غَزَّة في كُتُب

GAZA IN BOOKS



Essays by Laila Salma, Alaa Alqaisi,
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INTRODUCTION

For this year's publication, marking the fourth annual Read Palestine Week (November 29-December 5 2026), we asked writers in and from Gaza to reflect on books that connect them to their homes, families, and histories.

There were no limits on the books they could choose; anything that evoked or connected them to Palestine. They write about books written in other times and places that feel as though they have come from their own hands, lives, and experiences.

Laila Salma reaches back to Ghassan Kanafani's *Land of Sad Oranges,* which she read in university and first tried to grasp as theory, and later as violent reality. As she writes, "Less than a year later, that distance collapsed. I found myself living the story, not as a reader on the margins, but as a character within them."

Alaa Alqaisi chooses two poems: one by Somali writer Warsan Shire and one by Syrian poet Saer Wadoud. Both are poems of exile that connect her both to where she was and where she is now, outside Dublin.

Nasser Rabah writes from Maghazi Camp, in an essay translated by Enas Eltorky, not about a particular book, but his whole lost library. When he went

back to the home he had been forced to flee and found it collapsed, he writes, "I rescued as many of my books as I could. I lifted up concrete blocks and pulled out a book, dusting it off as if I were a doctor slapping life into the back of a baby just born from its mother's womb."

In another essay translated by Enas, Nahil Mohana writes about Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin,* which planted its roots deep inside her: "While reading *Mornings in Jenin* amid the chaos of the third wave of displacement, I felt the author's words were not written in 2010, but rather that they were born from the heart of this specific moment in time."

Jehad Abu Daya writes about his connection to Albert Camus' *The Stranger,* because, as he says, "In Gaza, we live between the day of loss and the day after, and sometimes there is no difference between them."

When his dear friend Essa was killed by Israel in November 2023, Basman Aldirawi recalled a poem by the Palestinian poet Rashid Hussein, "The Absent One," in which, "God has become a refugee, Sir."

Somaia Abunada, who like Alaa is also now in Dublin, connects us to the work of her sister, Heba Abunada, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike on her home in Khan Yunis, Gaza, on October 20, 2023. As she writes, "Since I lost Heba almost three years ago, I have been searching for her everywhere." She continues to search for her in this essay.

Hend Jouda connects Gaza to a book from somewhere else entirely: *Zinky Boys*, by Svetlana Alexievich. In her essay, translated by Marianne Dhenin, Hend connects the killers in *Zinky Boys* to the soldiers in the IDF, asking, "If the killer can feel regret, then why

doesn't the killing stop? If consciousness emerges too late, then is it even enough in the first place?"

In his essay, "I Am Tired of Justice," Ahmad Elkhuwaja writes about a visit to a bookshop in Gaza in the summer of 2023 recalling, as he left the bookshop, that he had no shelf for his new book. "I feel like everyone was playing in this theatre of normalcy that I'm not a part of. Putting up a bookshelf is a bet that I would never recover from losing. Installing one in my room is a wish that things will be okay, that I will live until I die of old age, that life will become routine and ordinary."

And finally, in "A Paper Ticket to a Land Beyond Reach," Saga Hamdan writes about Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses*, in an essay translated by Enas Eltorky. She notes that the book helped her travel in time and space: "This book allowed my imagination to journey not just beyond the borders of Gaza, but to the whole of Palestine; a place that, for me, is impossible to visit."

Along with these reflections, we ask readers to join us in taking further action for Palestinian liberation. In "On Further Action," we collectively reflect on actions everyone can take: refusing complicity; supporting Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions;and joining the struggle for Palestinian return and liberation. ■


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JAFFA 5
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FROM JAFFA TO GAZA: THE ORANGE THAT NEVER WITHERS

By Laila Salma

When I studied Ghassan Kanafani's أرض البرتقال الحزين (*The Land of Sad Oranges*) in my final year of university, I read it as a student trying to grasp the story of a generation that lived through the first Nakba. I saw, within its pages, a child forced to leave his home, a family crammed into a truck, a sorrow so heavy it fell on children before adults. I approached the text as literature, archiving the past, turning tears into words. Back then, the little story was, to me, about what had happened, about the first exile that displaced Palestinians from their land. I read it like a historical document, pain at a distance narrated through prose. I remember reading it at the small desk in my bedroom, surrounded by half-empty mugs of coffee, the kind that collect during long study nights. The lamp cast a warm pool of light over the pages while the rest of the room stayed quiet and dim. I was alone, trying to grasp the weight of a pain I hadn't lived. I empathized with the characters, but felt a safe distance between us, as if time itself protected me from their fate.

But less than a year later, that distance collapsed. I found myself living the story, not as a reader on the margins, but as a character within them. The war in Gaza pulled me into Kanafani's text, rewriting his words across our skin. The image of the child clutching his orange on the road of displacement was no longer just literary, it became flesh and blood in the form of Gaza's children, holding onto charred toys, dusty schoolbooks, or small pieces of bread they feared might be snatched from them mid-flight. In the story, the truck became the space where they had to shrink their entire home, their memories, furniture, children, and elders, before driving into the unknown. I remember pausing as I read that moment. There was a strange tightness in my chest, not just from sorrow, but from how disturbingly familiar it felt, even though I had never lived it. Something about the idea itself unsettled me: that a person

could compress their entire home, their history, into a space too small even for their grief.

At that moment, I was gasping for air. It was as if a quiet, invisible weight had settled on my chest. I didn't cry. I didn't speak. But I carried a silence inside me, and a question that I couldn't shake: How does a person reduce their life to so little, and still go on?

What I didn't know then was that just a few months later, I would see that same scene with my own eyes, not on the page, but in the streets around me.

On the pages of the short story, Ghassan writes of childhood, of reaching a depth of despair so profound that he began to doubt whether there truly is a God who hears or sees. He says, in my own translation, "I doubted that this God hears and sees everything." I wasn't surprised by the doubts of the broken child in the story, but I never imagined I would arrive at that same moment of doubt myself.

On nights under bombardment, we asked, not in blasphemy, but in sorrow: *Does God hear us? Does God see us? How does He allow these homes to be extinguished over the heads of their people?* In those moments of weakness, all we had were questions and tears falling before our words.

And then there was the scene that never left me: a young boy sleeping on the pavement with his family. I had once thought that it was the ultimate image of misery, one history would not dare to repeat. But I found myself on that very pavement, sleeping beneath the open sky, among hundreds of Gazans who had no shelter. As if the story had prophesied for us this flood of torn tents and streets turned into homes.

The women, too, were never far from the story. In the short story, when the men could no longer protect or provide, it was the women's gold that saved them, an unclasped bracelet became the most valuable possession. And today, in Gaza, I've seen that scene unfold again and again: women offering their simple jewelry to save a family from hunger or buy a child medicine. It became clear that gold is not an ornament, it is proof, once more, of how women continue to sacrifice, as they always have, to keep the home standing, even if that home is a tent.

And then there is the waiting, the heartbreak that keeps repeating. In the short story, Ghassan's father waited for the fifteenth of May, the day the Arab armies were said to come to reclaim their land. He waited a long time, and when he returned, he returned carrying

his disappointment. We too have waited. For two years, we've counted promises and looked for signs that something might change. But what we found was disappointment wearing new faces, betrayal repeating itself in an echo.

Ghassan writes in one of the most poignant moments in the story: "When I moved away from home, I was moving away from my childhood."

I didn't fully understand it at the time, listening to the story through my phone on my walk to university, with the city slowly waking up around me. The streets were still half-asleep, the air carried the smell of morning, and my thoughts were floating between the narration and my own routine. It felt poetic but distant. I thought it belonged to another time, another heartbreak.

But now, I understand it deeply. Today, our children in Gaza are being pushed away from their homes, and with every step, their childhood slips further behind. Their hair grays, though they are still only ten years old. They carry burdens far too heavy for their small frames. They hesitate before asking their mothers for breakfast, not wanting to be an added weight. They take on the roles of adults while still barely out of infancy. Childhood falls from them as ceilings fall from homes.

Each time I turned those pages three years ago, I thought I had reached the end of the story. But when I opened my eyes to Gaza, I found it repeating itself: the truck, the doubts, the pavement, the gold, the waiting, the murdered childhood. Ghassan wasn't only writing about the past, he was writing about us, about a present not yet born when his pen touched paper, but one he somehow knew would come.

And yet, despite everything, I believe the oranges haven't withered. The oranges remain a symbol of hope, a sign of roots that refuse to be pulled from the ground. Just as the family in the story resisted death with words, we resist it with life. We cannot predict when this displacement will end, and disappointment has lingered through the years, but we know the orange trees will bloom once more. And our children, no matter how soon they've been forced to grow, will carry the seeds of return in their hearts. ■


ERITREA
YEMEN
DJIBOUTI
SOUTH SUDAN
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
MOGADISHU
UGANDA
KENYA

FORTY-FIVE KILOMETERS, THIRTY YEARS

By Alaa Alqaisi

"no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark."

The first line arrives with the blunt force of revelation, yet it contains an entire philosophy of departure. Warsan Shire begins her poem in the form of a negation, but what she delivers is not absence. She offers instead a condition that cannot be refused: home itself transformed into a predator, one's place of origin turned into a mouth that devours. Shire wrote these words from London, not Mogadishu, but the voice that carries them is the residue of ancestral departures—her Somali parents fractured by exile, her own identity carved into double-ness. The English word for "home" is not merely a vehicle of communication—it is a deliberate address to Western ears, pulsing with the cadence of inherited departures. Reading her, I feel her double-ness press against mine.

I too departed, not by decision, but by compulsion; not with designs on the future, but with the urgency of survival. Gaza expelled me in the only way a city can: with suffocating air and ruptured nights, with the thickening dust that settles on the rim of every cup, with the constant rehearsal of explosions that arrive whether one listens for them or not. The bus that carried me south traced the familiar geography: sea gleaming on one side for forty-five kilometers, ruins tightening on the other, the windowpane both barrier and mirror. I pressed my hand against the glass as though skin could resist erasure. When Shire writes, *you only leave home / when home won't let you stay*, I hear not metaphor but my own body's instinctive recoil—as if Gaza itself whispered, *leave, go, you can no longer breathe here.*

But leaving is never merely compulsion. Saer Wadoud, writing of Syrians who abandoned cities reduced to cinders, reminds us that the act of exile is also layered with ritual. In ورد على آذار / "Roses to March," he writes (and I translate): *They left the windows open as they went, / perhaps in fear of echoes in their wake, / perhaps that evening would call them back.* His language transforms departure into

ceremony, a gesture that anticipates memory's return. Windows left ajar hold the air of unfinished presence, as if absence is never complete. Between Shire's mouth of a shark and Wadoud's open windows, I find my own arc of leaving: Gaza compels, Wadoud consoles; the body runs forward, yet ritual insists that something always remains.

