subject was not related to lying as much as to the definition of an individual within their group; that is where an individual gains freedom of movement and the ability to draw their real map of movement without having to lie. A person is able to leave or stay; that is, they can determine their place on this Earth through travelling all over the world and that is the epitome of his passion?

Where can this person gain their definitions, from a person dictionary or that of their group, so that they can afterwards place definitions for the words?

The words 'benefit' and 'security', for example; then how I became the practical application of the model of voluntary servitude, even though apparently I was the practical example of the revolution against that servitude. And the word 'revenge', which carries a meaning of refusing and within which you find a temporary excuse for me to be a slave. But as soon as the idea of volunteering is involved,



all that is negated; the revolution is negated. I negated myself by my own accord.

### **So, what does art do here?**

I was pretending when I said that I was busy, but I instead went every day to the General Security offices to ask about my passport. I gave others, outside my house, the opportunity to completely confiscate my freedom, so I felt as if I were in prison, to an extent that I was blighted with disturbances in my digestive and nervous systems! And my friend, without whom I would have become homeless, along with another two friends, held on to my big toe and the one next to it to keep them in their place, as they were pulling away from my other toes. I think they would have kept pulling away without my friends' interventions and I would have become a woman with only three toes on her feet just because she left her house. Also, when I was in the lane to go back home, I felt terrible pressure on my stomach, so I placed my head in the sink and threw up in one of the hotels on the southern edge of the corniche in Beirut, in order to throw up this pretence. I wrote while sitting at the edge of the swimming pool. An old Lebanese man, who had recited poetry by Nizar Qabbani to me that he had learnt by heart, thought I was a servant that had come to swim in the pool. So, I said to him, "No I am a poet." And I read to him:

**Red seats**

**Scattered on the windows**

**Void of thoughts**

**Behind which are grey curtains**

**And helpless static curtains that cannot do anything**

**I am watching all this coloured silence from here**

**Next to the blue pool**

**And it does not awaken a desire in me to call him**

All that surrounded me outside the house, in that place, was loneliness; even the taste of the water, the food and the air was all I wanted while I dangled my feet in the pool and stared at the blue towels strewn all over the red seats I had mentioned in the poem. I felt a great void in that place—I wanted to be in the house.

I wanted to be busy in the house.

The house, once more, becomes related to being busy in a place that I know and am familiar with as it is useful and safe, and these descriptions are related to a house. If there was a salary for someone working in a house—that is, for its owner—servitude would be to oneself.

### **Being busy at home means submission to one's own servitude**

To pay the price of three words without batting an eye.

Can you see how price has a relative meaning and how every loose meaning cannot be expressed by a narrow word? Value is not imposed by the text as much as the need to use the word from the beginning.

If I had not left the house and had not travelled, all of this would not have been necessary. Why did I think of the book signing at the Ta Marbouta Cafe in Beirut? Was it not enough to write and publish it?

Is it not enough for the writer to write?

What obliges me to read other authors is my worry of not finding any more stories to write. But I can do so by merely looking at a panting dog, a blooming flower or a fluttering curtain, or hearing a doorbell ring. Why should I participate in conferences? I am a writer, not a door-to-door salesperson.

Why should I participate in facilitating the exposure of an artist and their art to slavery by going abroad to meet them?

I have questions about the manufacture of value, such as the pine trees that James and Mary saw on the sides of the road in the film *Certified Copy*. James said that each tree is not a replica of the next, so each tree is like a piece of art displayed outside. But everyone passes by them without giving them their true value; a monetary price if they were in a museum. But they are instead left outside and everyone enjoys them for free.

We can place the trees in a book, not to give them value, but to exert our authority on others by saying: They have a value.

But it is impossible to place everything in one book. James answered Mary's suggestion to place these trees in his book on art criticism in the same way: It is impossible to place loneliness in a book for it to gain value.

Loneliness has its own value by itself, even far away from those who experience it outside their homes, called the house of loneliness.

## Loneliness

The purpose of a foetus's exit from its mother's womb is to continue life. Similarly, a citizen leaves their house every day to guarantee their daily livelihood, and one travels outside the country for study or tourism. But isn't that all just extra expense? We need an effort which mostly aims not to cover up reality, but to make everything seem useful and safe. In the case of the foetus, its purpose is the continuity of the human race. In the case of the citizen and traveller, the purpose is to refresh life. But the foetus that

left its safe home to instead go to a place full of worries and fears makes one wonder whether life is worth living.

In my case, my purpose was to give my parents an excuse that I am not wasting time in my life but investing well in it. I am a lonely person who invests her time in everything useful, which emphasises my commitment to my community, and every time I go missing, I say to my family—as if defending my absence—“I am busy writing.”

### **Writing: a strange word**

What does this word do in life? How can you attach the word ‘busy’ to it? Why would anyone on Earth be busy writing? Writing what? My friends are not spared my attitude either—they only change their expressions. Being busy writing is an excuse that can be used once, twice or three times, but not forever. What is the meaning of a woman busy with writing all her life?

Is she crazy, psychologically ill or socially unsuccessful? She could be unconfident or incapable of being happy or a bad cook or dancer or cannot adapt or is not beautiful, etc.

I came back from Bethlehem after visiting Tanween Bookshop, on the 21st of January 2020, two months before the restriction of movement in Palestine, and I had a book with me as I had fallen in love with the author. The book was translated by the young Palestinian translator Amalia Daoud. It was an anthology of creative articles by Janice Waldand and others. I went there to sign my novel *The Memory Factory*, introduced by my friend, the novelist and researcher Usama al-Ayaseh. I came back with the book feeling satisfied, as if I had come back with an answer to a question that others had not put forward. I felt like passing the book to all those around me, so they could read the article on page 139 by Janice Wald, titled “Things

to Remember if You Fall in Love With an Author.” Wald gives advice about writing and discusses the beautiful world of literature while marvelling at the greatness of being married to a female author.

**Oh my God! There is someone who glorifies female authors the same way that wood appraisers glorify carpenters**

Great, amazing, equitable.

Then Wald gives his advice, hoping that it will help whoever lives next to a female author to understand her. He then ends the article by emphasising the fact that authors have the right to have those around them understand them.

I cheer along, agreeing with all of Wald’s advice.

Oh! And with tears in my eyes!

**What is this loneliness?**

Isn’t a female author crying without finding a way to explain to others the reason, loneliness?

She can find enough time to write what she was unable to explain and then stays at home. This is the loneliness that I started to experience away from the Ford minibus driver and the owner of the supermarket since the 23rd of March 2020.



## Zeit, Zaatar and Quinoa

**Abed Alrahman Shabaneh**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

After the 12th day of shelter-in-place, it has become necessary to go out again to buy some nonessential groceries. Watching the contents of the refrigerator run out gradually in calculated amounts did not bother us, nor did making a long grocery list this time.

We like making lists of whatever.

Recently, we felt brave enough to try out new international and local recipes. We finally soaked one kilo of large navy beans that had been on the shelf for more than a year. We soaked them overnight, then boiled and cooked them. My wife and I are thinking of soaking some chickpeas today. This will give us a lot of options to indulge ourselves tomorrow.

Hummus, musbaha, fattah, falafel, mujaddara with chickpeas, etc.

Before corona, we did not have the time to address the legume crisis and eat them. I did not feel that the process was worth the effort. Now, however, is the time to expand the menu. There is enough time to think and cook well. Making a compromise with the legumes and taking into account their need for soaking is interesting.

I admit I'm slow.

The breakfast table included a diverse array of foods at the beginning of the crisis. We were not too concerned as the food gradually depleted. The menu for the first 12

days consistently included zeit (oil), zaatar (thyme-based spice) and some variety of cooked or semi-cooked eggs. The second egg carton just finished the other day, the last on the list of essential items for making endless recipes.

Leaving the house is a risk we can avoid for now. There is still enough zeit and zaatar for breakfast for 10 days as long as we manage to convince our appetites of that.

I had previously tested and proved my theory of zeit and zaatar while I was a student at Birzeit University. The quality of food on the table did not matter and repeating the meals was normal. Buying the right cigarettes was way more important then.

I would like to double-check the theory and reassure myself only to brag to future generations about my proven opinion.

Zeit and zaatar are all we need to survive.

I am such an extraordinary man.

Staring at the bowls of zeit and zaatar at this very moment, I wonder about the reasons behind my chauvinist admiration. Perhaps the strength of zeit and zaatar stems from their simple local components, how deeply close I feel to the olive tree and the abundance of zaatar on top of the nearby hills. Although I'm aware my statement is naïve, I claim there is a particular truth: a Palestinian will

never starve if they rely on zeit and zaatar for legendary strength.

Legends are my last resort.

My childish self was playing with the zeit and zaatar as the unwelcome noise from the occupation's drone lingered in the background. The drone roamed the sky of Ramallah on this intense day of 2020, Palestinian Land Day.

The drone's noise is terrifying if you think about it separately. However, it sounded somehow normal against the more terrifying global pandemic; besides other, short-term priorities already occupied my mind.

I wondered:

How do these tools of conquest continue to be used—I mean, the noise of the drone—while the global pandemic is still at our doors and windows?

During this break that the virus imposed on us, everything is quiet and distant except for my thoughts about zeit and zaatar and the background noise of that drone.

What has remained from the occupation's tools except for my fear of it?

