

OVER SEAS



**YOUNG MIGRANT VOICES FROM
LEBANON, LIBYA, AND TUNISIA**

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

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About ICTJ

The International Center for Transitional Justice works across society and borders to challenge the causes and address the consequences of massive human rights violations. We affirm victims' dignity, fight impunity, and promote responsive institutions in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved. ICTJ envisions a world where societies break the cycle of massive human rights violations and lay the foundations for peace, justice, and inclusion. For more information, visit www.ictj.org

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Foreword

Migration and Narrative: The Self Speaks of Its Melancholy

Migration (*al-hijra*), abandonment (*al-hujrān*), displacement (*at-tahjīr*), desertion (*al-hajr*), and expatriation (*al-muhājara*) are words that reflect abandonment, alienation, estrangement, disaffection, and cruelty. In Arabic, the lexicon of these derivatives seems endless. Some willingly choose to migrate, while others are driven to it by force. Yet, in most cases, the connotation is laden with melancholy; and from melancholy, stories are born.

To migrate, by choice or by force, does not necessarily mean having the ability to tell the tale. The art of narrative is “the ultimate meaning,” an act of elevating experience into language, into one’s self that shapes what is imagined in all that has occurred.

The texts before us are of the type to shatter the well-known notion of “the death of the author.” Within these texts, the self-breaks free from the shackles that reduce migrants to numbers, cold charts, and stamped travel documents at border crossings. Language is the one traveler that needs no visa.

Within the pages of this book, the migration of possibilities and potentials comes to light. The writers reveal their power to expose, to unmask our masquerade balls. Yet, these texts also offer a lesson in humanity, worn thin by the aftershocks of a “sovereignty syndrome,” relentlessly resisting windmills. We write so we do not forget. For language is an alternate homeland.

These are texts born of distant horizons, dense enough to draw us back again and again, until each reading gives rise to new texts we cannot fully grasp. The reader here becomes engrossed in reading and rewriting, weaving another text from the original. And perhaps only the theories of reception can complete what remains of the wounds left by writing.

Eighteen texts, each steeped in the melancholy of the self, a self-burdened with itself and its own questions: the meaning of existence, the weight of being an individual amid the crush of the crowd, and the yearning for release from countless chains. Chains forged by shifting geopolitical tides: on one shore, wars, regional conflicts, and internal realities that offer no promise of life; on the other, family obligations, academic and career paths, as well as the search for freedom. These migration stories have been told here, blending fact with imagination. And what beauty there is in the imagined!

Are we witnessing the sorrows of a wandering self, writing its story of migration? Or the sorrows of those who yearn to journey yet find themselves bound by chains? And if they do migrate, they are consumed by questions—questions of existence, of acculturation, of integration, of identity, of their relationship with places and times, with tastes, with love, whether fulfilled or failed, of racism, of xenophobia, yet also of brilliance, self-assertion, and resilience. These texts bear witness to it all.

I belong to a generation that discovered writing on migration through *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih, the generation that stood with its protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, for fulfilling our dreams, our fantasies, our wild, shackled imaginings, delighting us with imagined, illusory victories. Before us came another generation that discovered Tawfiq al-Hakim's *A Sparrow from the East* (1938), a novel that explores the East-West debate and their intricate relationship. We lived in the heyday of the grand narratives that defined the 20th century. Only literary figures back then dared to write on migration as a lived experience. No one else did.

Today, however, we find ourselves in the labyrinth of micro-narratives, “mini-systems” of meaning crafted by ordinary people who have claimed the right to narrate, the right to write.

What sets these texts apart is their pleasant, engaging, and palatable style. Some soar into the skies of symbolism and abstraction, others mirror reality with meticulous precision, and others pierce the heart, stirring old wounds. As you make your way through the texts, you find yourself feeling as if they're recounting an experience you've lived, one someone close to you went through, or one that you may have yet to encounter. Within these texts, elements emerge

that are personal, familial, and national, as well as those that transcend nations and borders, geographical and symbolic alike, and that go beyond societies and cultures. All these elements come together in this book, shaping a work that stands as a unique contribution to its field.

My gratitude goes to all who wrote, and to the International Center for Transitional Justice for making this unique endeavor possible.

Mohamed Jouili

Professor of sociology

University of Tunis

Introduction

“Migration—whether forced, coerced, intentional or a little of all three—is a defining feature of global political landscape. It is also deeply misunderstood, with little correlation between the rhetoric surrounding migration and its reality. A narrative has evolved that is rooted in ignorance and is, at least in part, driven by political manipulation of public fears.”¹

Even though young people were key drivers of the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Lebanon, their lives have not significantly improved since then. They continue to face high unemployment and limited access to political processes. The pandemic only exacerbated their socioeconomic grievances and highlighted the legacies of violence in the three countries. Political instability and conflicts following the revolutions have helped make the MENA region a consistent source of both economic and political migrants.

Economic migrants typically leave their home countries due to a lack of opportunities, marginalization, and the absence of development models that meet their aspirations. Political migrants are often forced to flee because of their political affiliations, ongoing hostilities, or failures in post-conflict reconstruction that prevent them from building a dignified life.

Whether for economic or political reasons, many young people no longer see a role for themselves at home. Instead, they seek better and safer prospects abroad, a decision that has a profound economic and emotional impact on their families and communities.

The brain drain phenomenon is becoming increasingly visible and problematic in the Global South. Societies in the region are losing the investment made in citizens simply because they cannot provide the opportunities for a fulfilling life.

