

FARAH-SILVANA KANAAN

# SEVENTEEN SONGS FOR THE TRUTHTELLERS OF GAZA

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1.

**EVERY TIME** I’ve opened this document to continue writing, I’ve had to turn to the death toll in the second paragraph and adjust it. Every time I closed this document, I knew that, while I went on to do seemingly mundane things—go for a walk, softly squeeze an avocado at the grocery store, sit in silence, the closest thing I have to prayer—by the time I returned to what’s supposed to be something between an ode and a eulogy, a celebration and a lament, an indictment and a cry for help, more journalists would have been premeditatedly slaughtered. Palestine would’ve been robbed of more storytellers—writers, poets, and lovers of lenses and what they capture through them. In those few seconds, minutes, hours (sometimes days) the world would have been, yet again, deprived of even more crucial first-hand information.

This is, of course, deliberate. More than deliberate, it is bone-chillingly systematic. With icy precision—don’t they know that when they brag about their laser sharp weapons, all we hear is that they know exactly who they are killing and why?—Israel has, on day 224 of its genocide in Gaza, brutally murdered over 140 journalists. As I write, the number may very well have gone up. It’s not a question of if anymore but of how many.

These modern heroes, these guardians of reality, truth, and history, were targets of a genocide in which (dis)information is the most sinister of weapons. To those like me, who were raised on the idea that Palestine was our perpetual moral compass—the ultimate litmus test of our time—and that what was inflicted on the people of Palestine reverberated throughout the world and our own lives, Israel lost the information war the moment the Israeli state was created through the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian villages.

But in the seventy-six years since, far too much of the world was seduced by Israel's relentless, well-oiled propaganda machine—a vile combination of delusional superiority and a shameless exploitation of the Holocaust, for which not a single Palestinian was responsible. In the Arab world, or even outside the Arab world, our parents never let us forget where we came from. They made sure we were immune to this insidious reframing, this obscuring of the facts.

2.

**WHEN I WAS** asked to write about this incomparable loss – of life, of words, of joy—I hesitated. *Who am I to write about journalism? About death? About truth? About sacrifice?* But Gaza has changed everything. How I see the world, how I see myself, how I perceive the people around me. For the past six months, everything has both magnified and increased in opacity. I have had to cut people loose. Because they didn't care or didn't care enough. They prioritised their careers over the murder of our brothers and sisters in Palestine. I've watched grown men cry out of sheer helplessness, yet you couldn't condemn a genocide? Or even call it a genocide? I have lost so much respect for so many.

I don't really consider myself a journalist, I only ever thought of myself as a writer. I know of only a handful of people who embody what I feel are the foundations of journalism—ethical storytelling, holding the ruling class accountable, and chasing the truth. Gaza has exposed the rot in the industry. Too much ego, too little integrity. Western and Arab journalists catering to the West made me abandon any faith I had in journalism, but Gaza's citizen journalists, photographers, poets, and writers have restored that faith, or what was left of it.

3.

**EVERY DAY I** check if Wael Dahdouh is still alive. Amou Wael, we call him. *Did you see the interview with Amou Wael today?* Standing tall, carrying the world on his shoulders. Not just among friends—I even see strangers online refer to him as *our uncle, friend, mentor, Abu Hamza*. You are not the brother of my father or mother, Amou Wael. I have never even met you, but you are still my uncle. I am not Palestinian, but all Palestinians are my cousins. That's why they hate us. That's why they try to separate us. That's why they've tried to sow discord between us with their warmongering and money and lies, lies, lies.