On the day of departure, I carried, with me, the weight of both poets. When the bus halted for five hours at Karm Abu Salem, the air grew unbearable with sweat, silence, and whimpers muffled against mothers' shoulders. Men adjusted their collars with futile precision, as though order could protect their dignity. Through the glass, I saw tents sprawling across the horizon, smoke curling upward, faces staring with hunger that required no language. Shire's words thundered in me with the force of a verdict: *you have to understand, / that no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land.* For us it was not a boat but a bus, yet the condition was identical. Land itself had become the predator: geography weaponized into refusal.

Later, when I stood under fluorescent light in the curtained booth, camera glaring, arms raised, the officer ordering me across with fractured Arabic—'Ubri—I felt another of Shire's images burn into my skin: *until the blade burnt threats into / your neck.* Crossing had become submission, posture, motion. The body no longer moved by will but by compulsion, reduced to number and gesture. Every knock we had made—petitions filed, lists signed, hours of waiting—echoed in my chest as I obeyed the command.

Yet Wadoud teaches a different truth: exiles preserve even in dispersal. *They carried nothing with them but their names— / their names, their customs, and their mannered ways*. At the crossing, our belongings were confiscated, our bags forbidden. A yellow sticker was pressed onto my hand, branding me for the ledger of another. Yet beneath that sticker, my name pulsed intact, written in the cadence of Gaza's dialect, guarded by the qāf and softened kāf, carried in the intimacy of kitchens and the aroma of lentils simmering, in the courtyards where jasmine grew against stone. Bureaucracy stripped me of possession, but not language. I pressed my finger into the condensation on the window and wrote my name, erasing it quickly, ashamed yet reassured by the childish gesture. The act was proof

of Wadoud's insistence: even when stripped of objects, we remain clothed in syllables, in the fragile rituals of speech.

The road to Rafah revealed cruelty staged as theatre. Torn sacks of flour spilled across dunes until the sand resembled false snow in August, obscene whiteness mocking starvation. Children stood meters away, their hunger sharpened into spectacle while soldiers treated food as lure and trap. Overhead, crows circled in dark arcs of omen while on the ground, between stones, a violet flower forced its way upward. That sight contained both poets at once: Shire's litany of degradation—*no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck / feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled / means something more than journey*, mirrored in the spectacle of flour turned weapon, and Wadoud's insistence on endurance: *They gave their dream-born hands to wings of wind*, embodied in the flower that emerged despite such desolation.

At Allenby Bridge, the humiliation of repetition wore us thin. Passports stamped, names called, lines reordered, until fatigue became indistinguishable from surrender. And then, the horizon shifted. For thirty years, the sea had been the measure of day's end, sun dissolving into water with a promise to return light by dawn. On this journey, the sun set behind mountains, the earth itself intercepting fire. That was the moment Gaza receded fully. Wadoud's words spoke once more: *They gave their years in tribute to the wind, / which scattered them like leaves torn from the trees.* My years, too, scattered into a geography I could not yet decipher. I pressed my knuckles against the window, not knocking for entry, but acknowledging the absence.

Yet absence summons memory. I thought of loved ones whose tenderness steadied entire days, of friends whose shoulders carried more than grief, bearing the fragile architecture of hope itself. We shared meals when there was scarcely enough to go around, passing laughter like bread so that each of us could taste survival. In the thick of bombardment, we passed jokes between us, dark humor that postponed despair even for a heartbeat. We crossed streets together, half-laughing, half-bracing, asking aloud which of us might meet death first, and in what manner. Those jokes return now with a heavier edge, because memory transforms them. What once deflected despair, now deepens grief.

The laughter that once shielded us becomes elegy.

The sea was constant in our days, its salt threading into every wound, its horizon teaching us both confinement and promise. We joked that Gaza's sea could not carry us away—that it guarded us like an unkind sentinel, always there but never offering passage. Yet we walked towards it, even under curfew, breathing its salt as if lungs could store it against the stench of diesel. In the evening, we stood on the shore and traded stories: which neighbor's house was destroyed, whose cousin had been detained, what rumor carried news of tomorrow's strike. Over these conversations, laughter hovered, dark and reckless. Memory brings it back sharpened, weighted by the absences that have since multiplied.

Days later, in Dublin, rain began softly, a sound I had never known unaccompanied by blast. I recorded it, sent it back across distance, because Wadoud had already taught me that rain can carry grief when bodies have no more tears. His words returned with force: *yet heaven hastened to their grief, and so / the rain became their solemn funeral*. Rain does not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty; it falls, alike, on all. In Dublin the rain fell gently, a weight that did not crush but reminded, a sound that carried absence into another landscape. I left the window open a finger's width, honoring Wadoud's words: *they left the windows open as they went*. My papers lay on the desk, sharp-edged, fragile in their authority. I pressed my knuckles against the glass, remembering Gaza's walls where my hand had lingered, remembering laughter that tasted like survival, remembering the sea swallowing light each night and promising to return it.

Shire's voice insists upon necessity: *no one leaves home unless home chases you / fire under feet / hot blood in your belly*. The flame in her poem burns at the scale of the body, compulsion written into muscle and breath. Wadoud widens the blaze until it consumes the entire horizon: *And all their country—wide as all their hearts— / was kindled, was consumed, became a fire*. Between them, the fire expands from pulse to geography, from the intimate urgency of survival to the vast immolation of land itself. Yet even as he names the ruin, Wadoud turns toward endurance: *They gave their dream-born hands to wings of wind, / they gave their grief to heaven's unrelenting rain.* Between their voices, I hear my own departure. Gaza expelled me, yet

memory clothed me; compulsion and ritual interlaced. To leave Gaza was both devastation and ceremony, wound and preservation, survival and lament.

With them, I learn what exile truly means: to run from the shark's mouth with fire underfoot, yet to leave a window open so that memory can breathe; to carry grief like contraband across borders, but also names, jokes, tenderness, and the salt of a sea that cannot be confiscated. Departure is not merely movement across geography, it is the layering of compulsion and ritual, necessity and remembrance, grief and endurance. It is to know that the horizon has changed forever, and still, to remember the violet that pushed its way through desolation, the laughter passed like bread, and the sea that both confined and sustained us. ■



LIBRARY BENEATH THE RUBBLE

By Nasser Rabah
Translated by Enas Eltorky

I grew up in a house where my grandfather always bought the daily paper. As soon as he was done with it, my hands would reach out to grab hold of it. When I opened it up, the paper was wider than the whole span of my arms. So I would spread it out, pin it with my knees, and bend over to read, leaning on my elbows. As soon as I had finished a page, I would leave that space—a space crammed with letters, pictures, news, knowledge—and turn to another, where I would again be swimming in joyful amazement.

We couldn't afford books, except the ones they passed around at school. Years later, my father and grandfather lost interest in following the paper; they got a small radio, which they tuned in to the news broadcasts from Radio Monte Carlo and the BBC's هنا لندن (This is London). Years later, they listened to the Arabic news broadcasts from Israeli radio. But that wasn't for me; I walked with my head down as I went to and fro. Maybe I would find a torn page

lying on the sidewalk, maybe from a book, and that flash of stray knowledge would be enough, like a streak of lightning on a dark night.

I write all this to explain how much books and reading meant to me, how reading was my lost treasure, and to explain the magic that crept over my soul and led me into endless temptation.

Year after year, books were my companions: beside and under my pillow, in my wardrobe, under my bed. Sometimes they were bought, more often borrowed. I carried them from house to house, from job to job, as though I were carrying a sin, something stolen from the costs of living. I paid close attention to their cries and their grumbling, until, belatedly, I was able to build my own home in the Maghazi refugee camp. My home was right at the edge of the camp. To the north and west, the camp's makeshift houses—with their varying heights and windows side by side—were packed in together with the intimacy of a single family. Their distant sounds would reach me: neighbors arguing, children wailing, women complaining about the heat and high prices, the gloomy expressions of the men. To the south and east, olive and palm trees stretched out in front of me, drawing me into their world of quiet contemplation and freedom from the crowds. Their silence was edged with the rustling of palm fronds and the passing sounds of birds—of which I knew only the crows and the sparrows. And the horizon ran away from me, until my eyes crashed against that hateful border fence.

It was only when I was in my forties, in my own home, that I was able to build my library. I made an agreement with a carpenter friend to begin work, and we shared the whole process, step by step. I chose the types of wood, the paint, the door handles. I thought a great deal about its design, so that it would have a size and shape that suited me. I thought about it for a long time; it needed to span the distances of loss, and longing, and dreams. It needed to be a place for meeting an absent loved one—a place of slow and elegant beauty. And then, while I was praying, the design came to me. My friend built it in just that way, as I had seen it in prayer. From that day on, my library held that kind of sanctity, or at least a great deal of favor and respect. And so I finally had a library, or perhaps, a mihrab.

As I sat there in the library, the birds twittered with all their morning clamor. So did the crows, and the neighbors'

pigeons. They sat beside me, behind a clear glass window that looked out over the orchards behind the house, which stretched out toward the horizon. The landscape there, in that place between the southern end of the camp and the agricultural lands of Al-Masdar village, would change in the summer, when they would be dotted with small wheatfields, their gold rippling and glittering in the rising and setting sun. In the fall, a talented painter would add some red spots of date clusters to the tall fountains of green. In the winter, when it rained, the whole world danced behind the house. The palm trees swayed their feminine forms and were soaked through, while the olive trees trembled with the pleasure they waited for year after year. The soil gave off its hidden scents, and the birds quivered, and I was overtaken by the spirit of poetry.

Years later, the greenhouses to the east of the camp expanded into the space that separated them from the wire mesh. They multiplied and interrupted our visual dialogue, extending their mute white. In the camp, we were prisoners of politics and occupation, and books were how we traveled. We were unable to go between countries; laws always restricted our movement. For me, my library, and especially novels, represented a kind of tourism. From within the library itself, I looked out onto a world other than the one east of the camp. There were novels from Latin America (Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Coelho, Allende), Russia (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bulgakov), Japan (Kawabata, Shōsaku Endo), and, of course, the English Orwell. In the library, I argued with Darwish and Kanafani and shared tea with Ibrahim Nasrallah, Zakaria Muhammad, and Hussein Al-Barghouti.

I have always avoided writing about any grand Palestinian achievement, fearing my words would be read as nationalist flattery. However, Darwish, Kanafani, Emile Habibi, and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra cannot be overlooked under any circumstances. If I had to choose who had the greatest impact on my life, it would be Ghassan Kanafani, specifically the short story collection *Land of Sad Oranges*. I was deeply moved the first time I read it, perhaps in my twenties, and I experienced then a feeling of pride and honor in being Palestinian, belonging to a distinct tribe and not a sad and miserable people.