1 Lucy Hovil, “Telling Truths about Migration,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 13, 2 (July 2019): 199–205.

In response, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) launched the “Overseas” writing contest in September 2023, inviting young migrants (up to 35 years old) originally from or currently residing in Lebanon, Libya, or Tunisia to share their personal experiences of migration in the form of original, short, written testimonies.

The contest sought to put a human face on the cold numbers behind migration statistics. It invited young migrants who had left their home countries for political or socioeconomic reasons to share their experiences, the challenges they face, and their hopes for themselves and their countries through storytelling. The contest spotlighted stories of both regular and irregular migration.

Leveraging the power of storytelling, Overseas aimed to explore how marginalization, exclusion, inequality, and conflict influence young people’s decision to leave. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on the challenges they encounter living abroad, including new forms of repression and exclusion.

In some cases, experiences of migration involve grave violations such as slavery and arbitrary detention. The contest, however, focused on the stories of those who left their home countries because there was little hope for meaningful redress or reform and no opportunity to live with dignity and full rights.

A distinguished jury composed of prominent writers, academics, and human rights defenders from Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia helped make the Overseas contest possible. They reviewed the numerous submissions and selected the winners based on creativity, originality, and potential to provoke thought, debate, and meaningful change.

In a world where youth often choose to express themselves through visual art and digital means, launching a writing contest was quite challenging. Nevertheless, the entries received were powerful testimonies conveying the bitter realities of young migrants. Importantly, many contestants expressed a readiness to return home, provided the right conditions were in place.

The eight winners were announced four months later. In March 2024, they attended the Overseas awards ceremony and international conference in Tunis where they shared their migration experiences. Participants in the conference discussed migration and the brain drain phenomenon at the global

policy level, expanding the project's scope to include experiences from other countries like Morocco, Syria, and Yemen. The convening aimed to raise awareness, foster societal dialogue, and encourage young people to explore potential solutions to the migration crisis.

ICTJ chose to publish these 18 testimonies in the hope they would inform, influence, and inspire public and policy debates on migration and its root causes, while also helping to stimulate change and contribute to meaningful solutions to the political and socioeconomic problems that force individuals to leave their countries of origin. Together with other justice-related initiatives, these testimonies can help pave the way for needed political change as well as institutional and legislative reforms.

Nour El Bejjani, head of ICTJ's Lebanon and Yemen programs

Reem El Gantri, former head of ICTJ's Libya program

Salwa El Gantri, ICTJ senior programs expert



Alive Between Waves

Ash Kay

Ash Kay is a Syrian woman currently living in the Netherlands. She works in the arts. Her goal is to live in peace, without hate, war, borders, or discrimination.

The night that officers from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) intercepted our small boat, all we heard was a gunshot.

A bullet tore through the rubber and soft wood, damaging the boat. Three massive men pointed bright lights at us from a large white boat. I still don't know where they had come from or when they had gotten there! I only remember our small boat suddenly swaying over the high waves. I was about to fall and found nothing to grab hold of, so I closed my eyes.

In the dark, we hear better, making sounds extremely powerful and terrifying; making them impossible to ignore. I hate the darkness of the night...

The men took our boat's engine and sprayed us with water.

I will never forget the scent of the gunshot mixed with the scent of the sea as the women and children screamed in horror. I felt like vomiting but immediately realized that it was not the time for that!

"Who among you speaks English?" they howled at us.

I speak English, but I couldn't get any words to come out of my mouth; they were caught in a lump in my throat. I am used to biting my tongue and keeping quiet, and I said nothing in order to shield myself from the violence of those men. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs to defend myself that night, but my vocal cords failed me, betraying me as usual.

A young man raised his trembling hand. They ordered him to identify the captain of our small, frail boat, threatening to shoot us all if he refused. He didn't open his mouth. None of us did; we all kept quiet. I think we all foresaw what would happen to this young 20-year-old. The three Frontex officers became more violent, shaking our boat ferociously to throw us all into the sea as they continued to spray water at us.

One of the women screamed, "Him!" pointing her finger at the man who had been steering the boat. In the blink of an eye, they began beating the young man as we all watched, and for a moment, I almost thought I heard the sound of his bones breaking! It reminded me of the day when my brother lifted me high up in the air and then threw me to the ground, breaking my elbow... It was the same sound.

The smell of blood was added to the mix of scents. They grabbed the young man by his shoulders and threw him onto their large boat. I saw that his right shoulder bone was out of position! His face was covered in blood, and for a moment, I thought he had died, but his faint groans indicated that he was alive. Everyone was angry with that treacherous woman for what she had done to the young man, but none of us said a word. She grabbed her sick son sitting on her lap tight. If I were a mother, I might have behaved similarly to protect my child.

The three men started yelling again, ordering the young translator to tell us to give them everything in our possession.

Their voices echoed in the sea that night.

They took our bags, phones, money, and even our life jackets. We were left with nothing! Fortunately, I had hidden my phone, my Syrian passport, and some money in my bra. Later, I discovered that the other women had done the same—we are blessed to have breasts and bras! After taking everything they could see, they threw us a thick rope, told us to hold on to it and to walk to their big boat, one after the other.

Everyone kept asking, "Where are you taking us?" The only answer we got was, "To the island of Rhodes, you bastards."

As soon as we had all gotten on the big white boat, they ordered the women to sit on the left and the men to sit on the right. At that moment, a Zayn Malik song started playing in my head: "But you'll never be alone. I'll be with you from dusk till dawn. I'll be with you from dusk till dawn. Baby, I'm right here. I'll hold you when things go wrong. Baby, I'm right here."