There is relative safety. I am far enough from the nearest soldier, sitting at the table, staring at my bowls of zeit and zaatar after the other dishes are now empty. Otherwise, I am not doing much these days, except sitting at this table, writing.

The longer the disengagement, the more I feel the occupation's fear of me but not my fear of it.

That damn thing could not bear to stay away from me even for a few days. It is rushing to break into what had been left of my home. It comes to me masked, scared of contracting the virus during the raid. It strips some life off me before fleeing, slowly and pathetically.



They are afraid, too.

The power relation between myself and the Israeli occupation is not limited to the direct impact of oppression that includes annihilation, exile and displacement. It is deeper and more intense. It has been entrenched for decades until it becomes compulsive and pathological, shaping both of us consciously and unconsciously.

Subjugation is the habit of the occupier and submission is the image of the ideal victim.

We were cursed to think that the world does not sympathise with the powerful. Cross-legged, we sat in the comfortable end of this dichotomy of subjugation where the Israeli occupier is the oppressor while the Palestinian is the victim.

Each fuelled the other until the equation of the unjust world settled. Each blamed the other to justify their actions and reactions. They steal the air, water and soil of the earth, and we, the complicit victim, are happy with the whining.

There is no escape from the claws of dual oppression except with a resilient economy based on growing and manufacturing. This conscious Palestinian economy shall understand the difference between essential goods and nonessential items filling up the shelves and streets. It shall have the agency to decide and assimilate the dishes on the dining table.

I stopped my revolutionary thoughts and justified anger in a moment of certainty.

I told myself:

The complex journey, or journeys, the ingredients took to get to this table in front of me exceeds my desired disengagement and liberation from the Israeli. Some Palestinians and Israelis cannot live without the quinoa

imported from South America. Yes, the quinoa that the poor harvest there.

Hence, whatever crosses my mind is mere nonsense. War is more complicated than I thought and there are others besides us in the free-world market.

Far away from the drone and close to the zeit and zaatar, I sit staring at the bowl of soaked quinoa on the kitchen shelf.

The world has nothing to do with my most important experience. I am looking for an independent meal. Is there really any?



# Invisible Play

**Khaled Hourani**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

Today is the 35th day of quarantine and the second day of curfew that has been imposed in some areas in the West Bank. We are facing an upsurge of measures due to the marked increase in the number of Coronavirus cases in order to stop the disease from spreading on a wider scale. This is what the Ministry of Health and official parties are saying, but things are under control, whereas the emergency committee appointed to combat the pandemic says that if necessary, it will take even more measures according to its following of the disease's path on the epidemiological map.

Despite the danger, I went out in the evening for a short walk in my neighbourhood. There was complete silence and tranquillity. Everyone was committedly staying indoors, the streets were empty and there were no passers-by; I was alone in Abu 'Ala' al-Ma'arri Street. I was careful, this time, not to stray too far from home to avoid problems. It seems I did not follow the news very well, or that I lacked information and I did not want, in any case, to hear any more explanations from policemen if they stopped me by chance, as it would not really be that useful to explain my point of view concerning the measures or what my life philosophy is or my opinion about the virus.

I was the citizen stripped of his will and they are the authorities who are giving us instructions. During normal times, I would not have taken heed of their measures, I would have been busy with something or another and I at least would not listen to the government's guidelines.

I hardly had the time to go for a walk with a friend or to go to the club. I would perhaps go to my studio on Batn al-Hawa Street to finish some artwork. I no doubt had many unfinished things to do. I would have been sitting with a friend or attending a meeting or visited my mother; anything but this feeling that I am like an intruder with no purpose.

It was not me walking in the street now, but me as a boy during the days of curfew imposed by the occupation authorities on Palestinians to punish them and to take control of their lives. I monitored the patrolling Israeli army jeeps from the roofs of houses before going down to the streets to resist them and to practise a stolen freedom and to protest what was being planned against us as human beings. This time, things were definitely different.

I said to myself, “Stop being boyish!” and “Why don’t I go back home and walk in the garden without wearing a mask at least?! I could kill some time by pruning the plants—didn’t I always want the time to do that?”

The word ‘curfew’ reminded me of the past and I started imagining an Israeli military patrol on the street corner. I started hyperventilating upon these strange imaginings while wearing my light blue mask. The city has not been this empty for a long time, there was no one there to keep me company during these moments, and no doubt people were acting in the correct fashion.

While walking quickly home, a police patrol car turned right from the direction of the mosque towards the street I was walking. What bad luck I had! How embarrassing! I will tell them that I was just taking a breath of fresh air and that I was committed to their instructions. However, the patrol did not stop me or even pay attention to me, as if I was not in the street violating the curfew. The “Affinity Checkpoints,” as they were dubbed by the official

spokesperson, did not prevent me from walking around as if they were just memories of checkpoints and crises. It was an invisible play.

I am borrowing this term mostly from popular Egyptian tradition: “with my hands on my heart.” It is a somewhat ambiguous term, transforming into the passive or third party when the enemy wears the cloak of invisibility. But with things as they are now, the term seems more appropriate for describing the situation with the Coronavirus. When Ahmad Zaki and Saeed Saleh used it in the play entitled *The Kids Have Grown Up*, where their younger brother—Younis Shalabi—was kidnapped, the so-called “kidnapping gang” was a joke, but now things seem to be serious. Airports are closed, streets are empty worldwide and hospitals are overflowing with the sick. The virus is not a joke and life has ground to a halt all over the world. But until this dark cloud passes, one must take up more weapons than just isolation, doubt and fear of everything around us.

It is impossible for isolation to be the only weapon to face the virus. In the midst of all this, even the places that provide solace and peace of mind to human beings—the mosques, churches, museums, cafes and bars—are closed. Where are the dervishes, the believers, the art lovers, the sociable people and even the opportunists? Where are you good people? I say to myself that I will write all this once I get home.

I spent most of the time during the quarantine with my son ‘Amr, who had to stop his studies at Dar al-Kalima College in Bethlehem due to the virus. He came back home as everyone does during a crisis. For me this was a good thing. He came back with his new instrument, the saxophone, and he had a lot of time to practise and to

compose music to post online. I would enjoy the music he played in the next room. He is a distinguished artist and would suggest or insist that I watch certain films. I was the cook or the gardener in the house and every time I searched for the artist within me, the maintenance man would appear instead.

It's the 47th day of quarantine, and despite the fact that I know this, I do not really know which day it is exactly. In reality, I do not want to know whether it is a Friday, a Sunday or a Saturday. I am writing this now without knowing the day or exact date. Of course, it would be very easy to find out just by looking at a mobile phone or the TV or the computer. But it is somewhat different as it is related to the disruption of our circadian rhythm and a feeling of our uselessness and insecurity.

Unlike past pandemics, this virus has impacted our lives with great changes and is still doing so—it has impacted people's behaviour and I am one of those people. My habits and relationships with things, ideas and people have changed, like the perception of the place we call home, in this case, and my perception of time has changed as well. My relationship with the sink, the disinfectant gel and the mask has evolved. After the initial shock came the feeling of boredom, then numbness; even creating artwork or writing could not help me as they did in the past. I feel that time flows in a circular form and not in a straight line moving forward. There are no projects to commit to, no tasks or necessary duties or work with a deadline. Everything stopped with the development of the virus and the excuses developed without any pangs of conscience. The Coronavirus has liberated us from commitments and the rat race has stopped. Life is moving as if in slow motion and at ease, as the popular saying goes, "Food and no work." The work that you could do in a few hours is stretched over days. the municipality's

planting of seedlings took three days and I pared the vine the day after that. I went up to the roof to fix the water tank on Thursday and I folded the washing on Sunday; the schedule became relaxed and homely to the greatest extent. The house became the geography in which you passed your time, it became the stage upon which events were performed. Visits became non-existent at the beginning, then very limited and only for some very close friends or relatives and we would sit far apart in the garden. We would converse, exchange news or discuss current issues and share smiles; we did not believe some news or we would make fun of our ambiguous belief. This is a time when you quickly feel a desire to return to the 'cave'—to your solitude. It seems as if the discussion mixes you up and that people staying metres apart from each other has become familiar in a way and necessary, not just to protect you from the virus but also to keep you calm while you are away from others, contrary to Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus's claim that "True comfort is to be away from yourself." You say and hear the same ideas spread on Facebook, you both know your own convictions well but the extent of misunderstanding or agreement remains the same. There is nothing new while we are sending our ideas through social media, so what is the use of direct conversation from behind a mask?

Humanity is facing this pandemic without prior experience, unfortunately, and there is not enough information about will happen or about our future. This blindness might make us follow all the reports, news and analyses, even contradicting ones, but in the end you resort to what is in your own head, to your own thoughts and solitude—you resort to your inner conversation and unknown destiny. Communal thinking does not relieve your mind anymore nor does it answer pending questions.

While facing yourself, the past starts coming up. What should one do in such a case? Should one think of current times or the past? And what about the future? The virus is suggesting a new way of life.

When one is in prison, for example, one waits for the moment of release impatiently; or if a country is in a state of war or is under occupation, it aspires to victory or some sort of settlement.

In brief, when an area lives through a crisis, one starts to place hopes on other areas that are not experiencing a similar situation that they can run to during a worst-case scenario. However, if the world is in crisis, then both geography and time are narrowed down.