There's something quietly authoritative about Amou Wael, yet he's

also what you'd imagine a bear with a heart of gold would look like. It's not just his stature or his smile; a smile that shattered a million hearts when, not long after being told live on air that his wife, daughter, son, and grandson had been killed in an Israeli airstrike, he was seen comforting a young girl whose leg had been amputated. *This is our life, this is our land, and there is no other place than here*, he told her. Soon after that, he was injured himself. As a young man in Gaza, our Amou Wael dreamed of being a doctor, but the First Intifada turned him into a journalist. Now, the boy from Zeitoun has become an enduring symbol of sumud. He's even built like an olive tree, his skin golden like its oil, his smile blooming like its leaves. They killed another of his sons, Hamza. Another Dahdouh, another journalist, another Palestinian truth-teller. When Wael was eventually evacuated, after over one hundred days of bombardment, and arrived in Doha for medical treatment, the men who received him hugged him so tightly that the big bear suddenly seemed like a small cub. Too small a frame to carry such unfathomable pain.

4.

**ISRAEL KILLED** my friend Issam. I saw his leg brought over to him by his colleague. He tenderly put it back where it used to be. I didn't want to see it but it popped up on my screen and I had auto-play on. I turned auto-play off after that and never turned it on again. I instantly recognised Issam, you know? He was lying there, without a leg, with his vest clearly marked PRESS and his helmet on. The footage was grainy, but I still recognised him. He had one of those faces.

5.

**TIME HAS** simultaneously lost all meaning and become more urgent because of Gaza. Everything has lost all meaning and become more urgent. As I write, I have become acutely aware of the ticking of time. The fleetingness of everything. What I spend and waste my time on, the people who choose to spend time with me, which I realise more than ever is the biggest gift of all. The last thing Issam did was help me with a favour. All he asked in return was that I visit him at Salon de Beyrouth, the somehow still smoky, jazzy cafe that he co-owned in his beloved chaotic Hamra neighbourhood of Beirut. *You always promise to come visit and you never do*, was the last thing he ever said to me. It's not you, it's me, I said, half-joking, half with a sinking heart. I never saw him

again. I will never forgive myself. I wish I could tell you that Gaza has made me a better person. But that would be a lie. It has made me want to be a better person.

6.

**AS I WRITE**, Israel has murdered 147 journalists in Gaza. I don't even know how many are still alive. I read somewhere that Israel has killed 1.5 per cent of Gazans. Then why does it feel like fifty? And don't ask me whether that's just the civilian toll. They are all civilians to me. They are all resistance fighters. Every resistance fighter was once a little boy or girl who saw their reality collapse. Some took up weapons, others took up a camera. I try to think of the few that are left. Bisan. Suhail. Samar. Hind. Mohammed. Fatima. Plestia (a name derived from one of the earliest tribes to live on the lands of Palestine). A close friend said that if he has another daughter, he will call her Plestia. Ahmad. Ayat. Little Lama. Be honest—did you know all their names before?

No. But now we will never forget them.

7.

**IN A WAY**, all Palestinians have become journalists, and we trust them more than the mainstream media: those very media that pretend to honour the truth and claim to be driven by objectivity. I wish I could share snippets of all of their precious lives. One snippet each. But there are so many, I can't begin to name them all. They risked their lives to guard what is real, to regale us with stories of survival and joy amidst the relentless onslaught of blood, screams, bombs, collapse, horror. These young souls streaming their own genocide, the weight of death on their shoulders, becoming thinner, scrawnier, slowly before our eyes.

Shall I talk about Bisan? Why is Bisan a wizard, you ask? Let me count the ways. She used to dedicate her life to telling the stories of her people, long before she was sharing the criminally insufficient ration of water she could get her hands on with a young girl she thought needed it more. I'll never forget how she lamented having to cut off her beautiful locks because there was no water or shampoo to wash it with anyway. A wonderful wizard is forced to cut off the strands that might've supplied her with magical powers. Because Israel is evil.

8.

**GAZA**, or rather Palestine, but especially Gaza, made me realise that there is no clear delineation between a journalist and a photographer, a writer and a filmmaker, a poet and an illustrator. Because we can't rely on traditional media and its (mostly) self-serving lackeys to provide us with the truth, to share the experiences of the oppressed, every Palestinian has been forced to become their own buoy while they drown in the sea of vile hypocrisy and wilful ignorance. In the absence of honest reporting, of genuine compassion, in the face of deliberate collusion with the occupying entity—it's almost like indentured servitude, the way the mainstream Western media operate vis-à-vis Israel, it engulfs me in second-hand embarrassment—we are desperate for any crumb of truth from Gaza. Any sounds, image, word that helps us make sense of the unbearable crimes against humanity that are happening there any second of any minute of every day.