Thinking of this song remains my way to self-soothe to this day; it is my only method for slowing my heartbeat and breathing again. I always did this as a child, and believe me, it is the reason I am still alive. It distracts me from the world around me and allows me to disassociate, a free survival kit that you can all take with you wherever you are and use whenever you want.

I had the chance to look into the eyes of those giant men. I saw angry green, bloodshot eyes. I saw rage in those eyes, the eyes of the men who had blocked our path toward hope. Black wool covered their faces, and we could only see their mouths as they hurled obscenities at us.

Today, I wish I could remember what happened in more detail, but much of the events of that day have been erased from my memory. I am grateful that I cannot remember, but at the same time, I want to know. I often try to focus my mind and retrieve the memories out of curiosity, but I never manage to find clear answers to my questions.

From what I do remember, they wore large boots and stomped as they took the men, one by one, and strip-searched them.

I almost fainted when they discovered that one of the men had hidden money in his pocket. They beat him mercilessly. I saw his face under the boot of one of the Frontex men, and his eyes looked like they were about to pop out of his face. They said things I didn't understand, and I covered my face with my palms as I heard his scream and the sounds of their blows. I was waiting for my turn. In the end, it turned out that they didn't search the

women; they merely asked if we had kept anything, and none of us confessed. I don't know how long we stood on that big boat as they insulted us. We were denied water and those who needed to urinate did so in front of everyone. At some point, the smell of urine became so strong that I felt like I was in a dirty school bathroom.

Suddenly, the three large men ordered us to stand up. They threw our broken boat into the sea after having pulled it up so we could board their kingdom. At that moment, I realized there was no hope; we were not going to be saved. They began throwing the men down onto that damaged little thing we had been on, and then made us, the women, grab a thick rope and use it to go back down to our small boat. The sounds became louder than ever at that moment. We were totally unprotected, as they had taken our life jackets. Our boat was broken, and we were exhausted.

I grabbed the rope and threw myself down. The men who had been waiting for us to join them grabbed me. Despite my empty stomach, I started to vomit. I was puking out my soul...

Frontex kept the man who was driving our boat, and we never heard of him after that. They then asked us to hold onto the thick rope so they could tie our ship to theirs. They threw us two or three life jackets and six rubber balloons. I believe that there were 27 of us on the boat, and chaos ensued as we fought over who would use the life jackets if the boat sank. It was extremely windy, and I was shaking. I had lost all hope; I didn't even want to hold onto the rope. I curled into the fetal position and hid my face. At that point, I was no longer in fear; I didn't care what would happen to me. I felt nothing at all. My feet were numb, as were my heart and mind, and I surrendered to the screaming.

One of the Frontex officers ordered us to let go of the rope. I think everyone was as numb as I had been. We immediately did as we were told, not even bothering to ask what would happen next. Only then did we realize that there was another boat, and the Frontex officers were pushing refugees into the sea. It was beyond harrowing! We were deep at sea, but the waves were

only slightly louder than my heartbeat! I was shaken to the core, so much so that I forgot about the deep fear in my soul.

That night, I saw them disappearing into a place of no return. I tried my best to look away and avoid registering what I was seeing. But hearing their voices, their cries for mercy and help, I could not stop myself from watching them vanish into the blue... Unfortunately, with every painful experience you undergo, you lose part of your soul. That night, I lost myself entirely.

The waters were rising higher and higher in the small boat that the other refugees and I were on. The smell of death was all around us, but it seemed that we were more fortunate than the poor souls on the other boat.

We were more obedient; let's put it that way. I forgot that I had tucked my phone into my bra. As the women were crying out for help, I got the idea to do the same. Smiling as though I had attained a great victory, I pulled out my phone, took a few photos, and sent them to the Maritime Rescue Cell. The signal on my phone was weak, but after several attempts, I managed to receive a call from a Monitoring and Rescue Cell operator who spoke Arabic. He asked me where we were, how many people were with me, and if we were all okay. My first answer was, "Please send us help, I don't know where we are, but I shared our location... There are people drowning before our eyes and we can't help any of them. We don't have enough life jackets, and water is accumulating on our boat more and more. We are dying slowly..." Then the signal was lost.

You see things differently when death is near. That day, I didn't want to see any more; I had seen enough. I put my head in my hands again and started singing once more, swaying with the waves (as I write these words, I can still feel the waves in my brain, and how they slowly shook our spirits). My clothes were completely soaked, I was extremely cold and becoming even more hopeless when the sun began to rise. It would have been a wonderful day to leave this filthy world; bidding it farewell to that magnificent sunrise would have been a peaceful way to die. I saw my father smiling at me in the sky, and I could see my relatives and friends. I saw myself embracing them and taking in their scent.

A loud roar brought me back to reality. I saw a Turkish flag on top of a gray boat. I am not even sure it was gray, but that's how I remember it now. The rescuers had reached us. I don't remember anything after that beyond a handful of men in uniform speaking Turkish and asking me strange questions.