The scenes of kangaroos running towards the Australian desert due to the fires were broadcast universally on TV—the image rang the alarm bell of the dangers threatening life on Earth. The universe had also previously sent a number of signs indicating imminent danger due to human behaviour towards nature and life in general. However, unfortunately, we did not take heed of these indications and fires.

It is also shameful that after our invasion of space and enormous scientific development, in addition to decoding human DNA, gene editing and other impressive discoveries, science—when facing this virus—is only able to say, “wash your hands and stay at home until God finds a solution.” It is truly worrying that so far, the world has only come up with a number of protective measures and not even one cure.

At one time, we saw the world in a different light while looking at life from different perspectives. Now it is as if we are all looking at it from the same perspective; we are wearing the same lenses but do not see the same things. Whether it is development of the Coronavirus in



nature through the combination of one virus or more, or its development within one living being or more or in one country or another, or its mention in a book or film about the end times or science fiction.

The virus is the result of the laws of the universe and the disease exists as an essence of the medicine somewhere, even if scientists and specialists do not recognise it yet.

The black Coronavirus cloud has begun to dissipate in some areas and the strict measures were eased until the threat of a return of the virus begins again. Unfortunately, there were many more cases and deaths in one day than in the first months. But now the numbers are mentioned without the fanfare or magnitude of the panic or the curfew. In August, I was listening to the news in my car when the broadcaster said that in Palestine, there were seven deaths and more than 678 cases in one day. In the southern and northern governorates, this number would have been alarming during the first three months of the virus. It was as if nothing had happened. The only race now is to find the vaccine, not the nature of this emerging virus!



## Waylaid in World

### Makings

Carlos Sirah

You. Yes, you are Being. So, tell yourself, even in you don't believe it, I am beheld. Tell yourself, this day, this moment, this present, opens, bright and ripe and open.

Marvell, Arkansas, comes to mind, Beatrice's commitment and love, concretized and taught...garden, and history, and sound. Study. You. Well.

You tell yourself, I am made up, a fiction of myself. You tell yourself that are you made up of soft stuff. Of tissue and skin, and gut and brain. You tell yourself to listen. You tell you. You are so tired of listening. The drones. This droning. The dead gods. The dying empire. The dead, the dead, the dead.

Waylaid. Tell yourself. What happens to grief deferred?

Well. If you are eyes, or have eyes, you open them, in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, in every season, in every moment. They close. They will close. Your eyes, close. Us, again. You listen to your soft muscle, pumping. You beat soft. You drum skin. Taut. You blood move. You, light. Come inside. This room. Diffuse. No need. To move, driven this light. Studied.

You are. The dialectic.

**Dear Alive,**

**Closer, when the light comes into the room, where there have only been corridors to drive that light. There are no more thunderstorms. The droning. That surveil, you listen. Hover. Hovering you. About your head. About your buildings. About your make, about you... Only, you observe this matter. You, in turn, surveil.**

**Unrepentant,  
Waylaid**

**Of light, or rather, the thing, that object, that you love around which the light moves. Remove that obstruction. Let love. Be studied. There will always be a ewer in the corner of your room. It is to catch the rain, that falls, from the leak in your room. If no rain falls... You will imagine.**

**Rain, you will remember. Waylaid.**

**You are in Los Angeles. You are in Oakland. You are in Brooklyn. You are in Charleston. You are in Memphis. You are in Palmares. You are in Rafah. You are in Esmaraldas. Waylaid. You are in Réunion. You are in Natchez, and Istanbul, and Kinshasa, and Dakar, and...**

**Simarabo.**

**Next to the bed in which you have been sleeping unevenly. Dreams and terrific visions, and night, and night, and night and...What if your evil mind riding weary on this light of**

this evening obsolesces the border, obviates the border, denies the order of these borderings....

You wake, and a wasp will come, will visit you daily for a month, stinging you, and then will vanish. You will question sanity, edema, torpor, seeing, iris, mercury, encampments, rooms, visitations, fallwayintos, maths, hollers, frottage, wakes, redress, science...

You have a window. It is large. There are three panels. Material. The center being the widest. When you look through. You will think. What a flat surface. You do.

Look out.

From what you can surmise. Cars exist. There are not as many as you have remembered or dreamed, but the sound is unmistakable. Do you remember the lattice, the wrought iron, the way the light moves through it? The smith curves the iron. You are. Wrought into Being.

Today, you realize you are forty years old, in your apartment, with no job prospects, looking out of a despair, birthing rage clears thinkings, about a world, about worlds, about... Begin. Part of you never wants to know it. This other part, that knowing region of your spirit, knows that you must language the world that was, that is, the worlds that are to come.

In reality you type words. You wonder about any meaning. And sometimes some thing will seem like truth, or the truth, or a truth. For example, Waylaid as.

In reality, this Waylaid. This moment will bear upon you alternately more and less than the wasp's visitation.

This situation... You mean pandemic, you mean catastrophe, you mean, this cull of your people, reminds you of the war, or rather, of war. More than the war, the siege. There's a charge to the air. You feel it. Shit, you see it in the way they lock hands, the lovers you are passing

by. Passing you by? Waylaid. Their mouths cloaked forever in this ceaseless season of longing. Your mouth. Cloaked and Uncloaked.

On one of those quiet evenings, before the world turns to panic, you watch as a plane flies over the tallest building in this city of angels. It's movements nearly imperceptible. Yet, the incremental shifts, the sun's descent. The buildings ablaze. You do not weep. Waylaid. You believe in the night. Waylaid. You forget to remember certain...

Things.

They dragged Rem'mie's body out of that river. They did not know it was her. They suspected. There were so many bodies of persons. Dragged, and dragged, and...

The world is on fire. Waylaid. The worlds are on fire.

Missing that week. You sit down with peppermint tea. You do not move for hours.

There is rust on the balcony, dried into a patchwork of desert. The building across the boulevard, the building in the foreground. A mere four stories. It is theorized that your heart has four chambers. I believe in fifth, and sixth, and seventh chambers... In how many stories...The cow jumped over the...Waylaid.

Chambers, do you believe?

The palm trees don't stand like. These buildings, not up to earthquake code. The building's facade, its foreground has a missing letter. THE PARK WI ONA. It's enough of a sign, to recall Curtis Flower's life who lives in Winona, Mississippi, just a car ride from the place where you are born, much of his life spent in bondage. He is free. The many others must follow. An incomplete list. Mumia Abu Jamal, Leonard Peltier, Red Fawn Fallis, Michael Rattler, Marcus, David Gilbert, Reverend Joy Powell, Ana Belen

Montes, Jeremy Hammond, Ivan Vargas, Simón Trinidad, Russel Maroon Shoats, Jalil Muntaqim, Mutulu Shakur, Jamil Abuallah Al-Amin, Veronza Bowers, Sundiati Acoli, Ed Poindexter, Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald, Kamau Sadiki, Kojo Bomani Sababu, Suchell “Cinque” Magee, Jaan Karl Laaman, Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, Dr. Abdelhaleem Ashqar, Jared Chase, Bill Dunne, Marius Mason, Abdul Azeez, Malik Smith, Hanif Shabazz Bey, Oso Blanco, Alvaro Luna Hernandez, Ramsey Muñiz, Stephen Kelly, Fran Thompson, Steve Donziger, Joseph Mahmoud Dibee, and the many thousands more, who remain, carceraly unfree, in the camps, in the towns, in the cities, underneath the cities, on the borders, on the sea, ...

Waylaid. Borderless.

If you don't know the name of the street, you're fucked. No one uses the names of these streets anymore. When you do a see a name, it is often written badly. One letter or many may be taller than the building. Itself.

I promise you the name, written properly. Okay. Not, Waylaid.

The threat of the levees. No, the promise of the riverine. No, I won't take an oath for this state. Our lists are incomplete. And a balcony juts toward your window. There will be no man who will water plants in the morning, but there will be a man with a large hairy stomach, who will smoke a cigar, and ostensibly tan for hours on end. He will look towards you, across Winona Boulevard, and smile.

Then, a woman in a cranberry robe will sit next to him. Hours will pass. They will not speak. She will use her spoon to crack open an egg. Some of the yolk will always spill over onto the shell, onto her fingers. She will purse her

lips. She will tilt her head back. She will close her eyes. She will suck the yolk through the egg.

Shell.

If we can remember, it is still mourning time.

In his memory of her, in the old country, she is out at the coop, peering through chicken wire. She watches the hens. She anticipates. It is dark and warm inside the coop. Soft clucks. The smell of the hay on which the eggs rest reminds her of the year they rode into the wood. A hay ride. Harvest is in the air. She would have been five or six or seven. She did not have... She is sitting in the back. And the road is getting suddenly dark. She sits aloft hay. The children around her cluck and peck at the candies. At the coop, one of the chicks pushes its head through the wire. To peck at her finger. This is wondrous delight. She pushes the chick's head back inside the safety of the coop. She covers the eggs in hay. On the balcony, across the boulevard, the man with the hairy stomach, coughs and coughs. Smoke barrels from his throat.

In this dream, a parade of Black people, roar on motorcycles to the sound of A Call for All Demons These also ride alongside the wagon. Children on hay. Waylaid.