For me, novels were an early way to distinguish myself from my peers in school and university, as their interests

were focused elsewhere, on sports or the movies.

And after a long life, I discovered I was a person who could talk about politics, psychology, geography, and history, without realizing where all this had come from. Novels gave me serenity, making me into a person who loved everyone and listened with an open mind, as if I were reading a novel in each person's story. It was rare and difficult for me to get into a real argument. I don't ever remember doing so. Who would be so stupid as to argue with a novel?

During the long nights, butterflies slip out of the orchards, attracted by the lights of the library. They circle and circle, and a butterfly lands at the edge of a book, as though beckoning me to read. I never disappoint them; I connect with these signs of the unseen, and a thrill of knowledge runs through my soul.

My library went through several wars and invasions and it survived, just as I survived them. After each war, I would pamper it with more books. True, the bombing didn't scar it as it did me, but time after time, it would cover the library with a veil of sadness and dust, just as it sank my soul in a whirlpool of anxious delirium. The library is the soul of the house, the guardian of the night, the friend of late nights and solitude. It wept in my arms that day, when I stood before it, bidding it farewell. I had decided to leave the house for another, safer place, and I left it alone, staring with its tearful eyes at a window overlooking the horizon of tanks.

I returned two weeks later, after the Israeli army had left the area and headed a little further east. The library was gone. Four tank shells had struck the house; two of them hit the library. I couldn't find the walls, or the shelves, or the books; they were all crushed under the rubble. That day, the children looked for me and found me, and I rescued as many of my books as I could. I lifted up concrete blocks and pulled out a book, dusting it off as if I were a doctor slapping life into the back of a baby just born from its mother's womb. Every time I rescued a book, I rejoiced, as if I had saved a soul. I had saved the souls of Salim Barakat, Nietzsche, Ziad Khaddash, and also the soul of Nasser Rabah.

Maghazi Camp, October 23, 2025.



Nasser Rabah with the few books he was able to save from his home library, which was bombed in 2024 by Israeli tanks in the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza.



SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *MORNINGS IN JENIN*: WHEN DISPLACEMENT BECOMES A PALESTINIAN DESTINY

By Nahil Mohana
Translated by Enas Eltorky

Amid the ongoing genocide that the Gaza Strip has been facing since October 2023, which casts its dark shadow over every detail of our lives, big and small, I found myself seeking refuge in books. Searching for voices resembling my own, and words to comprehend what it means to survive beneath the ashes, I have read many novels dealing with the Palestinian cause. The one that most touched my heart and senses was *Mornings in Jenin*, (translated to Arabic: *As the World Sleeps*), by Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa.

Abulhawa wrote her novel in English in 2010 and it rapidly gained international recognition, being translated into nineteen languages and becoming a bestseller in Britain. The novel tells the story of four generations of a Palestinian family from the village of Ein Hod near Haifa, tracing how their peaceful lives turned into a tragedy in the diaspora, after their forced displacement in 1948 following the establishment of the State of Israel. Through this family, we witness the saga of an uprooted homeland and a wound that refuses to heal.

I read the novel during one of the harshest periods of my life, as I prepared for my third displacement from my home in Gaza. The occupation army had announced its intention to invade the Strip just one day after the famine ended. During those hours, I bade farewell to the walls, cafes, and small shops that had been my miniature homeland. I bade farewell to my colleagues at work, as well as the children I had mentored in writing and offered psychological support, those to whom I used to say: "Reading is more important than bread," even though I knew deep down that nothing is more important than bread in times of hunger. They were tense moments, suspended between hope and fear, just like the hopes of the novel's heroine, who moved between Jenin, Ramallah, Beirut, and finally the United States, on a journey that mirrors the fate of every Palestinian: endless displacement, and

roaming that knows no rest.
In the pages of the novel, I found myself experiencing a "rehearsal" for a new displacement, realizing that my fate, like Amal's, was to remain caught between exiles, carrying my homeland in my heart, because a single home no longer exists in the Palestinian lexicon.

The heroine of the novel, Amal Abulheja, belongs to a family that was uprooted from their village in 1948. Amal grew up in the Jenin refugee camp, studied medicine in the United States, before later returning to the camp at the beginning of the second Intifada in 2002. There, she was martyred after the infamous Jenin massacre, when the Israeli army besieged the camp, and declared the area a "closed military zone," preventing journalists and relief teams from entering. In that massacre, which claimed hundreds of lives, Amal met her final fate, as if she carried within her the pain of every Palestinian generation born in exile and dying with a dream of return.

When I read about the Jenin massacre in the novel, I immediately recalled what we are living through today in Gaza: demolished homes, bodies under the rubble, unidentified children. I realized that history is repeating itself, but on a larger scale, as if the novel were a prophecy that is renewed on our land every decade.

One of the scenes that stuck in my mind was that of Fatima, the wife of Yousef, Amal's older brother, when the family recognized her body by the color of her blue dress. I used to love the color blue, seeing it as a symbol of purity and serenity, but came to hate it when it became a witness to the death of Fatima and her two little girls. That color, once a symbol of life, became in the novel and in my reality, the color of loss and spilled blood.

In another scene, Amal returns to Jenin to meet her friend Huda after many long years of separation, in a conversation that mingles irony with nostalgia, when she says to her:

"You're in Jenin." It made my heart explode with the memory of love. With the memory of life. "Must you always state the obvious?" I said, turning to the tiger eyes of Huda. We flung ourselves around each other, laughing through tears. "You got fat," she said. "So did you," I said. "Must you state the obvious?" she said, imitating me.

For me, this scene was more than just a meeting between two friends; it was a reunion of a Palestinian with their homeland after a long absence, a confrontation between a person and the

memories they tried in vain to flee. One of the moments that moved me most was when Amal described her feelings upon hearing the call to prayer in Jenin after many years of living in America, and how her body shivered with longing and nostalgia, as she had never heard the call to prayer, nor seen minarets, nor felt neighborly warmth there. How deeply this mirrors our own longing, when we are displaced from our cities, losing the small details that made them ours: the cries of street vendors, the aroma of morning coffee, and the dawn call to prayer proclaiming that we are still alive.

Abulhawa is not just a novelist; she is a witness to Palestinian memory. She was born into a family that was displaced from Jerusalem to Jordan in 1967, then to Kuwait, before settling in the United States during her teenage years. She studied biomedical science, but chose to write from a place of pain rather than a laboratory. She founded Playgrounds for Palestine, which is a foundation dedicated to providing safe play spaces for Palestinian children, believing that play is a human right, no less important than the right to life.

Mornings in Jenin is not merely a literary work, it is also a testimony to an era, and a humanitarian plea against injustice. She wrote it to tell the oblivious world: as you sleep, we guard our memory, carving our names into stone so they will not be erased.

Perhaps what makes the novel so deeply touching for readers is its honesty, and its ability to capture the small details that make up the Palestinian identity, from the scent of olives in Haifa, to the sound of gunfire in Jenin; from a mother's pain, to a grandmother's resilience.

When I closed the book on that cold night of displacement, I felt a kind of solace unlike any other. I was no longer alone: I had Amal and Susan, and all the Palestinians who never left our hearts, despite their absence.

Today, as I write these words, I am still displaced from my home. Everywhere I set foot, I try to plant a memory, to teach, to write, to plant a sapling in a large pile of rubble. Nothing has changed in our essence as Palestinians; whether we are in Gaza, Jenin, Jerusalem, Rafah, Khan Younis, Jabalia, or Lod, we are the homeland, wherever we may be.

We live to tell our stories, we write to bear witness, and we dream to continue the journey. For as the world sleeps, we stay vigilant to keep the memory alive.

Today, more than seven decades

since the Nakba, it seems as if the novel is being rewritten in Gaza. Homes reduced to rubble with residents trapped underneath, entire bloodlines wiped from official records, and children growing up in the same fear, are all extensions of the novel's characters whose stories have not yet ended. It is as if history insists on repeating itself, and justice is still absent from Palestine. Abulhawa reminds us that the story is not merely a past to be recounted, but rather a present being reshaped day after day, and that what is being committed today in Gaza is nothing but another chapter of the same novel, still being written as the world sleeps.

I read *Mornings in Jenin* during our displacement, when tents were being hastily erected, and the sky rained fear instead of water. I moved between the book's pages, as I moved between areas of displacement, searching for a safe haven, for a home resembling the one we left in haste. Abulhawa tells the story of a family uprooted from their village, Ein Hod, in 1948, only to find themselves in refugee camps, just as we find ourselves today, displaced from one city to another within besieged Gaza. When I read about the loss of their home, I felt as though I were reading about us; about the keys we carry even though the doors are gone, and the pictures of our homes we keep on our phones, because returning to them has become a distant dream.

I realized then that history does not depart, but continues to revolve in the same place, and that the story of displacement is not a chapter from the past, but a present that is repeated, with new names and different children. *Mornings in Jenin* is no longer a novel to me, but a mirror reflecting what we are experiencing today, a displacement that keeps repeating itself, as though we have been trapped on the same page for seventy years.

While reading *Mornings in Jenin* amid the chaos of the third wave of displacement, I felt the author's words were not written in 2010, but rather that they were born from the heart of this specific moment in time. The scenes of displacement experienced by the novel's heroine, Amal, from Jenin to Ramallah, then Beirut, and finally to America, seemed like another version of the displacement Gazans are living through today. The pain was the same, the departure was the same, and even the words hadn't changed: "forced evacuation," "waiting at the border," "homes demolished in an instant," and

"memories left behind the door." Every time I closed the book to look at the small bag of possessions I had with me, I felt that I was sharing Amal's bag, the one in which she carried her life, her miniature homeland. The novel seemed to tell me that the Nakba is not a thing of the past, but rather a recurring event in every cycle of extermination we endure, and that Palestinians are born to carry their homeland on their shoulders, as they carry their hearts. With each page, I became more certain that what began in 1948 has not ended yet, but is repeating now in Gaza, where the same scene is being replayed with new faces and newly destroyed homes, in a cycle of displacement that knows no end.

As the world sleeps, Palestinians are being exterminated. ■



THE STRANGER IN GAZA

By Jehad Abu Daya



While the sky was raining both water and missiles, I was volunteering as a medical student at Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah, after being displaced from Gaza City. The wounded arrived like a relentless flood—dozens at a time—and the hospital floor was stained a permanent red. During the short pauses between shifts, I would lie on a narrow bed, open my friend's recommendation, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and try to lose myself in its quiet madness.

The book began with that cold, unforgettable sentence: "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know."

It stopped me the first time I read it. That disoriented sense of time, of not knowing when a loss has truly happened—it felt hauntingly familiar.