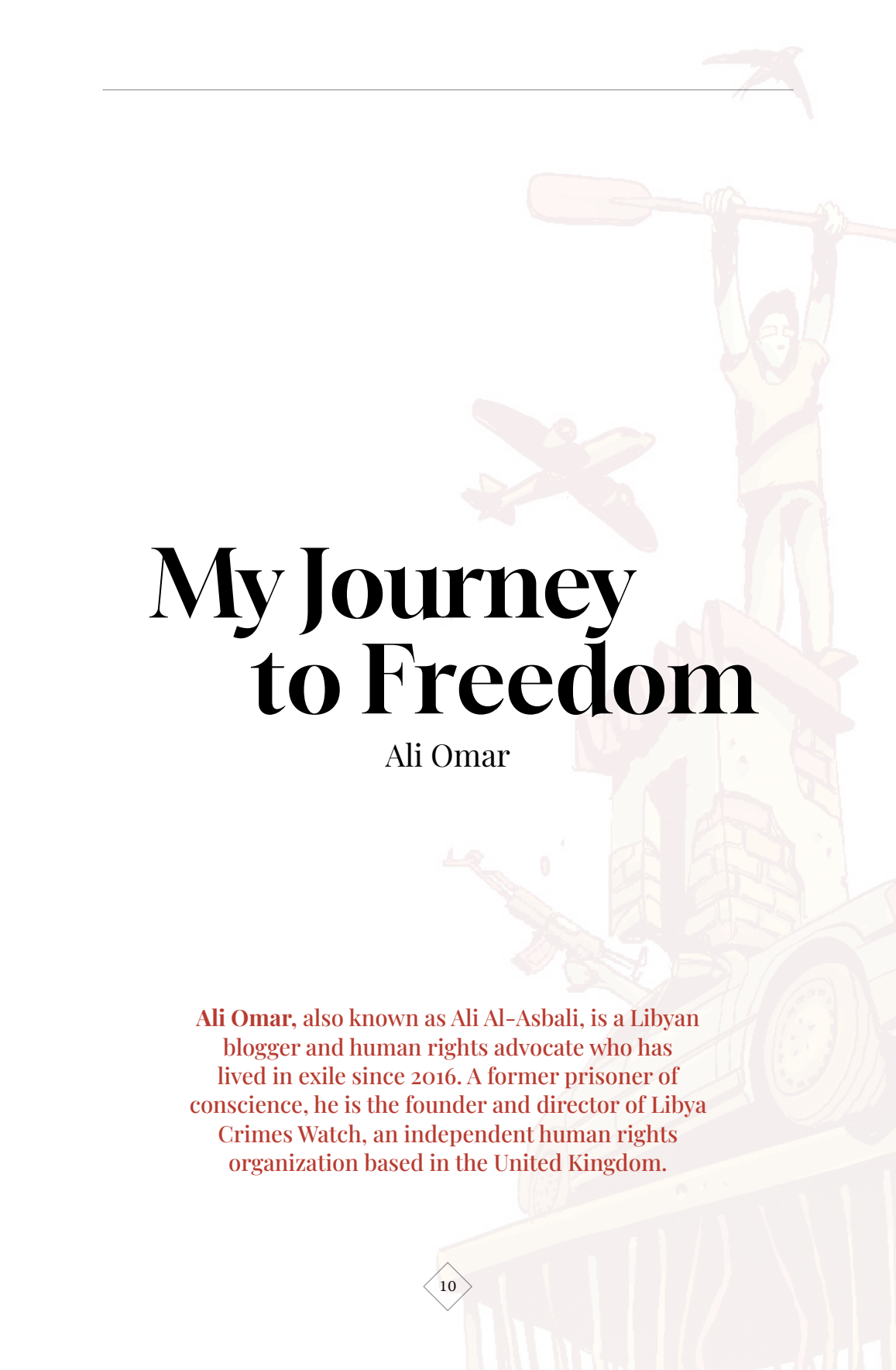
I was given a small bottle of water and a blanket. They then took us to a Turkish port. I could still feel the waves, even as we stood on solid ground. After being rescued, I could not tell what was real from what wasn't for a long time. I couldn't speak or introduce myself; I couldn't even cry. I wished I could cry, but all I could do was move my fingers, trying to point to where people had drowned. My vocal cords were still failing me.

I don't know how long I slept under the open sky at the port that the Turkish coast guards took us to, but when I woke up, I began to scream. My voice had regained its full force. I was screaming for help. Pleading for someone to save the others who were still at sea, but it was too late. I fell asleep again and only woke up when I felt that I was being carried to a bus. I could not tell who or where I was.

When I woke up, I found myself on the ground with many shoes next to me. I took some pictures and went back to sleep again. We were left in the parking lot of a police station for three days, drinking water from the toilets. They treated us worse than cats are treated in countries that don't respect animals.

I slept like I had never slept before, in an open parking lot, night after night, freezing and longing for safety, the safety I had been seeking when I left my country.





My Journey to Freedom

Ali Omar

Ali Omar, also known as Ali Al-Asbali, is a Libyan blogger and human rights advocate who has lived in exile since 2016. A former prisoner of conscience, he is the founder and director of Libya Crimes Watch, an independent human rights organization based in the United Kingdom.

By October 2023, seven full years had gone by since I left Libya. I don't know where to begin my story or how to end it. I don't know how the years have gone by so quickly! Nor do I know when I will go back. The only thing I know for certain is that I am a liar. I'm sorry to say it, but I lie to my family, constantly promising them I'll be back soon.

I go back in time to March 2016. It was dead quiet as I stood at our doorstep. Suddenly, I saw a car with tinted windows driving at high speed and then, shabbily dressed armed men with austere looks on their faces hurling towards me. Although I could have tried to escape, I didn't move a muscle. I don't think it was a matter of bravery; it may have been fate that stopped me from fleeing, resisting, or even surrendering. Despite having stood perfectly still, I was dealt a blow to the head that left me disoriented for a few moments, just long enough to find myself tied up and being taken to an unknown location. I cannot put how I felt that day into words. These were moments I will never forget; I will retain the most intricate details of what happened for as long as I live.

