



Prose-poem descriptions by Dr. Said M. Kahlout.

Translated by Ghada Kanafani

Have you seen hunger?

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I have seen it.

I saw it in a mass of fathers, mothers and children, swaying up and down, hands pushing and pulling, all reaching out, waving frantically for a loaf of bread.

I saw hunger in fifty children chasing a transport truck carrying giant, empty food containers. The echo of the battered war-ravaged road beneath it seemed to shout: "No food for you today! No food at all!"

I saw it in two children fighting over a scrap of bread among the tents, as though it were the last thing left for them in this world. Hunger in their eyes bore an age far older than their small years.

I saw hunger in the prices that suffocate the camps like ropes tightening around the necks of the displaced. Everything has risen twentyfold, choking the breath out of the poor and the newly poor.

I saw it in a little girl tugging at her father, exhausted by the rough hands of war, pleading for candy. He looks at her in silent defeat, his silence heavier than any words. How could she possibly understand that war has hands beyond its bombs and that in the language of poverty, silence is another way of saying, "I have nothing, my child."

I saw hunger at a small, cramped family table, where glances carry the weight of sacrifice. The siblings pretend to eat, leaving what little there is for their ailing mother, while she insists she will not eat until they are full. The food is scarce – too little even for the words they use to comfort one another.

I saw hunger collapsing in tears on a mass grave. Here lies a people who perished, their men too proud to cry before the world's cameras that they had died of hunger.

Here, hunger is not just the body's desperate need amid the devastation of war; it is a human condition, a hollow cry echoing through the world's empty vessels, exposing the void where humanity – shared humanity – should have been.

Here in Gaza, hunger is not a fleeting sensation, but a destiny carved into our souls, immortalized by the silence that conspires with the machinery of war.

A Water War.

A little before midnight, after a lifetime of waiting, and of its own accord, the rain invades the refugees' tents, beats with a baton the slumber stolen between explosions.

All of a sudden the sky explodes as though declaring another war, this time a water war. The sand drowns, objects disappear, and dreams are lost in the midst of mud and water.

Here is Mahmoud's bag, over there are Suad's books. Arwa's little doll swims afar, and our neighbour's undergarments are carried by the water to another tent. Our utmost private matters float over the torrent.

"The bread! The bread got wet!"

Our neighbour's scream tears up the night. The bread here is not just food, but rather life itself in another battle, the battle of hunger.

"Leave everything behind!" he screams again. "Take care of the flour before it drowns."

His wounded voice reaches us as though carrying with it the world's weight, but no one answers. Everyone is occupied with whatever they're able to salvage.

In a muddy alley, a woman runs carrying her infant. She trips and cries, “Oh, God, please pay attention to us!” Her face is lost, her feet wade into the mud. She doesn’t know in what direction to go, but she continues to run as though chasing a mirage we do not see.

From another small tent, a little girl’s voice rises: “Baba, we’re drowned! My God, we’re drowned!” She calls for her martyred father. Perhaps heaven answers. Her voice breaks the heart, but the rain doesn’t listen. It’s too busy drowning her.

“Beat the belly of the tent!” The voice of a father teaches his son how to release water gathered on top of their tent lest it collapses. His trembling hands hold the stick as though they’re holding life itself. He tries to save what’s left of his frail home.

In another corner of the camp, an intense argument:

“Your tent pushed the water towards ours!”

“It’s your tent that’s the cause!”

They hurl accusations at each other, the way the rain hurls them. None of them realises that the rain doesn’t side with anyone, like the bomb that doesn’t differentiate between one tent and another. Both pour their anger equally. The mosquito doesn’t care whose blood he is sucking.

The world is vile. Shared humanity is a lie. It is said that the “First World” is incapacitated regarding the “Third World” and here we too feel incapacitated toward our own selves. Despite this, we try and fail. Then we try again.

For the first time, I hate the rain. For the first time I feel I have a personal grudge against the drops. How was the rain transformed from winter music and stories’ muse into an enemy? I used to run under the rain, happy to be drenched, and raise my hand to the sky’s hand. Today, drenched, I run away devoid of safety.

Put all this aside and listen to the little girl’s voice: “Baba, we’re drowned! My God! We’re drowned!”

Brother, let the echo of this voice reach your depths. Perhaps you will be roused. Peace be upon the refugees held under the rain and held over a spear.



Our Friends Outside.

Outside this homeland turned guillotine, we have kind brothers and sisters who love us, and their hearts don't stop pleading with God to end this plague upon us and to stop the war from claiming more lives. They say with sincerity that they remain glued to the screens, switching from channel to channel, following the latest developments of this massacre.

I wish I could tell these beloved ones that we are fine, that everything is alright, and that our football team scores twenty thousand clean goals every day against our eternal rival.

And that we are champions who have crossed the thresholds of pain – both the first and the last – and no longer feel hurt whenever we pass by a funeral, whenever a mother cries out to her son: “Where are you going? You’re leaving me behind.”

I wish I could reassure them that we’ve adapted to the sand in our tents, the cold, the mice that raid what’s left of our flour, urinating on it so that, in the morning, we’re forced to lay it out under the sun, knead it and bake it for our hungry children, as the fire of hunger consumes everything.

I wish I could open the camera and record a scene for you in front of the tent’s garden, where white lilies bloom behind me, red anemones shine and basil leaves flourish. But I am ashamed to show you the onion sprouts I planted which died of fear and cold after three weeks of a desperate attempt to grow just one centimetre. Didn’t they tell you that trees feel fear? Then what about little seedlings that spend their long nights counting minutes, watching the bombardments tear apart every attempt at photosynthesis? Perhaps the seedlings grieve each time they hear us talk about our high hopes for them amidst the onion shortage, only to succumb to a stroke that paralyzes them and leaves them to die of despair.

How happy I would be to tell you that the resilient people of the tents have restored education to its former path, that the rubble-strewn roads rejoice

at the tiny footsteps of our children in the morning as they go to school, line up for the Palestinian national anthem and sing afterwards “The Land of the Arabs is my Homeland” and “All Arabs are my Brothers” before entering classrooms to absorb all colours of knowledge.

But I fear for your delicate feelings, so I’ll hide from you that our children spend their days, from dawn to dusk, in queues for drinking water, washing water, the community kitchens and humanitarian aid convoys which war and theft have depleted to mere drops.

How happy I would be to tell you that the surgery, internal medicine, paediatric and outpatient departments in Gaza’s hospitals are working at full capacity and that, defying the war, scheduled and routine operations are conducted on time. And that our surgeons here have recently succeeded in discovering new endoscopic pathways which major scientific journals have accredited with patents.

I am sorry to tell you that two-thirds of the hospitals have been forced out of service and that sick children spend their unwell nights in darkness, as their wards operate without light to conserve energy for operating rooms, intensive care units and the morgues, which never cease to receive new victims.

My dear ones:

Even if life continues under war, shards of nothingness impede any act or movement. So, I confess to you that we are weary, that life is fractured, and that death is fully formed.

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