In Gaza, we live between the day of loss and the day after, and sometimes there is no difference between them. We bury our dead quickly, often without knowing their names, and the grief that should last a lifetime is condensed into a moment, into a breath, into the space between two explosions.

The hospital became a reflection of that absurd world Camus described. The cries of pain, the smell of disinfectant and smoke, the chaos of blood and bandages—it all seemed to confirm that existence itself had lost meaning. And yet, in the middle of it, there was a strange calm, the same calm that surrounded Meursault, the novel's protagonist.

The scene of his indifference to his mother's death always reminded me of a father who once came to see his son. When he learned that his son had been martyred, he sighed, nodded, and quietly left the hospital. He wasn't heartless—just emptied. In a place where death is cheap and everywhere, the simple fact that your loved one's body was found—not missing, not devoured by animals, not buried beneath the rubble—becomes a strange kind of privilege, a luxury to be envied.

This land is as strange as Meursault himself. Why does the world's pain

pour only upon it? Why does no one comfort it, or gently pat its weary head? Gaza walks toward the angel of death with a peculiar calm, while the whole world watches its funeral—smiling, relieved to be rid of a burden they never wanted to carry.

When I reached the part where the judges question Meursault's composure—his lack of remorse after killing a man, and his stillness after his mother's death—I couldn't help but think of the soldier in the sky, pressing buttons in his cockpit as if playing a PlayStation game, and of politicians counting our dead as milestones in their so-called "historic peace." All of them passed through my mind—but none of them will ever stand trial. The clock struck midnight. My break was over. It was time to return to work.

Bodies lay on the floor, bearing wounds the textbooks never described. The medical team performed what could only be called miracles, moving between shattered limbs and collapsing lungs, improvising life with nothing but willpower. The electricity flickered. The air smelled of iron and smoke. Then, in the middle of that long, endless night, one of the doctors learned that her son was among the martyrs. She cried quietly for a few seconds, then wiped her tears and returned to her patients. No one could replace her, and the hospital staff were already too few.

I remember looking at her and thinking of Meursault again—not because she lacked emotion, but because she, like him, had learned to survive the unbearable. If Gaza were anywhere else in the world, how long would a mother be allowed to mourn her son? How many years would she weep? Here, seconds are counted by the number of the dead. There is no time for tears.

Camus wrote that life is absurd, that meaning is an illusion we chase in a world that does not care. In Gaza, we have learned to live within that truth—not as philosophy, but as daily routine.

We bury, rebuild, and return to the ward. We drink tea next to windows shattered the night before. We laugh softly, not because we are happy, but because laughter is our last defense against collapse.

If Gaza were not strange,
it would have wept for every victim for a year
and thus, it would have wept forever.
If Gaza were not strange,
its people would have grown weary,
and stopped clinging to life with their final breath.
If Gaza were not strange,
life would have been written for it,
as it was written for the rest of the world.

Camus's *The Stranger* is not just a story about a man detached from his emotions; it is a mirror for those who live in places where grief is endless. Meursault accepted the absurdity of the world and found peace only when he realized that meaning was never promised. Perhaps that is what Gaza teaches us, too: that even in chaos, we can choose honesty over illusion, existence over despair.

The night I finished the book, the bombing was still echoing in the distance. The hospital's windows rattled, and somewhere down the corridor, a nurse whispered a prayer between two heartbeats. I closed the novel and looked at the last line, where Meursault waits for his execution and hopes for a crowd of angry faces to greet him. There was something familiar in that defiance—in that refusal to pretend.

I understood then that that Gaza is not only a place of tragedy, but also of truth. A land that refuses to lie about its pain, that stares into the absurdity of existence and still insists on living. Maybe that's what it means to be a stranger—not to feel nothing, but to feel too much in a world that no longer knows how to listen. ■



IN THIS GENOCIDE, I WAS THE ABSENT ONE

By Basman Aldirawi

Before the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014, I was forty percent a nerd, but I was one hundred percent a science guy. Physiotherapy was my career and, at the time, my focus. After the 2014 assault, which back then we thought was the worst things could get, I lost my friend Haytham. My father had passed away when I was three years old, and Haytham was my first taste of loss with a fully formed memory. The war in 2014 left thousands of martyrs and massive destruction across Gaza. It also left me with multiple syndromes: insomnia, phobias, and a craving to write and read.

In October 2023, I was in Egypt for three months of advanced training in physiotherapy, supported by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, where I work as a physiotherapist. My training started in July 2023, and I was scheduled to return mid-October. I was already missing home, friends, work, and of course, the sea. I witnessed all of the previous Israeli assaults on Gaza until I had lost count of them. But on the 7th of October, I was the absent one.

On the 17th of October, they bombed the only Christian hospital, the Baptist Hospital in Gaza. On the 19th of October, an Israeli airstrike hit the Church of Saint Porphyrius, where 500 people were sheltering. This was the first time Rashid appeared in my head. I heard a voice reciting, "God has become a refugee, Sir, / So: Seize the prayer rugs from the mosque. / Sell the church, which now belongs to someone else. / And sell the muezzin on the black market."

When my friend Essa was killed by Israel in November 2023, I again heard the recitation of the poem, "The Absent One," by the Palestinian poet Rashid Hussein, from his book, *Collected Poems* (*al-A'mal al-shi'riyya;* Haifa: Maktabat Kull Shay', 2004), which I consider one of my earliest reads and favorite poems. "Even the father of our orphans can't be found / So take them all away as well, Sir!"

But I couldn't be found next to Essa, or near his family. They took him away from his children. Before that, they took his house.

On the 3rd of January, 2024, I, the absent one in his forced exile, woke up to the news of my friend Ouda's killing. On the 4th of January 2024, my younger sister Eman was killed, along with her husband and four kids, in the so-called safe zone. This time, my weeping was entangled with the recitation of "The Absent One": "Perhaps you, most civilized master, should go to them / So that they too can become your property?"

In February 2024, a series of "flour massacres" took place. Both Israelis and Americans bragged about their humanitarian mission to distribute aid while the lucky Palestinian who didn't get killed returned with a handful of flour. Rashid again: "When I squeeze your bread in my fists / it is my own blood that flows!"

While my people have been slaughtered, many Israeli spokespersons have delivered speeches in front of the US Congress and the UN. Each time I hear one of them speak about how they are the light that fights the darkness, the good in a battle versus evil—or how Israel is the savior of Western civilization—my existence evaporates, like the dead body parts of a murdered Palestinian who finds his grave in the air. I laugh too hard. Rashid laughs in my head too: "Don't apologize—who ever said you're an oppressor? / Don't get upset—who ever said you're an aggressor?"

On the 15th of September 2025, the remains of my house were shattered after Israel attacked the remaining tall, multistory buildings in Gaza. On the 5th of October, my friend Abed Al Hamid was killed when he succumbed to critical shrapnel injuries following an Israeli attack on the 2nd October while he was on his way to work at Médecins Sans Frontières. Abood, as I used to call him, was the kind of person you could literally call an angel. These days, they kill even the angels.

Today, after more than two years of genocide and forced starvation, after

seventy-seven years of occupation,
and sixty-eight years after Palestinian
poet Rashid Hussein's "The Absent
One," an Israeli, an American, and an
Englishman (two out of three of them
having been accused of war crimes)
offer a peaceful plan, while God and
I look on from our forced exile, lost
between the longing for our homeland
and the unfinished fear of where we
might be forced to seek refuge again. ■



THE OXYGEN YOU LEFT BEHIND

By Somaia Abunada

"Poets who write words of greatness never truly die. They either live, or they live on."–Heba Abu Nada

Since I lost Heba almost three years ago, I have been searching for her everywhere. In every face I meet, every conversation I hold, every song that lingers, every article I read... Yet all these restless attempts fall short, unable to fill the vast silence her absence has left behind.

Sometimes, I return to our online conversations and I find myself suspended in a past where she was still alive. I feel the warmth of her words... The little butterflies rise in my stomach, light and joyful, as if they remember what I am trying not to forget. Those days feel so real. The blood rushes through my veins, and my rusty heart begins to beat again. I sit quietly between the lines she once wrote, holding on, gently, desperately, to the echo of her voice.

I return to the room we once shared, where memory settles like light. I find myself worshiping the three moles resting on her left cheek. I have always been captivated by them; they align in a way that gently hypnotizes anyone who looks at Heba's face. Her features carried a quiet comfort, a kind of

safety that asked for nothing and gave everything.

I scroll up through our conversation until I reach October 2023. There, her words come to an end. The warmth dissolves. The room fades. The moment slips away too quickly. And I am once again returned to a present that feels colder, quieter, emptier without her. Everything turns pale…

I begin my mornings looking for Heba. I try to arrange breakfast the way she used to, carefully, tenderly, but it never comes close. A small flame of yearning flickers within me, trying to find its way… But it asks for more than I have, more than I can gather, just to warm my soul.

The Oxygen is not for the Dead by Heba Abunada

Heba wrote her novel in 2016. I watched her, quietly, as she wove her spell into every line she touched. I saw the sparks in her eyes, small constellations gathering as she created something only she could see. She placed each chapter in my hands, one after another, and I could only sit there, speechless.

Heba carried her novel into the al-Shariqa competition, and it returned crowned with second place. Then, in 2017, her fairy child opened its eyes to the world—and began to live.

Now, nine years after her novel was published, I return to it once more. Reading as if I am reaching for her face, tracing her way of thinking and speaking, listening for the echo of her enchanting voice in every line. Heba begins her novel by saying:

"I looked at myself and gazed for a long time.

I turned inward upon myself and reflected deeply.I took shape before myself.

I stood against myself.

I called out to myself, but I did not answer.

I shouted at myself, yet I remained still.

I shook myself, but I paid myself no attention.

My shadow fell heavily over me.The darkness deepened as I begged myself for help.

I reached out to myself, but I could not grasp my own hand.

I tried to escape myself, but I sank deeper within. I tried to hold on to myself, but I slipped from my own grasp.

I breathed myself in, but I choked on my own presence.I asked myself: Who am I?

Yet I gave myself no answer." (p. 6)

I read these words in Heba's voice. I see them leaving her lips like a sheet of music, each line carrying its own rhythm. Her brown eyes recite the verses with quiet reverence. I can almost feel her presence beside me, reading them aloud.

In her novel, Heba reflects on the Arab uprising in a way that feels both intelligent and deeply human, echoing her own belief that "A poet cannot write an immortal text unless he has lost some of his fingers" (p. 82). The novel moves through vivid details of Adam, a senior officer working in the country's intelligence apparatus. The deeper you move into the pages, the more you find yourself held by it as nothing fully makes sense until you reach the last page. The novel feels like a knot of interwoven threads in Heba's hands, slowly, gently unraveled in the closing chapters.