In the living nightmare, the one you don't invent, above our boulevard, two police helicopters dance in the sky high above the apartment. Below them, the hungry and dying and thinking and believing and moving masses announce new worlds. Through my window, the helicopter moves from the center glass panel, then to the first, then darts to the third.

You look through the window.

They orbit each other like binary stars. Compelled. The state surveils nature, surveils beauty, surveils the lonely. We deny the state our dreams.

Not. Waylaid. These words come to you soft on the evening light which lasts. Sometimes whole days and seconds and eternities.

New cells. New structures. Clusters. Orbits of people. Emergent, frail systems. Everywhere doors tumble out from mouths, by signs, in footnotes, in ledgers, in songs, by hip sway, others remembered, or envisioned. Crossing and dancing, the lines of the Black crossings. New old. This work of recovery is not new, even if you are just finding these (perm) mutations on living.

Waylaid. You are alive.

The phone rings. It's your mother. She's had another heart attack or another attack of the heart. Waylaid. What's the difference? She's in the old country, the land where you grew up. Hundreds of miles away. She says you should make an effort. That she may not live. That she's unsure about living, Waylaid, like this. And what are you doing anyway? You tell your mother. Dreams. Your mother scoffs. Waylaid. You sulk. You stars. You, interdependently, pulling and shaping that space between... Your mother does not believe in rifts. Anyways, her gravity is stronger than yours. Betraying all interstellar logics. You accuse of her being a straight line. To what? she counters. You? She laughs. Catherine, the dead girl, the one between you, would have never laughed like that. Knowing, you laugh, in turn. Trouble is whole.

In earth. You remember. Your living room is very large. The window comprises one whole wall of the flat. Eastward. The window is an event like any other. Landing on the moon. Lighting a fire. Taking the dish out of the oven and sitting down for dinner. First you take it all in. Then you pick up the fork, the tender morsels of fungi, and salt, and butter taste very good. Savor this of flesh on the tongue. And there you are again, with yourself. Waylaid. In flesh and enfleshed.



The fantasy of the north, of the west, of the plains, of the midlands, of the isles, of the sierras, of these promised lands, now sit dashed, in repose, surrounded, waylaid by the order of their fantasy. So many migrations, to be met with, legacies of lack, revolutionizing, themselves under the impossibility of governing as total, as amnesia, as void, as surface and miscomprehension. Way making possibilities into ways of being, laid out before us, visible, articulable, to all, no matter the logics of these borders.

Yesterday, you talk to your grandmother. Like you, she is lonely, and taking care, and full of laughter. She sews the cotton into protection. Black family masks, she says, sewing and sewing, and... Apparatuses for breath. This wearing, she says. This wear. She's not getting enough calls from all her grands, she tells you, without saying those words. We will last. There is no accusation in her tone. It's a wonder, she says, that any of us are here at all. Waylaid. No wonder, she says, they all have death behind their eyes. Waylaid. A wonder, she says, that the birds are all singing again so quickly, and so loudly, and so beautifully, after the earthquakes, the storms, the floods, the fires, the wars, the sieges, the genocides, the gods, the churches, the politics, the terror, all these birds, singing their thousands and thousands of songs of the living. A wonder.



# What I Found in the Catastrophe

**Rasha Hilwi**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

I always reserve a special place in my writing for an act of searching, a searching for the peculiar way in which catastrophes - social, political and even personal - compel us, sometimes after many years, or months, or days, to find in them a sliver of light, or, not necessarily even a sliver of light, but a kind of meaning, any meaning. In this search for the meaning in catastrophes, I meet strangers, relatives, and friends. I write down my conversations with them, and what is more, I carry these conversations with me, within myself, and elicit from them knowledge and wisdom, and sometimes I don't share this knowledge with anyone else.

While looking back at years of my writing, I dug into the history of my family, my country and my people in Palestine. I talked to friends who had to leave their countries; Syria, Egypt, Tunis or Iran. I met them virtually or face to face in Berlin, the city where I had settled after leaving Palestine. I found out stories I would never have heard of if these encounters had never taken place and some of them were by chance. In all of them, despite the sadness and the catastrophe within the stories, there was a certain meaning, according to the storytellers, which was the luminous part, and there are no cliches in this story.

I moved from Acre and Haifa to Berlin in 2017 and looked for a house similar to the one I imagined myself to have lived in, where I could easily access stories and the wisdom that is gained from living through catastrophe, outside of the geographic space controlled by Israeli colonialism. I could not have imagined that after exactly three years, my room in Berlin would be like any other room in the world, as communication with the outside world was through the phone or laptop with close friends or those who were far away. It was the beginning of the pandemic and the state-imposed restrictions were like God's wrath on people like me, who essentially live outside their homes more than inside them. As in my life, homes could be people, gardens or a bar we liked or a conversation with a friend or a kiss next to the river. Houses, or the structures including doors, windows, a ceiling and walls are for sleeping, especially for those who live alone.

After one month of quarantine, I moved from a shared apartment to my own rented flat, where I was alone. Some friends commented that my timing to live on my own was somewhat strange, especially since I was really alone—I did not have a lover or boyfriend and visits by friends were prohibited. Those who expressed their surprise know me, but I considered it 'God's Punishment' and accepted the challenge.

After accepting the challenge of this semi-voluntary and semi-imposed isolation, I started praying secretly. I knew, as we all did—even though we denied it—that the world would never again be like it was before the Coronavirus. I started having feelings and tribulations that I knew existed but not in my body or psyche. For a number of reasons, this was a first experience. Inside I silently wished, like a secret prayer written on the walls of Facebook stories and Instagrams, that this new world catastrophe would bring about good fruit, even just one!

Not much time passed before my prayers were answered and an old lover came back into my life. I said to myself, “I wish I had prayed every day!” Anyway, what is most important is that my lover had come back into my life because of Coronavirus. The silence and isolation opened up realms of thought as a result of boredom and in-depth questioning. The cities stop their daily function of making us afraid to ridicule things outside the house, so we expressed—my lover and I—our yearning and dreams and talked about how everything outside the house was not guaranteed. We asked questions like: What are cities? Why do we immigrate? Where are our houses? What is a house, anyway? and we talked about smells, food and a lot about music. I asked: Do you want a family? Do you want to be a father? I feel like a stranger, my love! After this catastrophe, I want to be a mother more than ever—and then suddenly the quarantine was lifted.

I booked a train ticket. Direct trains had hadn't returned due to the quarantine. So, I had to book a number of tickets and change trains at three stations. I couldn't complain, not only because I was going to see my lover, but also because any travel after the quarantine was a blessing in itself!

I like travelling by train because of the wide windows facing nature and the imagination. The seats are relatively comfortable, which is also good for the imagination and I can write in a copybook or on my laptop. Most trains also have an internet connection and I can either read or sleep, but I did neither that day. From the moment the train exited the station in Berlin, throughout the stations between, before I reached the Amsterdam station, all I wanted was to see him. I was not afraid.

I arrived late at night and from the moment we met again we knew where we were headed. The route we saw was the only true reality in the world that was trying to improvise ways of salvation from the Coronavirus.

Amidst all this, we established a family and built a home. Of course, we wanted children and talked about the furniture and decided to get married. We moved in together in our house in Amsterdam next to the river (the city has many rivers). In order to relieve my sadness for leaving Berlin, I said to myself, "I am from a beautiful city—Acre—and so I deserve to live in another like Amsterdam."

Of course, the river is not exactly the Mediterranean, but the fact that there was fresh fish in a European city was attractive, even though it cannot be compared to the fish from Acre. It was nevertheless an important reason to fall in love with the city and to build a home there.

I have always looked for homes while leaving others behind; those that I would return to and others that I did not want to return to. What I fear the most is when catastrophes control our roads and add more checkpoints than there are some already. Maybe some have been set up for unknown reasons, even though they are man-made. It is as if, the catastrophe that is beyond our perception now brings back all the previous inherited catastrophes beginning from the stories of my grandmother in Palestine

about her displacement from her village, passing through the story of my love, a fugitive in the mountains of Iran from the oppression of a dictatorial regime. To the stories of my friends who long to eat maqdas from their mothers in Damascus and elsewhere. Corona is an invisible embodiment of disasters we know about, and those that we have not heard about yet. Today, at least I and many who I love are living their dimensions, impacts, questions and concerns in many places of the world.

However, in my constant search for meaning in past disasters and in the midst of disasters, I found love—pure and present—a good and compassionate home, and nothing scares it. This is not a cliché.



# Poetry





## Three poems

Asmaa Azaizeh

*Translated by Mariam Hijjawi*

### *Things asleep*

Look at me mother,  
I'm back with more meat  
and bones and wisdom.  
These days I can think of death,  
and sleep without being lulled,  
my milk teeth now grind my losses.

I came back to find  
tongues of lullabies severed,  
children bellowing in every corner  
and the Muezzin's call stifled  
by a strange hand

Return is a cinema screen  
and I no longer recognise the lead.  
She comes in once,  
yet tampers with the scenario  
a thousand times.  
Return is a cat who ate its young.  
Return is my plait,  
that I cut off  
and fed to time.  
The once green garden is now a woman  
afraid of old age,

the well, a bed in a hospital,  
and cats are the souls of women who once  
cried on my arm.

And I am now your mother.  
I shield your body with mine,  
from the bullet that your seventy years  
will suddenly release.