I did not know that a few minutes would turn into 120 nights of solitary confinement, during which no one knew where I was. I didn't expect to make it out of there alive after resisting torture in all its forms for no other crime than being a young man in my early twenties who had impulsively voiced his opinions and irritated the authorities. It never crossed my mind that this painful experience would be the reason for a radical shift, not only in my way of thinking but also in the course of my life.

Less than two months after I was released, I found myself forced to leave Libya. I felt besieged by betrayal. The walls were closing in on me after authorities had summoned me to a military base in the city to discuss my case, instructing me to bring my passport. Their aim was to make it impossible for me to leave the country. Instead, I turned off my phone, left my home, and headed to my grandfather's house that same day. From there, I went to a friend's house in the city of Tobruk and after going through a lot of trouble and paying large sums of money, I made it to Tunisia.

I left my country after having staunchly refused the idea of abandoning it. I left everything behind: my family, the few friends I had left, my books, my memories, and everything that I had never wanted to abandon. I took only my non-deceased corpse and a bit of money with me. I did not have a plan, only a commitment to never return so long as this profound injustice remained.

Tunis embraced me very warmly. I lived in the city's neighborhoods and alleys for three years but never once felt like a stranger. I loved Sidi Bou Said's views of the city from above and sitting on the windowsills along Habib Bourguiba Avenue. I swapped Arabic coffee for "cappucin" (cappuccino), in line with Tunisian tradition. Like the people of Tunisia, I ate lablabi and kamounia, and I fell in love with grouper couscous. The men and women who became my friends enriched my life, and some of them became inspirations of mine. I built my character and learned many lessons. Solitude and exile taught me a lot, and I was presented with an opportunity to confront and overcome hardship. Alone, I surmounted challenges and obstacles, and I learned to take responsibility. Once I was able to get back on my feet following the ordeal I had been put through, I returned to politics, continuing where I had left off, but with more fervor. I worked, wrote, voiced my opinions, went on television programs, and attended events and gatherings. I became more aware and mature.

Despite all of that, however, I also had a strong desire to leave Tunisia. Even with everything positive about my time there, Tunisia was not a safe place to live, especially not for troublemakers like me. I was worried about the

future, as Tunisia was politically unstable. There could even come a time when they would hand me over to the Libyan authorities, and I couldn't obtain a residence permit nor renew my passport.

These were the thoughts on my mind. And how long would I stay here? Should I find another, safer place to go to? Was I ready for a new adventure? I began asking myself these questions just a few months into my stay in Tunisia. With time, I reached the conclusion that I should migrate to Europe to a country where I could be safe and lead a stable life, where I could pursue my activism freely, without fear or restrictions.

I saved money, living frugally to afford visa applications, but to no avail. I received rejection after rejection after rejection. Despair had begun creeping in when, one day, someone presented me with a solution after hearing my story, which seemed to have moved him. Leaning in, he whispered, "I can put you in contact with someone who can get you a visa—a forged visa—to any country. You could try your luck." Without giving it much thought, I agreed. I felt ready to go on this risky adventure even though it was against the law. I had no other choice; I was tired of constantly receiving rejections from embassies just because I am Libyan!

I knew the repercussions that taking this step could entail: I could be imprisoned or deported to Libya if I was caught. But I trusted the voice in my head that told me I would achieve my goal. After a little research, I decided that the UK would be my destination. There were just a few reasons for this decision: it was not far away, and I had a basic grasp of English, meaning that I wouldn't have to learn a new language from scratch there. Moreover, according to the people I contacted who had already been living there, the asylum system in the UK was not complicated at the time. Everyone encouraged me to take this step.

In April 2019, it came time to leave Tunisia. I didn't pack my bags. I left everything behind, just as I had done before. I left my memories and all my inexpensive belongings behind. I even left my clothes in the apartment and walked out without telling anyone, carrying only a small backpack. I

didn't know what would happen. Would I make it through the airport, go to prison, or face deportation? I was nervous, but with the first step I took at the airport, my apprehensions dissipated into an overwhelming sense of calm and a mix of emotions. Everything went perfectly, and I acted like a student traveling to study in London. I breathed a sigh of relief and thought my adventure had ended well, but I quickly realized that this had merely been a phase in a new start.

The UK was different on every level: a new language, a variety of cultures, an entirely different system, the weather, buildings, food, colors, and scents. Nothing was like anything I'd ever known before. The humanity was palpable right away. I felt it in my first interaction in the country, with the airport worker to whom I expressed my intention to seek asylum. I stayed at the airport for many hours, completing the necessary asylum procedures before being sent to a hostel in a London suburb. There, I spent an entire week in a large room packed with rows of beds, where at least 20 other people, none of whom had previously been acquainted, were staying. We were united by a shared sense of hope in a new beginning, as well as a conviction that this was the start of a brighter chapter in the stories of our lives. The room was brimming with stories from dozens of countries and almost every continent, which made me hesitate to share my own. I met people who had endured grueling journeys. Some had traversed the sea on rubber boats, others had walked barefoot from the far corners of Africa, and others still had come hidden in trucks.

A new phase of my life began after my asylum request was swiftly approved. I had a strong case. I was a prominent activist who had been imprisoned and forced to flee, and I had ample evidence to prove my story. Despite the challenges I faced during the first few months, I gradually adapted and integrated. I returned to my activism with greater vigor than ever before, writing and expressing my views freely. Within months of my arrival, I had established a human rights organization dedicated to helping those who are undergoing similar experiences. Today, it has become among the most recognized organizations in Libya.