In the first chapter, Heba describes Chanel No. 5 perfume:

"The one different thing about Chanel No. 5., was I had applied a great deal of it, especially to the sleeve of my shirt, so that I would feel a headache every time I inhaled it. Its heavy scent gives me a pleasurable headache, for it storms the receptors of smell with extravagant force, carrying me back to last night.

I can still feel a gentle numbness, as yesterday's music rises from all my senses, and my thoughts ripple through scenes of the celebration with a quiet joy." (p. 10)

I know how much Heba loved perfumes. She used to have a long shelf filled with different scents; her favorite was *J'adore Dior.* Heba used to buy perfumes for all of us. I remember my brothers never bought their own; they would wait for Heba to choose for them, always trusting her taste, always captivated by her choice.

I called my brother recently, and we talked about Heba. He said to me, "I went to the rubble of our house and found the cologne Heba once brought to me. Wherever I wear it, everyone asks me about it. I still keep the bottle. I see her face, happy, when I wear it."

Heba once reflected on her passion for perfumes, saying:

"Whenever I go to buy a perfume, I ask the seller to suggest the finest scents, but in the end, I always return to my own. Once, after he offered me several options, I told him: 'The truth is, my favorite perfume is this one.' He said, 'Then don't try anything else. Those who love this scent are never

pleased by another. It is, in truth, singular, of refined taste, and it has remained faithfully classical for forty years.'

And yet, each time I feel the urge to experiment. But the truth I have learned from perfumes is this: Whenever I smell a fragrance, I begin to imagine the one who wears it, the shape of their face, the way they dress, the rhythm of their voice, their presence, their soul. Perfumes carry a strange secret; they resemble people.

Some are gentle, peaceful, moving through the lungs with quiet shyness.

Some are violent, storming the senses before we can even grasp their beauty. Some are heavy, declaring themselves with force and noise.

Some are soft, like the whispered music of a flute.

Some are sharp, striking the heart quickly before fading away.

Some are crowded, like dozens of overlapping conversations; you smell them once and feel confused, and when they begin to settle, you return to them, only to be lost again.

Some are like a new language, unfamiliar yet delicious in their strangeness; you want to keep smelling them just to understand.

And some are intelligent, they enter the soul quietly, then cling to every cell in the body, never leaving. Perfumes are the scent of memory, the trace of embraces, the whisper of notebooks, the trembling of hands, the sigh of clothes. A person may be forgotten with time, but when their scent passes by, we remember them. Or imagine them. Or fall in love with them."

I keep traveling through Heba's voice in her novel. I stop on a page where she describes coffee.

Heba says:

"Those mornings that begin with coffee are sacred mornings!Faten laughed for a long time as she prepared my spiritually devoted cup, dark, intensely black, and it is one of the morning rituals she allows no servant the honor of performing. 'Really? Sacred?' she asked, pulling the cup away from me playfully as she held it.— Yes, my friend. If I don't begin with it, the rest of my day falls into disarray!She stepped back a little and pouted.— And the coffee?— I love it in moderation!— Your moderation? You drink it there, on every occasion! Coffee is not what makes mornings sacred, but what comes after it!" (p. 28)

I laughed when I read these lines. For readers who don't know Heba, she never actually drank coffee. She didn't

like it. She always added sugar and milk trying to soften its bitterness.

As for me, my morning coffee is one of the reasons I wake up every day. Its smell numbs my senses; I can't function well without it. And yet, Heba was able to describe the addiction to coffee as if it belonged to her, as if it lived within her, despite the fact that she never truly tasted it.

In another scene, Adam fights his desire for a cigarette after quitting. Heba describes these moments, saying:

"He slipped a cigarette from the inner pocket of his jacket, sealing it to the burning mouth of his lighter. It seized the flame with hunger, drew it deep into his chest, then released it, endless threads spilling from his nose and mouth.I watched them... how they wrestled with the light pouring in from the window behind me, how they fused, collided, entangled with a kind of violence, until the black haze shattered across the room, flinging the scent of smoke everywhere, a scent that awakened a craving in the smallest, most famished cells of me, cells that had not tasted nicotine in over a year, now pressing against me, insistently, begging for just one deeper breath. I resisted... and coughed twice to my left..." (p. 23–24)

Again, Heba leaves me speechless. Heba never liked cigarettes. She never tolerated the smell, never stayed in the same room with someone who smoked. The scent of cigarette smoke would make her nauseous. And yet, her vivid imagination, nurtured by a quiet understanding of science, moves beyond expectation, shaping a description that feels more real than experience itself.

Heba: When Feelings Learn to Speak

Heba has always spoken to our hearts. Everyone used to wait for her words, for her poems, her prose, her online posts. Heba had a gentle way of reaching the reader's soul, touching something unseen, something deeply human. Throughout her novel, Heba transforms every feeling into language; she gives emotion a body, a voice, and a presence that lingers. Her descriptions do not simply describe; they breathe, they ache, they live.

For Sadness:

"The left side of my chest hurts, from the inside.
She placed her hand over my heart and said,'Here?'
Yes... but from the inside. You can't reach it. It's too deep, Mother...
She pulled her hand away, her lips

tightening with unease. It wasn't my heart.It was my soul that was hurting, and the pain of the soul is far greater,because no one can ever reach another person's soul.
No one knows where the soul lives, no one.
How many times have I broken? And how many times will I break again?" (p. 54)

For Fear:
"My urge to vomit and to cry grew unbearable.My feelings trembled. Cold began to swim through all my tissues,goosebumps circling my skin.
I stood there, unsteady, summoning all the blood that the tiles and asphalt had swallowed, the bodies, the scattered limbs, and the dizziness deepened.
I wanted to leave the room, quickly, but before I could, he said, as though casually ending a conversation with a friend: 'As for the one who carried this out,I think I can repay your visit.'
That night, I spent more than two hours beneath scalding water. I felt an unbearable cold and a deeper disgust.
I wished I could peel off my skin, change my flesh, shrink, and return to my mother's womb again.
The cruelest thing about growing older is that our bodies outgrow the arms of our mothers and fathers; we become too large to fold into them, to curl within their safe corners. And when their embrace can no longer hold us,the world itself tightens around us, and no arms, anywhere,can hold us at all." (p. 75)

For Love:
"They say, in the chemistry of love, that when a person falls for another, they are merely under the influence of a set of hormones, each one explaining those strange symptoms we can never quite make sense of.
Serotonin, for instance, is the foolish hormone, the one that leads all your reckless acts when you are in love. It is your urge to lift her into the air, your desire to leap from the highest point of Niagara Falls while holding her hand.
As for the racing heart, the sweating, the confusion, the stammering, the misspoken words, that is the private pleasure of adrenaline. Yes, the very same hormone the body releases when fleeing, or when being huntedby a predator.
At first, I wondered, what is the connection between love and fear?
Both are sensors, alert to a great danger within your inner world.
Both are a fragile thread, trembling, separating you from the beginning of a

new life. or from death." (p. 93)

For Happiness:
"From that moment, I wanted to give her an entire lifetime, a beautiful one, the kind she had never even dreamed of. To take her hand and run across a rainbow until colors and light itself ran out of physics. To draw my soul out of me, pour it into a small glass bottle, and place it in her hands so she could sip from it slowly whenever she felt thirsty. To open my chest with a magical scalpel, and let her inside my heart, to stretch out alone within its four chambers.I loved her to that extent. Her love gave me a beauty without limit, a beauty that does not perish, nor is it created from nothing." (p. 94)

For Guilt:
"Now, I am allowed to cry over this barren Earth until I dissolve into floods, into overflowing rivers.
Now, I am allowed to whirl in the temple of oppression for the rest of my life,to withdraw from both worlds. I am allowed to seal myself inside a bottle of memory,with only a little oxygen, just enough to suffocate slowly.
I am allowed to look up at the seventh sky of pain with nothing but the force of hurt,and to fall back to the earth again by that same force.
I alone am the reason she died, that angelic being I loved.
I am the one who killed her with my selfishness.
I have said it a thousand times, but no one believed me." (p. 219)

The Moment Where She Made Peace with the Light
In her last days, when death was approaching like a whisper that could no longer be ignored, Heba was the one assuring us. She was so calm. On October 20, 2023, Heba took an afternoon nap, and when she woke up, she did not speak much, but her face carried a quiet relief, as if she had found answers to the questions she had carried for so long. It felt as though Heba had reached a place of understanding, a place of acceptance; she was at peace with what was coming next.

In the final pages of her novel, Heba gathers her beliefs, her vision of life, and leaves them behind in words. She says:
"Beneath the Earth, you hear everything, and know nothing. Beneath the Earth, you shake hands with fear, with doubt, with anxiety, and you follow any light,even if you do not know where it leads.
Is this what the dead feel?

Only here you learn that the difference between death and life is not whether you are above the earth or beneath it, but whether you choose the right path, and follow the right light.
For the first time in my life, I feel that God grants us nothing unless we desire it fiercely, unless we work for it with the same intensity. A poet cannot write something eternal without losing a few of his fingers.
For the first time, I hear the voice of God within me. When you step away from everyone, when you cut yourself off from all people, you begin to feel your need for your Creator; you feel your truest connection to Him.
The one who was speaking to me was the truest version of myself, the honest draft, the voice of the city that wanted to wake me from my coma, the louder version that wanted to guide me out of the desert.
I had to reach the peak of my misery, the most exhausting corners of my heart,the height of my dizziness, just to find Him.
When you are submerged in darkness, you can recognize the real light. But in daylight, all lights resemble one another, the false and the real, and you lose your way.
And this is who I am." (p. 283-284)

*

For my sister, Heba, I love you to the moon and beyond. ■



ON THE OTHER BANK OF THE RIVER OF BLOOD

By Hend Jouda
Translated by Marianne Dhenin

At war a man is saved by the way his mind becomes distracted and abstracted.
*But the death around him is ludicrous and gratuitous. Without any higher meanings.**

– Svetlana Alexievich, trans. Andrew Bromfield
(W.W. Norton & Company, 2023)

**Translator's note: This quote and subsequent quotes marked by asterisks (*) are taken directly from Bromfield's English translation of Zinky Boys (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).*

From between the coffins of soldiers and their belated confessions, *Zinky Boys* opens a window onto the other side of war, where there is no heroism, only a consciousness that arose too late, a regret that meant too little, and a question that haunts the killers after their return from the killing trip: What remains of their humanity?

I dive into stories whose chapters were written from the other side of a war. By the other side, I mean that of the attackers, the aggressors. Specifically, these are the testimonies of soldiers, men, mothers, and wives from the Soviet Union collected after the Soviet–Afghan War of 1979 to 1989—a war the Soviets waged to "liberate" the Afghan people from "backwardness"!