The accent I once rode,  
now rests under the earth.  
What happened to the shifting “Qaf”  
and the “Kaf” that barely came out?  
Where is the sling and the bird?  
Where is the neighbours’ boy?  
What was his name?  
..and what was mine?  
I wouldn’t have forgotten it  
had it had  
only one name;  
it would have fallen  
right on my head  
like a sniper’s shot.  
Where are the skins I cured with life’s salt?  
Where are the war supplies  
that never came?  
They were eaten by waiting and mites.  
Where is that Northern gate that opens out  
onto happiness?  
Where is my uncle Mahmoud,  
who used to eat grass and ask God  
to forgive humanity’s sin?

My old father, who became my son, is dead.  
But where is the young man  
who used to be my father?  
Where is that body I used to climb  
and pick from its forehead  
the sour fruits of time?

Tell him that all the political lessons  
have rotted in my head  
and that I've replaced them  
with poems I do not understand,  
that I wanted to fix but spoiled instead.

My mother put  
a finger to her mouth  
signaling me to shut up  
and pointed a finger  
at the piles  
of things asleep.

### *I am but one word*

Look father,  
language is a lavish bed  
and I slipped out of life's vagina  
onto an old step.  
So in which language do I lament your death?  
For twelve whole years  
Al-Khansa'\* stood at the school gate.  
I gibbered after her,  
like a parrot with no tongue

and every time tears welled up in her eyes,  
 creatures with hardened skins  
 would walk across the desert of my eyes.

My mother cuts the mulberry tree  
 everytime it grows,  
 so its roots don't split the wall.  
 Which language can split  
 my sadness over you?

I picked the words  
 off the tree's memory  
 of its long-gone limbs,  
 I plowed language  
 from the meadow's fantasy  
 of its absent expanse.  
 Cats taught me their elegies  
 over the fetuses  
 that never formed in their wombs,  
 death tied me to the school gate,  
 asking for its share;  
 I am but one word  
 hopping on its short tongue

I am but a word I can't make out  
 I will be spoken and be finished

If lamentation was meowing  
 or bleating  
 I would become it.  
 I would be a long wail  
 that summons my father

or a question that leads me  
to him  
I am but a name that stayed in God's belly,  
one that he forgot to teach Adam.  
Let me know of other names  
so I can say another.

Look father,  
language is a lavish bed,  
Al-Khansa' sleeps on it like a ripe sphere.  
When I stand at its foot,  
Like an abandoned quarter,  
silence whistles through me.  
And into my body,  
on the tips of their toes,  
come the elegies\*.

### *A bed of green onions*

Come look, my cat,  
at my dull ember.  
Each time I turn my back,  
It's covered with ash by time's big hands  
And I am like you in this darkness;  
my pupils dilated,  
my meowing stifled  
in the chest of an old doll

Pupils crossed by ancient travelers

\* One of the most influential poets of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. In her time, the role of a female poet was to write elegies for the dead.

who never even heard  
of the idea of arrival

Pupils of railways and cities  
and whistles and leaving,  
expansive as a meadow that lost  
his father, the horizon  
and so went on forever.

I rode on the back of his untamed wind,  
I spun my life into detective stories,  
I dwelled forty bodies and left fifty,  
I married twice,  
I almost died  
a thousand times in my dreams  
If it weren't for the scarecrow of loneliness  
who punctured the silence of the night

I tattooed a Canaanite tablet on my back  
and took to persuading people  
that I was four thousand years old.  
I built houses on hills that I did not know.  
I lived in them,  
then razed them to the ground,  
then built others

I discarded men, and attracted others  
I thought I had been killed  
but my breath kept running  
back to my chest  
I politely threw love out,  
and so he came back

through the window

I slaughtered the children that I thought up,  
to escape the prisons of motherhood.  
And motherhood watched from afar, delighted

I hid my father's rifle  
hoping that gazelles would one day rule us  
but they were then skinned in our kitchen

Then God's chosen people  
began to choose  
our heads one after the other,  
dragging us to the big slaughterhouse  
that we call freedom  
My skin is mottled with joy and regret.  
Each time I replace it  
with a smooth dress  
it is torn by sarcasm's nails  
and I am left naked

I have met poets  
with whom I thought  
that doomsday was upon us.  
And that God had chosen us,  
only us, to live

I have left men,  
making them think  
that they were bastards  
and that they did not deserve love  
except to lament their luck at its gate

And here I am  
After all this, my mottled cat,  
meowing mutely at the gate  
of our little house.  
The beautiful past lets me in,  
I walk in the backyard  
looking for the tail  
of a fish I ate thirty years ago

The pomegranate tree is dead  
but its shadow lives on,  
my pupils dilate in its blackness  
I crawl atop the wall  
overlooking a bed of green onions  
My mother's hand weeds it  
My father's is buried within it





## Four poems

**Tareq Al Arabi**

*Translated by Mariam Hijjawi*

***He died when he realized that his legs had  
beaten him to the cemetery...***

At university I tried to be  
a member of a political group, I tried to be loving, funny...  
I failed the day I heard, at a student demonstration,  
that Egyptian planes were attacking Haifa,  
the speaker was a member of Fatah.  
That day ten martyrs fell  
at Huwwara checkpoint south of Nablus,  
I was running with them behind  
a red 608 Mercedes truck,  
which turned back upon getting the protestors to the  
checkpoint.

At the French Cultural Center,  
after a discussion about intelligence agents and rebels on  
the streets,  
and while the evening painted  
the face of the city on the camp's entrance,  
Apache planes bombed a car carrying three fighters  
of the Popular Front and Fatah.  
Two were martyred while the third,  
who was quickly rescued from the Subaru,  
screaming that he was alive,  
died when he realized that his legs

had beaten him to the cemetery.

In those days I buried friends with my own hands,  
 prison cells were open and so were the cemeteries  
 and things were merging until everything turned  
 the same color,  
 so much that we thought  
 that the sun would rise in the West

### ***Three Political Sociology Textbooks***

A woman comes home from university.

Sitting amongst books and exam papers,  
 she does not think of going elsewhere.

A man sits in a cafe in the afternoon alone.

He has a phone and numbers of friends,  
 he does not think of calling them  
 or of going anywhere else.

There is no woman standing by a window  
 waving to returning men,  
 there is also no window.

There is no man thinking of throwing  
 himself in the sea,  
 there is also no sea.

Neither is there a different scenario, e.g.:

The man meets the woman returning from work with three  
 sociology textbooks.

The woman returning from work  
 with three sociology textbooks  
 will continue to be pale.

The man sitting in the cafe will continue to be,  
 the man sitting in the cafe.

If the streets of this city were not overflowing  
with lonely women and men who were hiding away,  
other things would happen, e.g.:  
The man and the woman would share the same room.

## *A Man Talks to Himself*

Today for example, the grass was wet  
and the dogs hadn't yet left for their dens.  
And the February rains were pushing winter  
into the hills and I was thinking of you.  
Actually, so much time has passed while I did nothing else,  
Amr Diab released five albums at least,  
my friend published three books and a novel,  
and seasons of failed crops passed  
and people migrated  
And I still think you're as real as God  
And that I can assure you  
that faith is two people's ability to pretend  
that they had a past.  
But there is no past, no time,  
nothing except two people,  
one walking besides the other  
believing that they are getting along,  
thinking that they will walk on and keep talking,  
talk that won't end until emptied of lies.  
One person was walking through the fields in the morning,  
talking to himself.  
In time,  
in a den,  
he is a dog.

## ***A Man Alone Drives Around in a Car***

A man alone drives around town in a Nissan Micra.  
 Then he goes home, a fish in one hand, bread in the other.  
 As soon as he walks through the door, he calls to his son,  
 he does not need to talk nor travel,  
 nor mention the garden wall, the pine-tree or the absence.  
 Within the wall the unemployed sit,  
 and under the deep-green pine tree, he sits with his son.  
 And while he prepares him to learn again  
 and while he teaches him how to drive,  
 they are overlooked by Russian and Ethiopian soldiers  
 and a frightened woman who urges him  
 to come in with the shopping list  
 and close the door behind him.  
 A man alone drives around in a car, searching for something  
 lost to him,  
 the smoke of the world pours out of his lung,  
 he is searching for something lost to him!

## ***A Woollen Coat***

With time, I learnt to ask for nothing, with time I learnt to  
 be quiet.  
 When I need to talk, I talk to a Carob tree.  
 Under the tree, there are always four boys  
 eating breakfast with their father.  
 One of the sons was killed  
 while standing at a window in the camp.  
 From the day they became three sons and their father  
 under the tree,  
 I have come to understand

writing as speaking the silence.

My pain is great, as he who has lost his son.

My pain is small, too small to speak of.

The day before yesterday, my sister bought me  
a woollen jacket,

and I wrote this because I had to call out to you,  
for who can now stand the silence?