Finally, I have a home, even if it is small and its ceilings are so low that my head almost bumps into it. What distinguishes this apartment, though, is that no one can knock on my door to stop me from thinking or writing! Finally, I have walls on which I can hang the pictures of those who inspire me, a small library where I can store my scattered books, and a shelf where I can arrange memories of each country I visit. Doors have been opened to me since I arrived; I have gone to Geneva, Brussels, and The Hague, not for tourism but to advocate for those I left behind in prison and those who are being tortured, to amplify voices that have been silenced through violence, and to share in the sorrow of their mothers and highlight the human rights abuses in my country. Despite the distance, I strive to make a difference from where I am. I am certain that I can make a far more significant impact from here, both now and in the future.



Between Freedom and Safety

Karim Chebli

Karim Chebli a Lebanese theater artist, writer, director, and producer, currently living in the United States where he works as a university lecturer. He holds bachelor's degrees in business administration and theater and master's degrees in education and in performing arts and pedagogy.

I grew up in the heart of the Middle East, in a small conservative village in Mount Lebanon. I had big dreams and even bigger white wings that I tore off to blend into the local community. And I found myself crawling on my hands and knees, constantly fighting arduous battles against the deep-rooted customs and traditions of my ancestors. Indeed, I grew up in a society that had just been coming out of war aspiring to a career in the arts, a society in which children liked to play with weapons and swords. I was labeled “peculiar” and “strange” because I was, and still am, different.

Unlike the other boys, I never liked fast cars and weapons; my passions were acting, painting, and storytelling. Being intimately in touch with your emotions, as I had been, was taboo in this patriarchal society that runs on fear. When I realized that things wouldn't change, I learned to console myself and found solace in writing and acting, and by putting stories together. My escape into the world of my imagination made it my only friend for years. However, I was afraid of pursuing my true calling, and so, as an adult, I found myself trapped in a corporate job that left me counting the days until summer vacation.

Despite social pressures, I dared to abandon my first degree in business administration and changed career paths, entering the humanitarian field. I sought to explore the effects of integrating theater into pedagogical methods to help students cope with the injustices they were facing by helping them to discover themselves as artists and unleash their creativity. During a class I was giving at the time, a student asked me: "What do you want to become

when you grow up?" This question shook me to my core, and I realized that I deserved more; I wanted to make art.

At that moment, I realized that I was burying my frustration. I realized that I was constantly searching for distractions, and that none of them had brought me any real inner peace. I was sitting at a table I should have flipped over. With time, it became clear to me that I had imprisoned this child, the strange artist inside me.

I wanted to fly, but I couldn't. I was afraid to follow my heart. I was afraid to step onto the stage, of being another leaf blowing in the wind. Existing in this world is fraught with risk, more so when one seeks meaning through the arts—in Lebanon, the Arab world, and perhaps everywhere else. Let's be realistic: the odds might not be in our favor. We could end up struggling to even get a bed we need in a hospital. But despite these potential challenges, I dared to follow my heart. I am lucky that my dreams are braver than my fears. I am lucky that the child who had grown up was always stronger than I thought.

My student's question brought back my childhood dreams and drove me to enroll in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University to earn a degree in theater. I spent almost all my time working but never tired, as I found fulfillment in pursuing my passion, and, luckily, my efforts paid off.

In 2020, as Lebanon was in the thick of an economic crisis, revolution, and the coronavirus pandemic, I was the valedictorian of my class, surpassing peers in the theater program who had more talent purely because I believed in my abilities.

Little did I know, however, greater challenges lay ahead. After the Beirut port blast, making a living became extremely difficult for a quasi-artist and teacher. And so, I began writing my own plays and seeking funding so I could stage them to make ends meet. I do not mention these endeavors to brag, but to illustrate the immense challenges I faced in pursuit of a dignified life. Everything seemed manageable until conflicts broke out in our school's

neighborhood, and rumors that a civil war could break out began to spread. Confronted with this volatile situation, I reluctantly chose to prioritize my safety. And so, I accepted a full scholarship to teach and study in the United States. Although it was supposed to be a dream come true, the guilt I feel for having left my homeland, my local artistic journey, my village, and my loved ones behind, gnaws at my bones. Today, I teach in English, act in English, and earn a good living in US dollars, but I am not content. People wonder why I am not happier, or why I am not happy, full stop. After all, it seems that I have everything: a life on the other side of the world, something many young Arabs are desperate for. But I left so much behind. Maybe this feeling is a generational thing. Maybe we are unrealistic, constantly seeking more and trying to get the best of both worlds.

Are we asking for too much? Is asking for something that others around the world have—the chance to stay in the same place, with the people we grew up with—too much? Today, more than ever, I long for the warmth of my homeland; its sun, its people, and their embrace. Loneliness is suffocating me, and I impatiently count the days until I am reunited with my friends. It is difficult to wrap your head around how everything in your homeland becomes appealing and enchanting when you're far away, even the power outages, the bumpy roads, and the chaos. I miss it all as I try to carve out a path for myself during the gray, foggy, seemingly endless winter. Here I am, suffocating, yearning for another hug, another kiss. I feel for the mothers standing at the airport, watching their sons disappear behind a revolving door. I feel for the friends hiding their tears, and I feel you holding my hand, Grandma. I fear nothing more than never seeing you again.

Don't tell me everything's okay, or that I'm lucky. I curse the days that left us scattered and flung us across different parts of this vast world. I don't want to go back to my lonely walks or to talking to myself as I ride the train. I want to return to the place where people understand my jokes, where real friendships replace the virtual ones and video calls. I want to hold you all, dance with you at weddings, and stay by your side during difficult times, until your very last breath.