In *Zinky Boys*, Svetlana Alexievich pushes back this heavy curtain and attempts to understand the war from within, through the stories of those who fought its battles or faced its consequences.

The voices in the book do not tell of valor. Instead, they speak from the perspective of the knowing, cynical, and broken returnees who were sometimes deceived by slogans. Or from the perspective of the mothers who lost their sons and received closed coffins without being permitted so much as a farewell glance.

The book reflects a confusion and a consciousness about the absurdity and injustice of war that arose too late. I found that the most frequent theme in the testimonies was a comparison

between what came before the war and what came after it—whether for the soldiers themselves or for their families.

The book transported me into the world of those soldiers. There, I found that while the faces of the killers and the killed may have been different, the consequences of the brutality on the people of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union were strangely similar to some degree.

I was searching for an answer to the question: What happens to a person when they kill?

While reading, I realized I felt anger at the soldiers' testimonies and their failures. My anger multiplied as I learned of the soldiers' blind obedience and their excessive enthusiasm to the point of volunteering to enlist. It multiplied again as I read about their regret; it came too late to change anything. Perhaps I feel anger because wars are still being fought, and because I am among those who have lived under occupation and witnessed bombing, killing, and collective punishment for many years.

As a woman born to a persecuted group, who grew up and experienced what it means to belong to such a group, I wanted the comparison between the two wars to help me understand what I had been unable to justify all those times before—all those crimes!

I do not believe anyone could form a complete understanding of war without examining the testimonies of those who have invaded others' lands, killed or seen their comrades killed, and returned in a coffin or maimed and damned to live with the eternal loss of their humanity and the destruction of their souls.

The book offered an opportunity for me, as I stand on the side of the victims, to look across the river of blood to its other bank and stare into the eyes of the killers as their light fades, after the time of hate has passed and the time of reckoning has come.

Svetlana Alexievich writes that one of the returning "witnesses," who described himself as "deceived," said that he matured not during the war, but rather after it. As for me, my dear witness, I matured in a camp—not a summer camp, mind you—a refugee camp. I matured before, during, and after the wars.

With every confession, every regret, every coffin, the book takes me to Gaza. Soldiers returning from the war give brief testimonies, confessing their shock and unpacking their regret. And I see

the faces of the children—more than twenty thousand children—martyred in a war that only shapeshifts, never ceasing. How many years of regret would be enough if their killers chose to feel it?

I recall the screams of people running through Gaza's streets during the air raids and the explosions. I recall the terror of the fire belts and the threads of burning white phosphorus hanging in the sky. I remember the evacuation maps dropped from the planes, an omen of doom sounding like the blast of a horn!

My heart still aches with the memories of bodies mangled among rubble and ash. It aches with the memory of every innocent soul who could not be identified and was buried in a blue-and-white body bag in a mass grave, both before and after the army's withdrawal.

I think of all those who were discovered by chance after soldiers dumped them in roadside pits with no marker for their resting place. Those soldiers have no respect for the weight of death.

There can be no respect for death when killing is an achievement—the goal!—and when killing becomes a moment of pride and victory. How could it not be a victory, when it means the success of the mission?

Many were buried at random because the only thing the soldiers feared—ironic as it is—was that the bodies of those they had sniped might begin to rot before their very eyes, producing a stench that would pollute the air they still had to breathe.

I wonder, with every line revealing yet another trauma in a book about a faraway now-finished war: Do the occupying army's soldiers who commit these atrocities experience the same psychic wound as killers once they have finished off their victims?

Even if the soldiers are not always killing, do they feel at peace after they flatten cities and towns and expel their people? Do they feel anything at all as they normalize destruction and erasure to draw new lines for their walled empire as if it were an ancient fortress?

All of those lines on the maps, I see them only as ropes that strangle souls before disfiguring innocent lives and stirring hate anew.

Do the soldiers of this army feel anything when they seize our land, generation after generation, intent on wiping us out?

As for us, we were merely here on our land. But they wanted only the land—without us!

How? Through murder and terror, through engineered deprivation, starvation as psychological and biological weapons, and the long-held dream of the death of the old and the forgetting of the young.

Every attempt to force Palestinians to seek life outside the land, where the soldiers turn every day into a curse, every season into a massacre, every war into annihilation, is nothing if not astonishing.

But do we know anything about the effect of this ongoing persecution on its perpetrators?

What happeens to them when they imprison, and torture, and rape with batons, or sharp instruments, or even penises—crimes committed against both men and women alike?!

What right do they have to tear out hearts, eyes, and other organs and flay human skin to feed the organ banks in their labs?

What right do they have to act like human butchers and employ scientists whose job it is to calculate the value of the bodies of jailed Palestinians before condemning them to numbered graves?

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We are witnessing collective punishment, the erection of permanent and temporary barriers to disrupt movement, and the theft of our time, our spirits, and our lives.

We are witnessing a decades-long denial of the geographical continuity of Palestine and a refusal to engage with Palestinian leaders seeking solutions—whether through a peace process that has been paralyzed for decades, by respecting the rights of those who struggle in every possible way to reject oppression and live a free and dignified life, or by charting a path forward so that future generations do not have to live under occupation and bear its burdens.

Do those who attacked Palestine some eight decades ago, expelled her people, and stole their homes live with the same burden of loss and disappointment as the Soviet soldiers who returned from Afghanistan? Do those who forbid Palestinians from returning and kill those who try, or even in the best of circumstances, displace them within Palestine's borders, experience the same traumas as the Soviet soldiers because of what they've done?

***

We are facing an army that does not hesitate to split heads with bullets or reduce homes, mosques, parks, universities, schools, apartment blocks, and hospitals to ash. This army wields enough explosives to flatten mountains, and uses them to turn cities to rubble.

I read *Zinky Boys* while investigations and anonymous testimonies from some IDF soldiers who fought in Gaza were being released. That was followed by the news that ten returned soldiers had tried to take their own life—no surprise! The stories must be similar when cruelty and mercilessness are practiced, not to mention the hate. They use that hate to fuel a narrative of the occupation that casts us as Palestinians in a Jewish religious discourse on the Promised Land and as justification for the bloodshed and annihilation.

With every chapter I finished reading, with every farewell to a soldier or a corpse, every story of a wife or family, and every shocked and distraught mother, I found descriptions of loss or regret.

I kept repeating my unanswered questions, with every breaking news item, and every old story: Do the killers truly feel anything? Do they experience genuine remorse, and must it be concealed for the sake of politics? Or is there no regret there at all, not even a hint?

Svetlana Alexievich writes repeatedly that the Soviet soldiers drank alcohol, used drugs, and smoked marijuana to embolden themselves and to keep up their courage. She also writes that "Fear is more human than courage."* But where is the fear in the anatomy of the killers, or is it just another motive for their cruelty?

Was all the killing, and the pain, and our generations of grief truly necessary? Is this what hate, greed, and the desire for control and domination do to a person?

"It is a human right not to kill. Not to learn to kill. A right that is not recorded in a single constitution."* That's what you wrote, my dear Svetlana. But I think the matter is more complicated and ironic than that. One of the brothers killed the other with a stone. No one taught him how to kill. He just did it, and that was that! He was blinded by hate. One of the Soviet nurses who treated wounded soldiers in Afghanistan described the feeling as overwhelming. "Hate helped people to live out there. They survived by hating. And a sense of guilt? That didn't appear there, but here, after I looked at things from the outside."*

Hate, then, is a warlord. It is the secret to the continuation and the repetition of wars. Cain killed his brother, and we do not come to understand that he felt shame until he was forced to learn from a raven how to bury him.

We must admit there is an unrivaled shamelessness inherent in our human nature, a shamelessness that seems difficult to overcome as a collective. Perhaps freeing ourselves from hate is even harder than committing genocide.

***

I was more eager than usual to start reading *Zinky Boys*. I wanted to know what the soldiers had said in the testimonies compiled in this book that won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015.

With every killer's story, the author transported me to Gaza, to the victims and their mothers, the wives, and the orphans. She helped me understand that while the faces of regret among the killers are many, that fact alone is unfortunately not enough to sway the conscience and the decisions of world leaders. Wars persist because that is how people express their inadequacy, helplessness, and existential fear—a feeling they think cannot be concealed except maybe by explosions and bodies and by projecting that inner fear onto the outside world.

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Ultimately, it seems that war does not reveal anything new so much as it raises the same old questions in starker terms. We know what happens to the victims. We remember their faces. We recite their names, and we mourn them. But on the other hand, we do not know enough about what happens to those who do the killing. Or, it's that we don't want to know.

What Svetlana Alexievich offers in *Zinky Boys* is not justification, but rather a laying bare of the human flaw that only reveals itself when it is already too late, when regret becomes possible but no longer matters.

But if the killer can feel regret, then why doesn't the killing stop? If consciousness emerges too late, then is it even enough in the first place?

Perhaps the problem isn't war itself, but rather that part of humanity that learns to kill faster than it learns *not* to kill. That part that endures and writes the same story again and again, from the time that humankind killed

with stones to the time it developed more lethal weapons. The question that remains unanswered, then, is not what happens to a person when they kill, but why doesn't one stop killing even after they know?

Perhaps it is the desire of every person and of every regime to experience it for themselves because they do not learn from the experiences of others and prefer to live with their own regret. ■



I'M TIRED OF JUSTICE

By Ahmad Elkhuwaja

Standing in the middle of the bookstore was the moment I saw my future flash before my eyes: My grandfather dying while waiting for his sons to find him medicine, my starving uncles falling to the ground like leaves, and my cousin losing an arm, a leg, an eye. All of us becoming homeless. All of this happening because I selfishly wanted a bookshelf.

In the summer of 2023, I was walking home after my shift at the law office. On the way was a renowned bookstore in Gaza where one could buy imported books. I thought about entering but I was too tired to even think of what I wanted to read, so I ignored the impulse to add to my already-long list of books to read. It was Sunday, and I had promised to meet my friends at a nearby café that night to talk about something that I no longer remember. Khalid came with his work laptop, and we talked about some problems he faced at work and how annoying some people are. He excused himself to have a short video call with team members who live on the other side of the country (the West Bank). I took this hour to dissociate and contemplate if I was wrong not to buy a chunky copy of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. I thought it would have been an absolute blast of a read for when I finished the semester. Granted, I don't read as much as I write. It was also hard to ask for advice about it, when Khalid knows that I don't need another book that I will not read, so I didn't ask him or even mention it.

Khalid closed the screen and asked if I was reading something, to which I replied by asking him if the meeting wiped his memory somehow. He countered, saying how stupid I was for not reading despite being in many literary circles. Mind you, we're the complete opposite; he reads work written in Arabic, and I only read in English. He never misses a chance to shame me for how "pretentious" I am for not giving the writing of my own people a chance. I never really liked our stories, and I told him that. I made a bet with him: I would pay for the cost of this whole night if the next friend I meet is reading another romance novel in Arabic!