## **SERMON\***

**Diane Exavier**

Coronaphone

**Let me tell you about my mother.**

**She was beauty with eyes with teeth with skin with hands to chop the meat, hands to count the bills, hands to drive the car, hands to hold the child, with legs with toenails painted red, filed to a point with breasts with dark brown golden highlighted dye covering her hair whiter than a streak of light bouncing off the surface of her country's sea at noon with a laugh pitched like ti zwazo screaming their wings into flight from the base of her throat with a mouth that bled prophecies, a mouth that warned terror, a mouth that cursed the Knicks at the start of every basketball season with lips wet from care, lips dry from disappointment, lips red on a freshly powdered face because it's important to look good always with style that kept her too young for any age with taste with discernment with an instinct that knew when the fixings for lasagna were on sale at the market with feet hitting the pavement of Flatbush hard with the patience of too many mothers with the rage of too many women with the wonder of too many children with the generosity of too many friends with three daughters who don't know what to do with all the people she's left behind, daughters who are not yet saints, daughters who will never be saints since she raised them to be fish, swimming together most holy because even before they were born**

\* From *The Math of Saint Felix*, forthcoming from *The 3rd Thing*, 2021."

<https://the3rdthing.press/artists-alt/diane-exavier/>

they slept closest to God, in current with the blood and consequence of this everlasting math.

As my mother died I watched her body become her brother's corpse, small and white-headed crumpled under sheets. Later, I noticed my aunt's ailing body become my mother's dying body, bald except for a few white hairs, skin disappeared under sheets. It has taken two transtibial amputations and a global pandemic to complete the transformation. I did not get to see another aunt turn into her sisters. Sins of empire kept us apart, sheltered in place. We watched her saint settle in from behind the gate, behind masks,

under the putrefying foot of a nation dying too fast enough and not fast enough.

Limbs reeking of iron, slipping, gummy, pink. Organs who fight themselves, fight you. Organs who wreak havoc, don't listen. A liver was my mother's only adversary, turning on her as if persuaded by one of the jabs she constantly fought in her dreams. My first mother's love helped turn her lungs into foes. It's taken two daughters' lifetimes so far to reach something like forgiveness. I fathom six sisters permeating each other: bodies fight, bodies fail, bodies come to rest. My cousin, always my sister, has grown into my sister. My sisters become me. Our bodies, not ready to rest, listen. Together, we turn to our mothers: stay on the phone too long, laugh as much as we can, make deals where we must. I fall asleep on the couch watching basketball, tonguing the Blackness between my

teeth, home of the woman who birthed me. I make me my  
 mothers. I make  
 my sisters  
 make  
 sisters  
 make  
 women  
 who do not rest in  
 I  
 first  
 meet violence  
 first  
 meet empire  
 always urgent  
 care  
 I Black  
 eye unfinished

## **maw**

Sisters are only sisters in absence of a mother. Otherwise,  
 they are just daughters. All girls in my family terminate  
 daughters to become women. We've been forced. When  
 the mother is gone and the sisters are grown, they become  
 women whose bodies will soon reveal death to them.  
 When the mother is gone and the sisters are young, they  
 stay girls forever looking for death's revelation. Sisters are  
 mothers to each other sometimes, watching their bodies  
 become teaching ex-lovers. Sisters become their mothers  
 knowing their bodies turn to then into ancestors.

The mother, in her absence, becomes pieces, each  
 embedded in her daughters' bodies. Of utmost concern  
 is which pieces fall where: heart in whose brain? Liver in  
 whose hand?



Cities no longer stop when somebody dies. They used to  
be more accommodating:  
procession driving down Ocean  
turning onto Beverley.

I guess cities don't stop when you walk into love, either.  
I stopped being a woman to be/hold my love. My love  
stopped being a man to become guard of my mother's  
garden. Sabbath soothes doubt when I hold my face to  
those dark green leaves growing bigger than the halo  
piercing my scalp. The garden's guard is now my sister's  
brother. There is another guard of the garden who is also  
my brother. We each take our place in the pews. My sisters  
and I have let another creature into the house so that  
church may finally burn to the ground. Come in, come in:  
cat, donkey, lamb, raven, rooster, dove, snake, cow, whale.  
Come in crawling across the final embers of church, limbs  
turning to ash, glowing as they disappear for all time.

I am no Saint.

I am no Saint.

Let countries crumble.

I am no Saint.

I said no more countries. The city is dead.

May broken parts reunite,

bones reset,

remnants transpose.

May shapes relate

to understand

systems

in complexity.



## Al Hakoura

**Rabeca Eid**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

I went back to visit my family this week. I intentionally say “went back” and not just “went.” I usually say: “going back to my hometown at the end of the week.” Also, people ask me: “When are you coming home?” even though I no longer live in our house in the village of Eilabun. I have been living in Haifa and have lived abroad for the last 10 years or so. Yet, the house in which we were born and raised remains the place to which we always go back. It is our first home and holds the first place. Among the components and comforts of this first place besides family, memories and tranquillity, lies the orchard.

I am lucky to be part of a generation that has experienced and played in orchards. Perhaps the word hakura, meaning orchard, will not be used as much in the next decade and may even vanish entirely. Hakura is a piece of enclosed land planted with trees near one’s home. It is larger than a garden and smaller than a grove. This particularity defines the concept and features of villages in our country and the world. There is no village without orchards. It is the lung of the home and family and the source of its simple seasonal cultivation of crops. It is the childhood playground and the first yard of imagination before going into the bigger world.

My first memory of our orchard was the snowy year of 1992. I vaguely remember a small slope of soil covered with snow where I, my cousins and the neighbourhood

would children sled down, laughing over and over. After that year, we grew a bit older and the orchard and its surroundings became our daily playground. We would play from the early morning and return home with the sunset in our dirty clothes. There, we discovered soccer, hide-and-seek and Easter egg hunts and tricks. We also dug new roads with our toys there. It was the public space for the neighbourhood children and the place where we first rebelled against adult authority. It was a small geographical area but an endless world. The long hours of fun passed as if they were minutes. It is where we first searched for truth and grand narratives. It was our first encounter with unwritten poems and stories. It gave us a taste for freedom and an expression of rebellion.

Our orchard was surrounded by a rock wall covered with dandelion bushes, creating a world both protected and undetected. Under the orchard, cats birthed their kittens there. Adults would warn us to avoid going there because there might be a snake, which we thought was the devil who licked and spoiled our food whenever it fell on the ground. Despite that, I was an expert at navigating the dandelions across the wall. Because of my speed in entering and exiting, even barefoot, I was the one responsible for bringing the ball back after a child's reckless kick sent it into the dandelions. Hence, I was proudly called the Master of Dandelions. Entering these parts felt like I was a jungle boy who befriended animals starring in a mystical adventure. Somehow, everything piled up in there whether we tossed it in or not. Therefore, the heart of the dandelion forest became an exposition of garbage and forgotten objects that we used as props in our made-up games. I hid my wooden weapons there, waiting for the next big war.

What made our orchard special was that it was relatively spacious. It was a shared land that belonged to my father and uncles. It lived with us every day of the year, producing fruit every season. There were and still are figs, apples, berries, lemons, peaches, grapes, grapevine leaves, pomelos, loquats, passionfruit, greengages, clementines, oranges, plums, almonds, carob, thyme, vegetables, legumes like chickpeas and green peas, olive seedlings and others. Every Sunday morning, we used to make bread and manakish in the orchard's woodfired oven for the whole week. That was before gas ovens invaded our villages and terminated the endearing quality of homemade bread. There is still a chicken coop in the orchard today that stands quiet in the face of the eggs produced in the Israeli kibbutz.

Whenever I visit my family, I sit on a chair outside and look at the orchard from above. Although I left my childhood playground, I am still breathing the air of that unique world, especially that we live in the last days of orchards. It brings me joy to see my nephews—the smartphone generation—experience the orchard like we did more than 20 years ago. I am happy that they get to have this experience now before the imminent death of all orchards.

I do not know what we can call our orchard and a few others remaining in our village and other villages in the Galilee. Shall we, for example, say 'orchards that survived urbanisation', 'orchards that survived concrete', 'orchards surviving modernity' or 'postmodern orchards'? I have no idea. Contemplating the orchard, especially while sheltering in place during the Coronavirus pandemic, brings me back to it not only through memories but also as a surviving space—so far. It survived the hegemony of the capitalist and colonial system and has been creating

an abundant life away from attempted destruction that the political and economic reality brings about.

My contemplation leads me to the inevitable tragic conclusion that there is no longer a possibility for the orchards to sustain. Our orchard survived the structural transformations of the Palestinian Arab villages after 1948. These transformations include displacement, confiscation of lands, besieging Arab towns and supplanting Jewish ones, not expanding the building areas and developing Arab towns as peripheries of Israeli towns. Our orchard will have the same fate as other orchards. They became cement—apartments and offices for rent.

Dividing the orchard and planning its future has already begun, and so has the typical disputes over its boundaries. And so, the nostalgic discourse and reminiscing will seem completely unrealistic. When the first bit of concrete is poured into the orchard in the next couple of years, it will be officially buried. We will do the same special ritual we do in the funerals of orchards. There will be grilled meat. People and relatives will come to offer their blessings and give away sweets to neighbours. There will be nothing left for me in the orchard except for lingering memories.



# **This is my Diary for one day**

**Lama Rabah**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

Eighteen minutes had passed. I spent them in the bathtub, my body curled up like a foetus. I knew it was 18 minutes from the number of songs I played but did not listen to. I have no idea how my body ended up here. It was like a cold ball on the cracked floor of the bathtub. The bathtub had red stains because my mother had washed her dyed hair. It has been six months since I ran away from time. I am not staring at anything in particular. I am just trying to pass the time, near my chest, and not feel it. By the way, this is my diary for one day. It has been repeated countless times.

