

# You Will Not Kill Our Imagination

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THERE WAS A PERIOD IN OCTOBER 2023, DURING ISRAEL'S LATEST ASSAULT against Gaza, when I went through what I now think of as my *Take Me* stage.

At the time, we had for several weeks been witnessing the creation of a new category of children. These children shared certain characteristics: a gunpowder-gray layer of soot covering their small bodies from head to toe, only interrupted by streaks of burn or blood; missing or mangled limbs; sudden orphanhood; the concurrent extinction of immediate and extended family; and, most of all: a look of utter bewilderment at the world into which they have re-emerged.

Looking back, the shock and grief of observing this physical dehumanization of children had taken me to an unfamiliar psychic place. I was bargaining, mentally, with the perpetrator, the state of Israel itself. I visualized the pitch I could make. I am well-educated, articulate, have a Western-level income, and, critically, am a Palestinian. *Would they take me instead?* How many children could I save if I sacrificed myself? A dozen? That seemed far too ambitious. What about just three or four? One?

In some of my mental negotiations, I felt ready to surrender myself in exchange for no children. *Take me. Please, just take me.*

After a week or so, my *Take Me* stage passed. But in conversations and direct messages with friends and acquaintances, and in particular with other writers, I realized many had gone through a similar stage in their trauma. One writer friend, Hananah Zaheer, wrote a brief poem that articulated what I was feeling with breathtaking precision:

what a thing it is to be alive in a time when  
war is not war and a fight is not fight and

dying is not dying and children are heads  
and bodies and little animals who cry and all  
of us watching need to negotiate the truth  
like we haven't had our heart broken feared  
death looked at our own children and found  
religion  
said take me please and let that child live

Like me, others witnessing the atrocities had tried everything that might be considered constructive. The protesting, the article-writing, the lobbying, the donating, the social media. The only result we reaped was the same: hourly slaughter and destruction at a scale without precedent in modern humanity.

And the scale — the scale is the thing. If the assault on Gaza has a contemporary forebear, it's the US's assault on Iraq in 2003, the infamous "shock and awe" campaign. The lightshow that the US pridefully enacted over Iraqi cities was intended to snuff out, with a parade of plummeting missiles, any idea of victory the Iraqis may have imagined for themselves.

With the intensity of the ruination it has created and continues to create in Gaza, Israel seems to have ambitions to destroy our ability to imagine at all. As a writer, I felt particularly attuned to it.



One of the most terror-inducing aspects of writing is how much of it is an act of faith. It requires the writer, while they are alone conjuring words on a screen, to believe that the experiences of which they are writing, no matter how idiosyncratic, will strike readers as familiar, resonant, or interesting. The belief is made less foolhardy only by the knowledge that readers possess imaginations to assist them in navigating different worlds.

Palestinian writing is even more of an act of

faith. As a writer working in English, my underlying assumption as I wrote my short story collection *Her First Palestinian* was that readers would not relate to my work, not because it is uniquely unrelatable, but because relating to Palestinians has always been forbidden on some level. Empathizing with Palestinians is seen, in these parts, as a sign of a subversive, or at minimum nonconformist, nature. Sure enough, in many of the interviews about my book there would come (in some form) a question about whether and how my fiction sought to *humanize* Palestinians, a query that is premised on a racist insult. The only circumstance where you'd need to be convinced of a people's humanity is if you already suspected they lacked it somehow.

More than that, Palestinian writing is an act of faith because Palestinianness itself is so threatened. The erasure of Palestine over the last century has been well-documented. Israel has configured the West Bank (itself only a fraction of historical Palestine) into tiny, isolated bantustans, which it re-shrinks all the time via aggressive expulsions and settlement. Gaza has long been besieged, and is hardly penetrable from inside or out. For diaspora Palestinians in particular, the conception of Palestine is propped up mainly by memories handed down by deceased grandparents, by phone calls with relatives in Palestine, and by the shreds of our sporadic trips back home, when Israel deigns to allow us entry. A precarious stacking of all the cards we have left.

I have only been to Palestine once, with my father, on a trip of only a few days when I was nineteen years old. For me, as is the case for many other Palestinians, writing about Palestine is an intensely imaginative exercise. We imagine what our old houses looked like before they were stolen from us, where our olive trees would have been before they were uprooted or set ablaze, and how many times a week we might visit the

grounds of Al-Aqsa and the souqs around it if there were not umpteen checkpoints to pass.