He of course asked which friend I was meeting next, so to be fair, I let him pick from anyone who was visiting later that night. He chose and we shook hands.

He asked, "What do you think of what is going on in the country?"

"Eh, it's the usual game they all play, nothing new. Until someone has a better lie, I won't bore you with the same."

"Hahaha, are you still a global citizen? You know, with all that's going on in the world?"

I took a sip of tea. "Man, what is wrong with you? I don't know how many years we've known each other. Why do you keep asking the same thing? This border is fake, my tongue is fake, this accent is fake. Do you think that I like who I'm becoming? Do you think this is all fine for me? Please, drink your tea, it's getting cold."

The place got quiet and we didn't break the silence, staring at the street until Khalid finished his tea and said goodbye. I waited in the café, looking at cars and people passing by. Leila came by and said hello. I asked what she'd been reading recently, and, sure enough, it was another rubbish book about couples. I don't hate romance as a theme or love as a condition; what I hate is the fake hope it gives. I can't stand the temporality of the promise in light of what and where we, as Gazans and Palestinians, are living. I excused myself to take a photo of the cover to send it to Khalid. We talked some more and Leila suggested that I visit the same bookstore I passed by earlier, as they'd brought in some new titles. I promised I would stop in.

In the afternoon of the next day, the sun was so beautiful it could have made a tired donkey smile. I entered the bookstore and went directly to the traitorous section—English-language books. I didn't want to buy anything by Dickens, especially anything about

law. I'm tired of justice. I looked for anything else. I found a book called *The Promised Land* by Erich Maria Remarque. The cover photo was of the famous Chrysler building in New York City, showing one of the eagle statues from an odd angle. I thought, *I like art deco, and the title seems like something everyone says now* (I was thinking of colonial Britain at that time), so I gave it a chance and searched for a second book to buy. In the end, I didn't like anything else, so I took it to the cashier.

As I was walking, I realized that I don't have a bookshelf and I stacked my books under my bed. I was surprised that I forgot I didn't have one in the first place! Living in Gaza was always a puzzle for me. The city presents itself like home, but it has never truly felt like it. There is always something in the background: a sudden aggression, uninvestigated crime, men yelling in the streets. I feel like everyone was playing in this theatre of normalcy that I'm not a part of. Putting up a bookshelf is a bet that I would never recover from losing. Installing one in my room is a wish that things will be okay, that I will live until I die of old age, that life will become routine and ordinary. This is a dangerous wish.

The cashier asked if I wanted anything else and I politely said no. While she went to get me one of their new bookmarks, I opened the book and read the first lines. Standing right in the middle of the library while holding the book, I saw my future. I can't share what I saw or felt. There is still no way to prove what I saw was real. I went home to sleep, thinking about where to install the shelf in my room. I decided to leave the question for the next day, the 7th of October. ■



A PAPER TICKET TO A LAND BEYOND REACH

By Saga Hamdan
Translated by Enas Eltorky

There are many things I encounter daily that bind me to Gaza, but this time I was asked to speak specifically about a book. In the presence of the written word, I lose control of my expression and my pen, for reading is the realm of imagination; the vast expanse that allows me to gallop like a wild mare. It is the fertile boundless land that enables me to run in every direction, oblivious to the blockade, or the cramped room I used to share with my three sisters, a room now reduced to ash. Reading is more spacious than our overcrowded neighborhood and the entire besieged Gaza Strip, the most densely populated geographical area on the face of the earth. It was reading that enabled me to besiege my siege for the first time, to travel without a ticket, to roam the countries of the world, one after another, and to visit places that only exist on a map of my imagination.

As for the book that transported me beyond mere imagination and travel, it was *Time of White Horses* by Ibrahim Nasrallah. This book allowed my imagination to journey not just beyond the borders of Gaza, but to the whole of Palestine; a place that, for me, is impossible to visit. It took me back to pre-Nakba Palestine, covering the era from the late nineteenth century until 1948. There, I found the village of Al-Hadiya which exists on no map, but was born from Nasrallah's imagination as a stand-in for the typical Palestinian village. For me, Saga, Al-Hadiya became as vast as the world. I lived among its heroes while lying on my bed in

the Tal Al-Hawa neighborhood in Gaza. There I saw the land where my ancestors lived, and from which they were forcibly expelled. In my mind, I rode the white horses of that era, horses treated with the dignity due human beings, which only the base and vile would mistreat. They lived in those ancestral homes where the primary rule of entry was: "No woman or horse shall ever be humiliated within these walls!" I caressed the face of Al-Hamama, the swift white mare that took on a leading role just like the novel's human characters. I stroked her pure white coat, leaned my forehead against hers, and let my tears fall on her face as she neighed softly. It was Al-Hamama who carried the tall, blond Khaled on her back, galloping so far away that the villagers believed their bodies had fused into one, and that they would never return. They imagined them galloping together to the ends of the earth, without ever looking back, as if the energy within them was beyond human, the moment when the passionate rider and noble Al-Hamama became one.

Through that novel, I stepped into an impossible time, and journeyed to an impossible land. I read it while I was in Gaza, and while travelling from that geographical spot to anywhere else in the world outside of Palestine was very difficult, travelling within Palestine to any Palestinian city in the West Bank or the 1948 territories was truly impossible, whether it be Jenin, Jerusalem, Tulkarm, Nazareth, or Tiberias.

This novel was a ticket to travel through time and space, between past and present, to the era before the occupation, to those lands of Palestine outside of Gaza which I had always heard about but never visited. It was also the very embodiment of the freedom that my journey into reading first sparked, and that this novel further expanded.

It might not be an exaggeration to say that I lived among its people and its heroes. There, in the great Diwan, when the men gathered in the novel to ask for Amal's hand, the daughter of Jerusalem, in marriage to Khaled, the son of Al-Hadiya village, I felt as though I were sitting with them. I could see Hajj Ahmed, Khaled's father, flushing with embarrassment as he asked Amal's father to uproot his daughter from Jerusalem to the village of Al-Hadiya. I still remember Amal's father's reply to him, "This land is the size of a heart, Hajj; nothing in it is foreign, and nothing in it is far!"

And then there was Amal's death, when all the sorrow in the world was no match for Khaled's bereavement over losing the "honey" he sipped every day, as he used to call her, or the rose whose fragrance he inhaled. It was as if, after her death, he had lost his very oxygen, the elixir of life itself, and no longer had the strength to go on.

I was there too for Yasmeen, when she "appeared in all her glory", as the suitor's procession arrived to ask for her hand. She smelled of jasmine, just like her name. I used to wonder about this, for in those days there were no potent synthetic perfumes like we have today, especially among the villagers who had long relied on authentic kohl and natural essences. Did Yasmeen tuck jasmine flowers into her hair, and head to the fields at high noon, letting the sun draw the scent from the blossoms on her head? Even now, whenever I think of her shawl, I see Khaled pressing it to his nose, breathing in the lingering fragrance of his Yasmeen. It was as if I were there with her, the moment she received the news of her husband's martyrdom from Khaled himself, twenty years later. She had been forced to marry her cousin because it was not deemed safe to give her to Khaled, the "rebel" fugitive hiding in the heights of the mountains to fight the British. Then, twenty years later, her husband was martyred under Khaled's command, while Khaled lived on. I wept with her on the way back as she said, "Long ago, my father told me the lifespan of nations is longer than the lifespan of people, meaning Khaled. No, by God, the lifespan of people is longer than the lifespan of nations, father!"

The point is, this novel did not transport me to that land alone. During my journey through those pages, I longed to bring along a few companions to share that unique experience. So, every morning, I would recount parts of the story to my colleagues at the university, inviting them to travel with me through the pages, and telling them about my life within the novel's chapters. Sometimes we would skip lectures; other times we would steal moments between classes, so they could engage with Khaled, with me, with Al-Hamama, with Yasmeen, and with the village elders and its leaders.

My friends and I used to huddle together, imagining the country and its white horses. We were students of dentistry then, in the Al-Katiba building of Al-Azhar University in the heart of Gaza City. I do not know exactly what remains of that building,

as the depths of every street in Gaza have been turned inside out by shells and missiles. The memories of this place do not just carry me back to a distant past I never lived—though I inhabited it through the details of this novel while in that university building—but they also burden me with the weight of the recent past that I did live, in my college and among my friends, of which nothing now remains. Those white horses in the village of Al-Hadiya existed before the occupation, or, more accurately, during the British Mandate that preceded the Israeli occupation, handing over the land like someone passing over the keys of his house to an heir, giving "what he did not own to those who did not deserve it!"

There is no comparison between the white horses of that era, which were never to be degraded, and the shells, missiles, drones, and quadcopters hovering over Gaza today, or humans themselves, who can now so easily be not only humiliated, but erased entirely from civil registries, as if they had never existed. How wretched is today, and how far it feels from yesterday, despite all the misery, oppression, and theft of land that yesterday held.

Two years after reading that book—a period marked by two Israeli military offensives (May 2021 and August 2022)—it still had not left me. It was present with me during a literary workshop for young professional Palestinian women toward the end of 2022, a month-long gathering where we met almost daily to share our thoughts aloud at the Palestinian Writers and Authors Association. As a hub for Palestinian writers, the Association hosted poetry and literary seminars that stirred such deep emotions; we were frequently moved to tears. There, I spoke of the emotional upheaval that *Time of White Horses* had ignited within me, while other participants in the workshop shared similar feelings sparked by other books.

Amidst this great emotional storm I wrote my long story "Mariam", which made it into the literary world by the end of that workshop. "Mariam" is a long story about a stubborn orphan girl who recounts her experiences over a decade of her life: her conflicts with relatives, her rebellion and defiance, her convictions, and her love story with Mo'iz, a resistance fighter who was eventually held captive in Israeli occupation prisons. I repurchased *Time of White Horses* at the Cairo Book Fair, when I was there to sign my novel, *This Stone is Mine*. I brought it back with me

to the United Kingdom, but I have not dared to reread it yet.