I remembered I read somewhere that 186 patients were admitted to a psychiatric hospital. What they had in common was the time they spent at London's Heathrow Airport. The hospital is known for treating travellers arriving from nearby Heathrow, including those found wandering between the airport gates. Travellers from the east to the west are more prone to depression, while those travelling from the west to the east suffer from symptoms of bipolar disorder. They change for weeks, even months, and maybe forever as a result of the change in the time zones. They no longer had a perception of day and night. Before the last six months, we were the masters of deceiving day and night. That was before someone noticed that we had been wandering between the gates.

Also, before time stopped, my mother dyed the roots of her greying hair. We deceived the loneliness, emptiness and worthlessness, as well as my chest as time passed, scratching its skin. Now that it has stopped completely, we will not be able to deceive it nor escape from it—I am talking about time.

I stood in the bathtub only to realise that the water in the basin had run into the drain and disappeared. I dragged my heavy legs to the edge to get out of the bathtub. My arms rested on the sink. My mother's mirror had metallic edges eaten away by rust. I noticed that nothing ever changed in her house, no matter how worn out. I was still drying my feet with my rough childhood towel. Time does not fly here but gently walks away, ignoring that my feet have become a vessel.

When I look into my mother's mirror, I see her image. It gets stuck and printed there in front of me, all over my face and in my thin voice, narrow eyes and the heavy love that is like an anchor in my heart. I search for myself there but I did not find all of me. I was also not fully absent. My footprints are still in the sands of a distant beach. The smoke from my cigarette is still in the sky of some balcony I love farther away. My body curled up in her bathtub like a foetus that never grows. In my mother's house, nothing ever changes.

I dyed my thinning hair because, like my mother, it is also greying. The last time I brushed my hair, I stood in front of the mirror for a long time. One song was on repeat; starting over whenever it ended. It was performed by an amateur who gathered his courage, only to fail to imitate Kris Kristofferson. The name of the song was “For the Good Times.” The same song, repeated:

“Don’t look so sad.

I know it’s over

But life goes on . . .

And make believe you love me one more time

For the good times . . .

Don’t say a word about tomorrow

or forever,

There’ll be time enough for sadness

when you leave me.”

I have no idea how many times the song played on a loop, cycle, knot, noose. Someone yelled at me two or five days ago, when I randomly said that the past two months had passed quickly. “Quickly? They were the slowest two months of the year,” he said as if my comment intended to offend him. I have no idea why I said that in the first place. I am the last person to care about the passage of time. Before time stopped, I used to bite my nails while in a queue at some bank, government institution or nail salon. I used to get sweaty and anxious as I painfully saw the precious time being ‘wasted’ and ‘squandered’ before my eyes. I have no clue why I said that or how my body ended up in the bathtub over and over. I am not staring at anything in particular. However, I do know that after this is all over, there will be enough time to grieve.





# Surviving

**Mahmoud Al-Shaer**

*Translated by Zahra Khaldi*

I was playing cards on the shore in Rafah when the cafeteria owner came to inform us that the police had ordered them to close. We threw our cards down and went back home. At 11 o'clock, the people looked as if they were silently expecting war. We went back home without absorbing what happened or how the Coronavirus had been able to penetrate the Gaza blockade and spread inside. This came along during a round of escalation and negotiations that were taking place between Hamas and the Israeli occupation through brokers. I do not want to delve into the conspiracy theories, but my continuous doubt is that since the Israeli occupation has made repeated attempts to break and subdue Palestinian willpower, it has also succeeded in bringing the virus into the Gaza Strip. The Israelis have, since the beginning, purposely polluted all that enters Gaza through its border crossings with the Coronavirus in the same way it has killed, displaced, besieged, bombed and destroyed everything and anything that helps Palestinians to resist and survive.

Last March, Gaza lived through the events of the pandemic with the rest of the world, and here it is at the end of August experiencing the pandemic on its own once more. Did it manage to surpass the problem the first time? I don't know. Will it survive this time? This depends on a lot of issues, the first of which is that human beings are not given any importance in this area. As a Palestinian experiencing life here, it seems to me that anything is more important

than the citizen. Secondly, I doubt my ability to resist the ramifications of corona. This newcomer has joined the many woes I suffer from and I am fighting to just coexist with them.

In 2008, I finished my secondary school certificate exam. My colleagues and I entered a dark hall to take this exam inside a besieged place, that had three wars imposed on it and the electricity cut off. The border crossings were shut in our faces and our lives suffer from a split society, a separation and rivalry that consumes everything.

### Is survival important?

In 2020, here I am living with the Coronavirus alongside the world. I am amazed at the flexibility of the human soul and its desire to live—like I felt in Gaza during the siege. “The siege was not that bad,” we said as we saw how the virus infiltrates through open windows and other people. The border crossings are closed and our fear of our despicable enemy has increased. I read more than once about theories of underlying attempts by the Israeli occupation to bring the virus into besieged Gaza. Gaza, that had succeeded in isolating itself from the pandemic for six months, is living with the effects and repercussions of the disease.

It is impossible for the establishment in Gaza—flabby, besieged and exhausted by wars—to protect more than two million people or to provide their basic health and economic needs like the rest of the world. Therefore, I can understand people who try to circumvent curfews and closures to provide basic necessities for their families in a society where 50% live below the poverty line.

### On which margin?

I see myself as someone who lives according to the principle of investing in a crisis, as the context in Gaza has trained me to do. I have no permanent plans, as anything could suddenly be destroyed and disappear. This has happened many times within my lifetime. It is happening again and I am convinced the worst thing that can happen is a good thing.

This is always my standpoint: I defend the destruction within me. I say to life, “this destruction is a witness of my experience.”

What pains me and what I fear the most is loss—loss and defeat. I have a phobia concerning the pain and drain caused by the number zero; the zero-sum economy, health and livelihood. I am afraid that life will consume me and I am afraid of losing my options.

## **Movement under two sieges**

After I grew up and was able to leave the house to spend my free time with friends in their homes or a coffee shop and was old enough for an identity card or passport, the border crossings were shut. The airport was destroyed eight years ago, so the idea of travelling and exiting Gaza gradually became an idea that resembled finding water in a barren desert. The siege has been continuous over the past 15 years and during this siege, we have been deprived of our right to live. It ensures that the electricity supply is reduced from 24 hours a day to 8 at best. Also, the chances of living within a normal context that can guarantee stability on psychological, economic and social levels are reduced. Moreover, three grinding wars have taken place and waves of escalation occur from time to time.

Throughout the years of the siege, the Gaza Strip began to resemble the salon of a large family—a family of two million

with a small sea, small recreational parks, a large market and a port resembling the pictures we drew as children. In this salon, many of the residents know each other and it is not difficult for people to become acquainted. Basically, our grandparents and parents know each other, and one can easily find that people from the furthest north of this salon are related to those in the furthest south. What brings us together are our stories about the same events, whether during wars or happy occasions, as we live our stories here communally. So, you can hear about the details of war and life in the heat without electricity in the summer and the siege and unemployment and the 'return' demonstrations from everyone, as if they were one person living the same story for 72 years under the occupation, 15 years under siege and this year of Coronavirus.

### **On the side-lines of dullness**

Gaza once more—I claim to know what I am doing and I go to meet my destitution by saying this is my experience. I claim that I came back to express the destruction within me. The destruction witnessing my siege, experience and identity; the destruction that includes my family.

I try to express my feelings in this essay, but what I want to say is that I have become numb and cannot feel pain. The pain of my experiences, disappointments, wars. Being stranded and unsuccessful has become normal and happens all the time. I have started to hate my defeat and have become better at transcending things. I browse through papers and news channels or my accounts on social media and see the world, with its tragedies and achievements, as a farce. Nothing can provoke me, neither the sight of a blast nor even the sight of fireworks during a feast celebration.

## **Finally**

**Life approaches me like a wave. It starts high and then becomes nothing. The details come like waves; they amaze me, please me, make me sad, make me cry, frighten me, cast me down then become nothing after a little while.**

**Through patience, hope and insight have come to me, but I still hear a voice repeatedly weeping from defeat due to more waiting and running towards nothing.**

**Oh life, you have taught me to stand tall. In order not to fall, you said, “do not run, but saunter, do not feel defeated, walk slowly.” You said, “weeping is a rope around your feet.”**

**Life approaches me like waves that are high and then become nothing.**



# From loss to solitude and not the other way around!

**Yahya Ashour**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

In July 2019, about a year ago, I have consciously experienced loss through death. I experienced it suddenly, simply, quietly and in complete disguise. Death had ended my father's long battle with cancer. The moment I received the news at night, death penetrated part of me, a part I did not know of nor could ever feel. My immediate reaction upon learning the news seemed to match what my readings in literature, philosophy and psychology about loss had prepared me for: acceptance. However, all my strength vanished with the sunrise.

It was not just the experience of loss that shattered me, but everything that had followed: washing the dead, saying goodbye, the prayer, the funeral, the burial. I felt angry at life and at those who were alive. What I have read about loss must have never been written the moment the author was experiencing the loss of a loved one. Death and its rituals will always remain an undocumented secret.

I did not interact with close or extended family, nor with my close or distant friends. I barely interacted at all. My bitterness appeared to be quiet and led me to solitude, instead of wanting to end the world. This bitterness began to leave the way it came in the first place: voluntarily. Then, my life made me stay in my solitude. I only communicated

with people on social media while engaged in community work and college.