I long for the days when people would simply knock on my door and walk into my house; when their scents, the white strands of their hair, and the freckles on their faces were all familiar. I miss my mother's coffee and enjoying the leftovers of Sunday meals on Mondays. Life has changed, and now every day feels like a Sunday without kibbeh and tabbouleh... spent far from those I love in the company of morbid melancholy.

I want nothing more than for us to sit together on the rooftop of my house with a view of Beirut. I want you to reassure me that I am not alone in this world; that you, too, are lost; that you share this pain of not belonging anywhere. I wish I didn't have to leave, to be caught between freedom and safety, between ideas and aspirations. We all sacrifice something to gain something else, but I miss everything, and right now, I crave a hug more than anything else.





Surviving Beirut

Jade Doumani

Jade Doumani is an Eisner Award-nominated Lebanese-American academic pursuing a doctoral degree in Scotland. His work has been featured in numerous publications, including *Business Insider*, *Newsweek*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Griffith Review*, and *Queen's Quarterly*.

Can one build a future in a country that doesn't seem like it will be there when the future comes to pass?

My family's financial situation in Beirut was near a breaking point when the unthinkable happened. The Minister of Economy announced that supermarkets could now dollarize, meaning groceries would be priced in US dollars rather than Lebanese pounds. Following the financial collapse of Lebanon, the disparity in the black market exchange rate (between US Dollars and Lebanese Pounds) had allowed us to afford basic necessities even after having lost our life savings. Coupled with the monthly quota for cash withdrawals that Banque Du Liban had set, my income as a freelance writer for magazines and news outlets allowed us to scrape by. I wrote in English for international outlets that paid in hard American currency, but the low pay and difficulties navigating the bank lockdowns made my work time consuming and unrewarding.

Having been born in New York, I was an American citizen. However, I had only visited the US once since then.

I graduated from a local university with a Bachelor of Science in business studies, meaning that I could not obtain work in my region without the right connections, especially since it is difficult for someone in my field to migrate to the West because its market is oversaturated with graduates who obtained similar soft-skill degrees. However, the situation in Beirut was becoming unbearable. Mass youth unemployment and a housing bubble made moving out after university impossible without a fixed income, so I was forced to

remain at my widowed mother's apartment. Although she was a pediatrician, my mother's salary plummeted to a few dollars in the span of weeks. Making things worse, power cuts left us with little electricity during the daytime and none at night. The country's electricity crisis was particularly excruciating during summer nights. My mother and I both suffered from high blood pressure, and the side of the apartment that faced the sun consisted entirely of windows. I could only solve the problem after spending most of that year's salary on the installation of an Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) and covering the cost of the ensuing repairs of our electricity board and batteries damaged by constant power outages.

I can also mention other problems following the Beirut blast, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the food and medicine shortages. We were so worn down—physically, psychologically, and emotionally—by these daily struggles that we would quarrel about money on a daily basis.

After feeling that I had a grip on life following a difficult phase that stretched on for years, I was thrust back into a state of perpetual panic, desperately trying to solve problems I had no control over. Every time I felt pride in the milestones I had achieved as a writer since taking up the profession, the situation in Lebanon would bring me right back down, reminding me that the Lebanese financial and political elite could snatch everything I had achieved, every step I had taken toward my dreams, with the snap of a finger. I couldn't bear the idea of living the rest of my life under these conditions, even as those around me incessantly reminded me there was no other option in Lebanon. It became difficult to work knowing that my labor allowed me to make nothing more than enough money to survive long enough to keep making more money to survive. I wasn't happy to just stay alive, I wanted to live.

However, I had become a man hoping to build a future in a country that seemed like it wouldn't exist when that future came to pass.

In the meantime, my sister, who was also born in the US but had also spent her entire life in Lebanon, managed to turn things around after the liquidity crisis meant she couldn't attend university.

After having resigned herself to seeking employment straight out of high school, she received a full needs-based scholarship to attend Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Her time in the US was not easy in the beginning. The family did everything we could to help her at the time, but it was unfortunately not enough to ease the transition she had to go through at far too young an age. She was only 17, but she managed to establish herself there with even fewer resources than the little we had before all these crises began. All the way from the Middle East, we watched with pride as she thrived in a new country, away from the never-ending struggle that life in Beirut had become.

Although she loved Lebanon and wanted to stay, she was mature enough to understand that our homeland could no longer provide her with the dignified life she wanted for herself.

With time, I would, too.

Despite repeatedly insisting to friends and family that I could somehow make it work here, I eventually realized that it was impossible under these circumstances. Deep down, I always knew it, but I had hoped that, at some point, our so-called leaders would face enough pressure to improve things, at least enough to make the situation bearable. However, after years and years of waiting, they hadn't even taken the first step.

Now that our basic needs were priced in dollars, I just couldn't take it anymore. My teens and twenties were wasted here on broken promises and bogus solutions to problems that could have been easily fixed. If our leaders didn't feel they owed us a way out of the crises they themselves had created, I owed it to myself to find a way out of Lebanon. And that's what I did. I bought a ticket

and left for Pittsburgh. Years of apprehension and doubting whether I could make it suddenly withered away, and I found renewed strength that I had never known I had.

If you can survive in Beirut, you can make it anywhere.



Go Back to Your Country

Ameen Abo Kaseem

Ameen Abo Kaseem is a Palestinian-Syrian documentary photographer and filmmaker based in Beirut. His work explores toxic lifestyles and survival strategies. He has taken part in numerous exhibitions, receiving many prestigious awards and grants.