Perhaps this time it will not only transport me back to Al-Hadiya and Palestine—which I have not seen and perhaps never will—but to something even more difficult: to Gaza, which I have seen, and where I spent my childhood and adolescence, and which I may never see again after today. One day, I will write a novel about it for a younger generation to read after I am gone. Perhaps in fifty years, they will travel through its pages to the Gaza they belong to but have never seen; they will tell their friends at school and university about it, and they will imagine it, and how painful will that be! ■


CEASE FIRE NOW!
CEASE FIRE NOW
FREE PALESTINE
FREE PALESTINE
SAVE GAZA
فلسطين
END THE OCCUPATION NOW!
FREE PALESTINE
END THE OCCUPATION
DISMANTLE APARTHEID
I PALESTINE
STOP BOMBING GAZA

ON FURTHER ACTION

Palestinian Life, Memory, & Culture

Israel has targeted and murdered hundreds of intellectuals, memory-keepers, journalists, poets, students, and artists––from Ghassan Kanafani in 1972, to Hiba Abu Nada and Refaat Al-Areer and over two hundred journalists since the start of Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. It has destroyed historic libraries, attacked cultural events in East Jerusalem, ransacked Ramallah's Sakakini Cultural Centre, and carried out the genocidal destruction of universities, archives, libraries, bookstores, publishing houses, historic mosques, hospitals, churches, and homes in Gaza. Despite such violence, Palestinian life, memory, and culture—whether in the areas of 48, the West Bank, Gaza, or the diaspora—remains powerful, vital, and imaginative in resistance, with Palestinian artists, intellectuals, writers, journalists, and ordinary people refusing to be intimidated or silent.

Hasbara, 'Brand Israel,' & Art-washing

"I do not differentiate between hasbara and culture" (Ranking Israeli foreign ministry official, 2005). Israel has invested billions of dollars to construct a sophisticated cultural apparatus, using academia, literature, film, music, tourism, and social media in strategic ways to justify its violent occupation of Palestine. Israel's artists, academics, writers, publishers, arts organizations, and universities, through silence or active participation are complicit in normalizing and 'art-washing' Israeli occupation, settler-colonialism, apartheid, and genocide.

BDS | Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions

Inspired by South Africa's successful anti-apartheid movement, the global grassroots Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement was launched in 2005 by 170 Palestinian organizations including unions, refugee networks, women's organizations, professional associations, popular resistance committees, and other civil society organizations.

BDS puts pressure on international companies, institutions, and governments to change their policies and stop collaborations with Israel until it complies with these three demands, as stipulated by International Law:

1. End Israeli occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantle the Wall;
2. Recognize Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel's fundamental right to full equality;
3. Respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

The BDS Movement's Economic Boycott information is available at bdsmovement.net/economic-boycott.

PACBI | The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) was initiated in 2004 to contribute to the struggle for Palestinian freedom, justice, and equality. PACBI is a founding member of the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC), the largest Palestinian coalition, and is tasked with overseeing the academic and cultural boycott aspects of PACBI. It advocates for boycotting Israeli academic and cultural institutions for their deep and persistent complicity in Israel's denial of Palestinian rights.

BDS Movement's PACBI information is available at https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi. More general BDS Movement's Cultural Boycott information is available at bdsmovement.net/cultural-boycott and its Academic Boycott information at bdsmovement.net/academic-boycott.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Agitate and Advocate

- Be in the streets; attend demonstrations, rallies, and other Palestinian solidarity events.
- Write to and call your representatives in government to demand they pressure Israel to end the killing, end the occupation, and allow the Palestinian people their rights and freedoms. Let them know that you need action and policy changes, not just words.
- Organize a walk-out in your school to bring attention to the destruction of schools and universities, and in solidarity with students and educators in Gaza.
- Bring a BDS or PACBI commitment resolution to your union, community association, and sports club.
- Ask your grocery and liquor stores if they are aware of BDS principles and how the boycott of South African produce and wine helped to defeat the Apartheid government there.
- Amplify Palestinian voices – everyday people and journalists in Gaza and the West Bank – and engage with their content to boost visibility.

Sign a Statement to Pledge Your Support for BDS/PACBI

- Sign a Statement of Support and join a solidarity group related to your work within academic, literary, music, or arts sectors (see the list at the end of this section).
- If you work in a cultural industry, endorse PACBI publicly and encourage your peers to do the same.
- Attend a workshop hosted by Publishers for Palestine about how to implement PACBI commitments (you don't have to work

in publishing to learn from these workshops).
• Sign up for BDS's social media and mailing list and support its urgent boycott demands to end this genocide and plan for the future of a free Palestine.

Refuse Complicity

• Refuse any collaboration with complicit Israeli academic or arts institutions, including those that normalize occupation through "both sides" inclusion of Israelis and Palestinians.
• Boycott complicit Israeli cultural products, including films, plays, books, music, and media.
• Boycott and/or work towards the cancellation of events, activities, agreements, or projects involving Israel, its lobby groups, or its cultural institutions, or that otherwise promote the normalization of Israel's actions in the global cultural sphere, with a focus on BDS-designated cultural entities.
• Refuse funding from any complicit Israeli source or from corporations on the BDS movement's priority target list.

Support Palestinian Voices

• Study with Palestinian professors, read Palestinian authors, watch Palestinian films, listen to Palestinian music, and support Palestinian artists.
• Invite Palestinians to speak at and attend your events, write for your publications, and collaborate with your artistic and scholarly endeavors.

NOTE: Connect with your local PACBI and BDS organizers to learn

more. If you need further advice or guidance, please visit the Palestinian BNC and PACBI website at bdsmovement.net or social channels @bds.movement, or contact PACBI directly: pacbi@bdsmovement.net.



CONTRIBUTORS

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Basman Aldirawi (also published as Basman Derawi) is a physiotherapist and a 2010 graduate of Al-Azhar University in Gaza. Inspired by interests in music, movies, and people with special needs, he contributes dozens of stories to the online platform *We Are Not Numbers*.

Alaa Alqaisi is a Palestinian translator, writer, and researcher from Gaza. She holds an MA in Translation Studies and is a PhD candidate at Trinity College Dublin, School of English. Her work appears in *ArabLit*, *ArabLit Quarterly*, and *Encounters in Translation*, and focuses on literary translation, resistance, and survival.

Jehad Kamal Abu Dayya is a poet and writer from Gaza and a fifth-year medical student, currently displaced in the southern Gaza Strip. In 2025, he published his poetry collection **مذبوح في هامش الوقت** (*Slaughtered in the Margin of Time*) in collaboration with the Palestinian Ministry of Culture. His work also includes playwriting and illustrated stories, among them *To the World* and *The Final Scene*. Currently, he is working on the launch of *There Is a City*, a collaborative poetry book created with a group of poets. The project aims to be among the first book launches accompanied by the printing of copies inside Gaza in the current period, as part of an effort to revive and sustain Gaza's cultural and literary life.

Ahmad Elkhuwaja is a Palestinian writer and storyteller from Gaza City. His work explores how memory and loss shape both individual and collective experience. He has co-published experimental fiction titled

Indicia with Coastal Lines Press and is currently completing a short-story collection, *Lives on the Shore*.

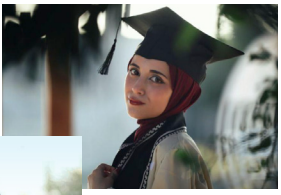
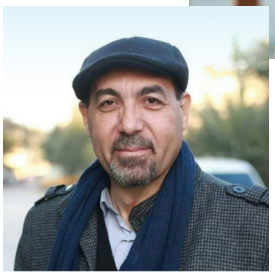
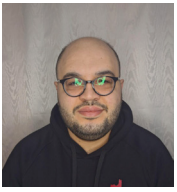
Saga Hamdan is a Palestinian author from Gaza and PhD candidate researching healthcare under attack and international law, currently based in the UK. Her work bears witness to memory, survival, and life under siege and genocide, and has earned multiple local and international literary awards.

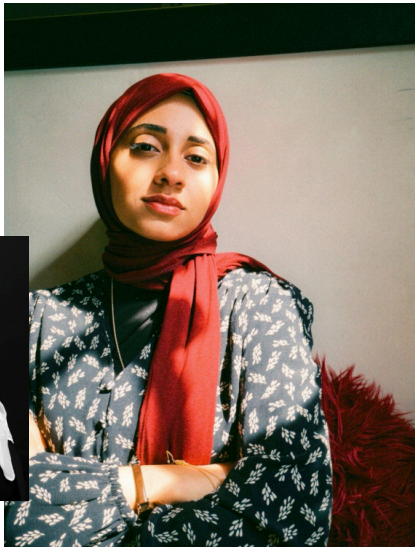
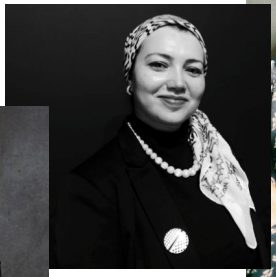
Hend Jouda is a poet from Gaza whose grandparents were displaced from the village of Ashdod in 1948. Born in the Bureij refugee camp in 1983, Jouda graduated from Gaza's Al-Aqsa University and has since published four poetry collections: *Someone Always Leaves* (2013), *No Sugar in the City* (2017), *A Finger That Managed to Survive* (2024), and *The Fall of War's Robe* (2025). Her poetry has been translated into several languages, including French and Japanese. Jouda's 'Gaza, ô ma joie (Gaza, Oh My Joy)' was shortlisted for the 2026 Václav Havel Prize.

Nahil Mohana is the author of the novel *No Men Allowed* (Arab Scientific Publishers, 2021); the story collection *Life in a Square meter* (The Ogarit Cultural Center, 2008); and six plays, including *High Pressure*, which received the 2008 Abdul Mohsin Al-Qattan Prize; *Ghoson*, which received the 2008 Children's Culture Award; and *Lipstick*, which was produced by The Royal Court Theatre in London in 2015. Her literary works in English appeared in the anthologies *Palestine Everywhere* (TBA21, 2025), and *Voices of Resistance: Genocide Diaries* (Comma Press, 2025). She has written and published many essays about her experiences of the war on Gaza in *Washington Post*, *Aljazeera*, *Granta*, *The New Arab*, *Literary Hub* and *AGNI*. Born in Gaza City, Palestine, Mohana is a graduate of Al-Azhar University, and now teaches creative writing to children and young adults in Gaza. More at http://nahilmohana.com

Nasser Rabah is a poet and novelist from Gaza. He has published six poetry collections and two novels. In English, his work has been featured in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Words Without Borders*, *Literary Hub*, *ArabLit*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *O Bod*, *Poetry International*, and *Harper's*. His new collection of selected poetry, *Gaza: The Poem Said Its Piece*, came out in English translation from City Lights in spring 2025, along with two collections in Spanish. He won second place in the Arabic Flash Fiction Prize, organized by the ArabLit platform in collaboration with Komet Kashakeel, in the early fall of 2024. He is a 2024 Jean-Jacques Rousseau fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude, Germany.

Laila Salma is an emerging Palestinian writer, poet, and translator from Gaza. She writes about life, memory, and the uneven edges of a journey shaped by war and loss. A 2023 graduate of the English Department, she hopes to pursue further studies in creative writing and publish her first poetry collection, gathering into words the experiences of a life marked by profound upheaval. Through her writing, she seeks to carry the stories of her world beyond its borders and toward readers willing to listen.



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