I gradually changed my desire from wanting to end the world to wanting to stop it a little. Yes, I mean the whole world, not just mine. I wished for it every day as I struggled with loss and life at the same time. Suddenly, Covid-19 shook the world, forcing it to stop! What a wonderful gift!

A state of emergency was declared due to the coronavirus earlier this year, in March. I was ready to stay at home, or rather, in my room. I had been practicing this the previous months without knowing. Corona allowed me to master social distancing before it vented its anger towards the world and fulfilled my wish to stop it. Anyway, the advantages of social distancing have never outweighed the disadvantages of social proximity for me.

College, institutions and meeting spots shut down. The Internet, however, did not stop! I was in no rush to blame corona for ignoring the fact that all social interaction has moved to the Internet. In the worst-case scenario, it was an outlet for the denial of loneliness. I could turn it off with one touch at any time! However, the Internet slowly turned into a mirror in which corona revealed itself.

On the surface, corona has been quarantining, suffocating and killing people around the world. However, it has

become ridiculous to consider corona a coincidence and not a product of capitalism, democracy, patriarchy, racism and globalisation. The masters of these systems come from the states that have been first and most affected. Besides, the technology that these countries celebrate accelerated the virus spread instead of eliminating it.

Corona made the world stand on the same edge, allowing it to evaluate its systems. However, we will only find out whether the world has learned its lesson after this phase is over. It is obvious now that the world is a dangerous place, or rather, fake.

If this is the state of the world, then what about Palestine, my country that is still under the last occupation in the world? Corona did not affect the occupation's policies against us. On the contrary, this occupation took advantage of the world's preoccupation with the virus and continues, with its allies, to achieve its goals of establishing its presence as a fait accompli! It is no surprise that this occupation has caused the Palestinians to suffer the impacts of corona in several aspects, depending on where they live, whether Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, the 48 lands or the diaspora.

In Gaza, where I live, neither the siege nor the division has changed during corona. Besides, the prisons and missiles still long to visit us every other day. I do not know why I had hoped, as I always did, that corona would improve some of these conditions in Gaza. However, I was disappointed, as I have always been. The authorities in Gaza managed to quarantine whoever returned during the partial opening of the crossings for 21 days to ensure no one was infected. I was confident that in Gaza, we would not suffer the direct impact of the virus.



For the first time, many here thought that the blockade was finally good for something.

Life gradually went back to normal in Gaza. Restaurants, schools, universities and institutions resumed operations, and there was no more social distancing, which many had not committed to in the first place. There was a constant feeling that one mistake made in the quarantine policy near the border would be like a time bomb exploding inside Gaza. Even this fear began to diminish as the world started to ease measures. Corona, however, stabbed us in our backs...

The mistake happened. Corona was finally within us by the end of August. It was not kind to us, unlike what we initially thought. It seems that whether in good or bad times, we are the last priority of the world and in life!

I do not know what the coming days will look like. I do not want to expect or hope for anything. Yet, I know I will grasp onto some hope and hold on some more as soon as the former disappoints me. That is how I survived the difficulties of life before corona and this is how I will survive corona. And if, at worst, I do not survive, at least I would not be alive to laugh at myself. Hope is my home, and despair can get to me as much as it pleases when I die.

It has been one year since I had experienced a loss. I had finally broken down the walls of solitude and started to regain a sense of things. Indeed, I do not want to say that I am not ready this time to experience more solitude, as I have trained well for that. I want to say that I have

fears—fear that the ghosts of loss will haunt me with the same ferocity to guard my solitude. Fear that I will not be able to help others with their feelings and troubles. Fear that those who helped me once to survive will not survive corona. Fear that I will not be able to present something new to myself and the world. Fear that I will fail to assume the responsibilities of my independence from the nest whose builder I lost.

When the virus was first spreading, I imagined that I would be the first to get infected in Gaza. I told myself that I would be the first perhaps in revenge or for a lack of self-confidence. However, I was not the first to be infected. And now, I am not trying to get infected at all.

I thought that I would not be able to graduate and obtain a bachelor's degree in sociology and psychology through e-learning. I, however, graduated and received my diploma and forgave my university for the graduation ceremony that I did not want to attend anyway. I thought that I would not join the crowd to learn a new skill online. However, I found myself entering a new field on the Internet and excelling in it. I thought that I would not be able to write a letter about corona, and here I am writing it all. . .

I now have to organise the mess inside of me and my electronic devices. I need to stay away as much as possible from Twitter and get closer to books, music, art, videos and words. If, after all that, I am to feel bored, I will remember the sun, the night and my jasmine on the window. Perhaps I will dance and sing with Amr Diab in my room while I think about what I can achieve in the future during and after corona!



# Emergence

**Donya Altaieb**

*Translated by Bisan Samamreh*

I moved it off my desk chair as I grumbled. I pulled it out from the fabric of my clothes. I crushed it with the cigarette in the ashtray. It, however, crawled into my dreams while I was making fun of its blisters. O sorrow, you will not find within me the spirit of defeat as I will honourably die on your remains.

I admit I am a girl who does not like to live behind curtains. My endless desire to provoke my emotions and rebel against them probably caused me excruciating spiritual pain. Recently, I have learned to eliminate the body or the machine through which I became accustomed to living my day. This machine that drives the car, goes to my work, picks my shirts, looks into the eyes of my loved ones on my behalf and mocks my feelings to diminish time and deny alienation. I have become very mindful about my soul: I do not want to forget it at a job interview, in a waiting room or on my bed while the ill-fated machine makes a cup of coffee.

My soul has been picky and hard to please ever since it settled into this body. It decided to have the mind of an old lady who cares only about silence and her addiction to coffee, cigarettes, smoking, books and writing. I know that a traditional soul like mine will become a joke for people from my generation. Therefore, I have not been deeply angry about the corona pandemic.

I do not belong to places nor people. However, I got used to sitting under the sun in my free time. The sun significantly affects shadows. They become ridiculously long and short. They rearrange things and people. That reminds me of a colleague. She used to practice reciting literary texts while sitting on a wooden bench under the shade of a tree whose leaves the sun penetrates. When I sat next to her, she yelled while complaining and waving the paper around in her hands: "At the very heart of tragedy, there is light..." She moved her eyebrows closer together and begged: "I am unable to come up with a sad tone of voice." She was planning to read Van Gogh's letter to Theo, his brother. I have no idea whether she managed to do that or not.

During the pandemic, books disciplined me. I am in a love relationship with the Book of Disquiet by Fernando Pessoa. The contemplative characters captivate me and suffering appeals to me. I learned from Radical Alterity by Jean Baudrillard to not fear forgetfulness as it is the opposite of death. The death of reality means killing the details in the first place. Perhaps it means the death of everything else under this simplified definition. When the human is absent, they become some long-expired memories that mix until they lose their significance. Elimination is death. I know a cancer patient who does not fear death. We are not close friends; she borrowed books from me when we were in touch. She likes reading and divides a human into two categories: Random and organised. She tends to be in-between. Cancer turned her into a random girl. Because of the pain, she had lost the privilege of sweeping her room or stopping a spider from building its web in the corner. When I visited her, she said: "I'm a bald girl today. I don't need to dye my hair. It's alright. I will dye my wig hazelnut brown. It is depressing, though. It's long and funny."

What do I remember about the quarantine? As I was writing a news story about the dispute over the tax revenues, this employee confessed to me in an interview: “Before my daughter went to college, I gave her all the money I had. I hugged her and told her: Forgive me.” I will never forget the way she uttered, “forgive me,” nor how she cried and buried herself behind the smoke of her cigarette that had already burned out.

I tend to listen to people more than talk to them. Although I can put together words, rarely do I find a well-organised sentence. Why? No good reasons. Some characters develop differently than others. Perhaps it is due to the different levels of awareness, experiences and slaps.

The awareness one has at a very young age does not just go away—the way my mother’s face feels, my first memory of what the word ‘moon’ means, my name, my first disappointment and the pain I have built on as I grew up because I was unable to figure it out during my childhood. I am scared of what I cannot bury with me. Many are the things that will live after me, perhaps an entire world. My world is inhibited excessively with things, people and books.

It makes me sad that Bethlehem is far from my small and tangible world. It occupies a large space in my memory. I keep digging in the pockets of friends and acquaintances in search of news about it. Your birthplace remains dear in your heart and pulls you back to it with strings of longing and identity. Have you ever tried to be safe? Bethlehem forms an aura of aspiration. When I walked along its roads some time ago, I blended with its stones, walls and the images of sadness and resistance painted all over. If I had one hour in Bethlehem, I would spend it inside Tanween

Library, the place where I missed leaving my mark and stealing marks of writers I love.

What strikes me is that there are things in life that will remain beyond our control. If the pandemic ends, the feelings never will, nor the hint of indifference that will always frame the image of a girl who does not laugh but looks with sharp eyes at a fixed point. The best that she can give to a soul she loves is a brief and reserved farewell smile.

One cannot know oneself. And I am not saying that I know myself. I am only sure that my identity will always renew, as a static identity is a dead identity. And this girl, suffocated by her constant zoning out, will never be more than a childish gesture to the bamboo stalk that my mother placed on the opposite table for decoration.



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