We are hungry for the radical political acts of documenting, archiving, sharing, repeating. Like a mantra. Like a prayer. Like a never-ending eulogy.

9.

**THIS IS HOW** I'll remember Issam: just starting out as a journalist, ready to conquer the world. We used to bicker a lot and then hug it out. He could go from silly to solemn and then back to goofy in a second. And he always wanted to make everyone laugh. He used to call me from strange numbers while on assignments abroad. "Hi darling, guess where I am?" Issam was the guy everyone knew. You can tell by all the aghast bereavement, by the beautiful tributes still coming in months later. Beirut without Issam is lonelier. He connected so many of us. The illegitimate Zionist entity deliberately targeted and murdered him while he reported from our gorgeous—imaginary, colonial—southern border with Palestine. Borders cannot separate a proud people, a common struggle, a haunted history.

10.

**IT TAKES UNCONQUERABLE** strength to remain tender in the midst of indescribable horror. A strength that should not be asked of anyone, a power cultivated by generations of Palestinians, against their will. Children have been forced to become adults before they were even allowed to be children. Like little Lama Abu Jamous, only nine years old. Instead of just dreaming about being a journalist one day and

watching her heroes on the screen until she's one of them, Lama has actually become the youngest reporter in Gaza.

At first, I couldn't help but think, with all the tenderness in my spirit, akh, hayete. Lama is ridiculously charming. Then I marvelled at how a person can be so young yet so aged at the same time. So innocent yet already marked with all that's insufferable and malevolent in this world. Then I started worrying about her – will she be the next journalist to be taken from us? No, Israel is calculating enough to know that to murder a cute young journalist risks too much of a backlash. Then I started laughing maniacally. *Do you hear yourself, Farah? Which backlash, ya hmara?* I start to sob for the 50,000 precious butchered beings who simply weren't deemed valuable enough to cause any significant political backlash, let alone the worldwide bloody revolt they deserve. I am sitting here debating whether Israel will kill a nine-year old girl for merely showing the world what is happening around her. A nightmare from which there is no waking.

11.

**MOST DAYS**, the only words I can muster are *there are no words* or *fuck you*. Nothing in between. Words fail me as we have collectively failed Palestine. Collectively. The more they collectively punish Palestinians, the more we collectively mourn, the more we recognise how we collectively fail them. *It's not us, it's the system. We are mere cogs in the wheel.* But if we all refuse our function within it, the wheel will stop spinning. What I'm trying to say is, if now is not the time to let it all burn, then when?

12.

**THE DEHUMANISATION** of Palestinians, the desensitisation to their suffering, the devaluation of their mere existence is so grotesque. Hordes of people spend more time finding excuses for the decimation of the Palestinian people at the hands of a rogue, ethno-fascist, settler-occupying entity than allowing even a crumb of empathy into their consciousness. I'm talking about the people in our midst. People we share a polite smile with at the bus stop. People we discussed our first high school kiss with. The people we work with, the people we thought we could trust.

13.

**ON THE 224TH DAY** of Israel's genocide, nine more journalists were murdered in Gaza. Bisan, who has lost her second home, her office, was under heavy bombardment all night during the longest internet black-out since the start of the war. She sent a message saying: This might be my last message. Motaz shared that everyone who used to film alongside him had been murdered, so he apologised for his shaky phone-camera footage.