Intertwined with this imaginative act is the faith that we will really have these things, at some point in the not-so-distant future. The belief is that the Palestine of the mind's eye is still possible. The tragedies of oppression are not just some convenient source of tension in our writing, something to give our work a pleasing air of righteousness. They constitute, always, a critique of a condition that must be lifted. The liberationist vision of Palestine is not a fantasy; it is as real as our words.

This imaginative infrastructure is not unique to writers or artists either. Every chant of 'Free Palestine' at a public demonstration is our collective imagination manifesting itself in dreams and actionable objectives.

All of which makes the campaign of annihilation that Israel has admitted to undertaking feel like it has a different kind of counter-objective. Twenty-thousand killed, neighbourhoods razed to nothingness, whole family lines erased from the civil registry, the vast majority of the population displaced from their homes and left to roam the meager geography, going from sites of near-death to sites of actual death. Even the human beings still alive have, post-rubble, been revised into gray, haunted people.

The recurring thought upon watching is: 'What is left?' If there are no residences to go back to, no hospitals to heal at, no farms to farm, not enough money to rebuild, and for some even no limbs to rebuild with, then what is left? What is the point of resisting at all?

These questions brought me back to my *Take Me* stage. If the thought of my personal non-existence once seemed abundantly worth it to stop even a small part of these horrors, then surely my imagination of Palestine has also been damaged.

Indeed, Palestinians for whom imaginative work is their vocation have been hit particularly hard by

Israel's aggression. International outlets carried the news that the prominent Palestinian poet and storyteller, Refaat Alareer, was apparently targeted by a strike, but he is hardly alone. The list of Palestinian writers and intellectuals killed has been extensive, to say nothing of those merely abducted and beaten like the poet Mosab Abu Toha.

Not to mention, the very language by which Palestinians may describe who they are, what is happening to them, and what they want is all the time being dwindled under hailstorms of antisemitism accusations.

So, is that what the aim of this offensive has been all along? To extinguish our ability to imagine a future homeland? If we do not dream it, after all, we will cease to work for it. And at such a point, surely the homeland will die.



I confess that, since the war began, I have been unable to write a word of fiction. As fiction is the only thing I'd ever really cared to write, this has been alarming to me. But it felt like the height of self-indulgence to spend time and effort inventing narratives and refining verbiage in the face of so much horror, particularly when the horror is effected on my own people.

But if the intent of the horror is to kill the dream that belies my most important and personal narratives, it feels like my responsibility to resist somehow, in the ways I can, even if the dream is impaired by current events. It feels, indeed, self-indulgent to shirk this responsibility. We are talking about the land of sad oranges, after all, and mother's bread, and wild thorns, and much other rich imaginative heritage. After seventy-five years of violent colonization, this is hardly our first trauma; why should it be the one to silence us?

Nor is the case of Palestine only for Palestinians. Many have noted that Palestine is a great litmus test for the ability of people to resist despotism. If, in the face of the massive worldwide popular feeling for Palestine, colonial powers can still assert their will to annihilate Gaza, then other anti-colonial movements (or, more broadly, any morally righteous movements at all) would not seem to have much of a chance. Writers, above all others, have a responsibility to engage with such struggles, and their deep ramifications, in their work.

Edward Said has noted that if it is the role of the politician to define for you what is ‘possible,’ what you must *submit* to, then it’s the role of the intellectual to assert the alternative. In the face of so many, particularly in the media and punditry classes, manufacturing consent for inhumanity, writers must be able to state their objections.

Imaginative work is not exempt from this precept, and in fact should be at its vanguard. We must feel free — and, if necessary, *will* ourselves to feel free — to critique the world of injustice and inhumanity that we despise, and envision in its place the world we want. If we can’t be free in our own imaginations, where can

we be free?

Luckily, this freedom, once accessed, is so full of writerly joy and spur.

Think of the grim irony you, as a writer, could plumb in imagining a gathering of important people, fathers and mothers, sitting around a table and gravely nodding their heads as they say *Agreed! Let’s kill ten-thousand children, we can see no other solution!* Or think of your delight as you write a scene in which a politician, with a straight face, says to a line of cameras: *Actually, these mass murders are the responsibility of the terrorists, since they forced us to commit them!*, because evidently this logic worked well enough in that politician’s youth when he took his little brother’s hand and thrashed him in the face with it.

Or think of the grace you may find in knowing that you had a chance to show human vice, depravity, and hypocrisy — and you did it.

And then, go ahead, imagine what we were, what we will be, and how we will get there.

Personally, I can’t help but want to do all of that.

They may want to kill our imaginations, but what a foolish ambition.