Wael is in Doha. His daughter Kholoud, who informed him live on air that his worst nightmare had come true, is still in Gaza. (My computer autocorrected daughter to fighter. I believe in signs.) Wael will return. This is what we natives do, when we have lost everything—we cling to our land. The land on which generations of our blood have been spilled. The blood which nurtures the soil, from which trees will grow, soil which feeds our children and turns them into revolutionaries—whether they hold a pen, a scalpel, a camera, or a gun. Kanafani said: *We will write for Palestine with blood.*

#### 14.

**THE ZIONIST ENTITY** has always been afraid of Palestinian voices. The louder they claim to want to eradicate the armed resistance (at which they are failing miserably) the more they prove that what they fear most is Palestinian eloquence, the righteousness with which Palestinians utter their words, the poise with which they put them to paper. From Kanafani to Naji al-Ali, from Shireen Abu Akleh to Bassel al-Araj, to the now 147 journalists killed since the genocide in Gaza began, Israel has always been terrified of those who wield word and image in the face of almost a century of terror. We can only honour them by sharing them. Again, and again.

In a stunning display of soul-nourishing solidarity, Refaat Alareer's poem, *If I Must Die*, was translated into almost every language in the span of less than a day after he, too, was brutally murdered. His prophetic words (every Palestinian knows they might be the next to die) will never be forgotten. Little kids all over the world are still flying kites whispering his words, filling the sky with angels. You can't kill a rallying cry. Months later, people still share photos of Refaat doing everyday things. It's the mundanity that gets to you. That and his sardonic sense of humour. Such a contrast with that soft, disarming smile. Those are always the best people.

15.

**AFTER THIS** genocide ends—although in many ways it will never end, because the wounds will reverberate for generations to come—we will remember every journalist, every writer, every anguished cry, every tiny smile that escaped through the terror. Every plea for help that was uttered despite knowing it would be in vain. Every word that was hastily scribbled on walls (is graffiti not journalism, too?) Every scrap of truth paid for in bodies and tears of loved ones. With each truth-teller brutally ripped away from us, we are left a bit more disoriented, a bit more lost, a bit more orphaned. But we continue to hold the same space for them that we held when they were alive.

16.

**WHAT THE OPPRESSOR** will come to realise is that the 2,000-pound bombs you drop on us cannot kill what is true. We will write poems. Children will inscribe them on kites. Every word you tried to steal from us will be magnified, carried over a million marching heads, over land, over sea, carried all over the world. Our words will be read and recited, taken in, tossed over in sleep. Our words will keep people awake, the night holding them hostage while their thoughts explode. The viciousness with which you snipe us, when we are holding up our hands, when we are waving our white flags, will haunt you through every line we write, with all that remains of our sanity.

You can desecrate our places of worship, you can raze our graveyards, but we will remember the names of our dead. You can loot our universities and rip out every page of our carefully collected history but you can't destroy the stories that we tell our children. At bedtime, on waking, in school, in films. You can hijack our neighbourhoods but not our minds. Everything you take from us we remember. Every time you blindfold us, the details of our villages are etched even deeper into our minds. The more you destroy, the more we will build; everything you explode will become stars in the sky that reflect back to us, in our sea, our mountains, our windows. They will inspire us to call an old relative in the diaspora and grill them for every single detail they remember. Every book we burn to keep our bodies warm while the storm blows away our tents will be recalled and chanted back and forth like the holy books. Every book we write is holy. Every word we write is holy. Every poem we whisper is holy. Our struggle is holy, our resistance is holy.



17.

**WE ARE MADE UP** of fables, our diasporas tell a million odysseys. Each story of survival and community and longing for the land left behind is more cherished than the next. The greatest epic of all is our love story with our land. With destruction comes immortality. With great suffering comes unbreakable bonds, global shifts—can you hear the sighs that grieve the earth? The tears that flood the tyranny that tried to silence the world? Palestine is freeing us—from the shackles of the myth of Western morality. Something we never believed in anyway, but the rest of you seem to be slowly catching up. You took your time, though. We’ve been screaming for a while.

FARAH-SILVANA KANAAN is a Lebanese-Italian writer, editor, and dramaturg. She is part of the Lebanese media collective The Public Source, dedicated to critical commentary from the left in solidarity with the Global South. She lives in Beirut and longs for the day she can finally cross the southern border into a liberated Palestine. Twitter @farahkanaan Instagram @farah.silvana

“We write for Palestine with blood.” —Ghassan Kanafani.