Can "returning to your homeland" constitute displacement when you are called a "stranger" there?

This is what I, Ameen Abo Kaseem, have undergone.

My story with migration and displacement did not begin in 1998, the year I was born in Yarmouk Camp.¹ It began in 1948, when Israeli occupation forced my family to leave Saffuriyeh, a small village on the outskirts of Nazareth in Palestine. From there, they got to Syria on foot. I thus eventually became one of the millions of Palestinians around the world who have been displaced from their homes and deprived of a fundamental right: the right to return to their land.

At the age of four, I endured displacement for the first time. I was sent to live with my aunt in the United Kingdom, in the hope that I could lead a better life there. However, I had only been there three months when I was sent to America to live with my other aunt.

I stayed there until I was six years old. My family, who had remained in Damascus, realized that sending me away at such a young age was a mistake and decided to bring me back to the substitute for a homeland that had become like home for them. Ironically, this somehow meant being displaced once again! I was seen as an outsider and nicknamed "al-ajnabi" (the foreigner/western) in a place where I should not have been one and which is inhabited by people whose identity and sense of belonging I share.

¹ Yarmouk Camp is a 2.1 square kilometer refugee camp south of Damascus established to accommodate Palestinian refugees in 1957.

I remained in Yarmouk Camp until the age of 13, when I had to leave because conditions had been deteriorating, and a Russian warplane bombed a school and a mosque on December 16, 2012. My parents and I moved to Damascus, another place where I was seen as an outsider. There was a sharp cultural divide between the camp and the city; those who lived in that small urban space led almost

completely separate lives. It was like getting to know a new culture and society that I had never encountered before. This time, however, I was a "refugee," not an "ajnabi."

I gradually became part of the art scene in Syria. Although I lived there, I never felt like I belonged. I was often told to "go back" to my country because I was not "from here," both as obnoxious banter from friends and by genuine racists who meant it. Nonetheless, I managed to leave my mark on the Syrian art scene. I always felt excluded, but the little things of everyday life made it impossible not to be sensitive to Syrians' situation.

I left my parents' house in 2018 after a long argument with them about my life choices. The road ahead was not clear at that point, so I was displaced in my "hometown" once again.

Later, I dropped out of my Information Technology program and applied to the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts at the end of 2019. I gradually became a professional photographer over the years that followed, with pictures I had captured being exhibited internationally. I received numerous mentorship opportunities, grants, and awards from major institutions worldwide, which drew unwanted attention.

That is why, preempting what might have been to come, I decided to move to Beirut in July 2023 seeking a safe environment. However, as a Palestinian Syrian, it was impossible for me to obtain a residency. I moved to Lebanon knowing I would be in a new kind of danger I had not yet experienced: entering Lebanon illegally.

During the many migration journeys I have taken over the past few years, I have always felt that my life revolved around my dual identity. Today, I ponder the life I would have led if I had been born elsewhere. Would I have had a family home with a yard? Would I have been able to spend holidays in my homeland?

Whenever I first arrive somewhere, I pause and ask: "What is home?" without finding an answer, even though I know that we have been deprived of our right to exist. We were expelled from our villages and labeled "refugees." Our nationalities were stripped away from us, and we have been scattered around the world.

However, despite all the immense difficulties, we continue to work and create because we carry a unique seed called resistance. It takes root, grows, and blossoms in different forms, and we are entrusted with it wherever we are. Thus, if I were to choose the country to which I belong, I would choose Palestine every time.

So, is that the answer? Is this "home?"



In the Little Girl's Shadow

Maisara Sassi

Maisara Sassi is Libyan. She hold a master's degree Middle East politics and has worked as a researcher and a project management consultant in Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

I remember the day I was frantically picked up by my soon-to-be-owner at her favorite stationery store in Tripoli, Libya: Maktabat Sah. Having only remembered to make the purchase that her teacher had demanded late in the evening, just before the shops here closed, my owner rushed to the shop to buy me. She enthusiastically pointed at me. “Baba, I want this one!” This purchase was mandated by the national curriculum of Libya, where schools were obliged to teach second graders, like my then-7-year-old owner, the significance of the duty I would come to represent. I doubt that, when we all left the store, my owner and her father had foreseen the journey I would embark on with the little girl. Shifts no ordinary Libyan could have imagined would unfold only a few years later.

During my first four years with her, I watched this little girl lead an ordinary life: her innocent secrets, her journey of becoming a big sister, and the ups and downs of making friends. My owner confided in me, regularly pouring her heart out in Arabic, the only language she spoke. I quickly learned that she was a talented pianist, got to know her large and loving family (who constantly stomped on me), and discovered that she was desperate to be cast on MBC3’s Eesh Safari children’s program.

I only truly understood the weight of my presence when my owner turned 11. Conflict had broken out in Libya, and it gradually crept closer to Tripoli, our home. Amid mounting tensions, I found myself being taken along as we sought refuge in the home of her extended family. They would console one another as they endured painful losses and loved ones disappeared. A

constant, overwhelming sense of insecurity defined our lives. With each passing day, her family's once rhythmic footfalls became increasingly faint, and they were gradually replaced with the deafening silence of lives taken away by the relentless violence raging in the streets. I saw my owner's heart break as she lost members of her extended family, as well as neighbors and teachers, and she experienced an unprecedented schism in a society that she had thought to be a family.

After having been displaced for months, our worlds shattered once more as soon as we finally returned to our home. Watching the news on TV, my owner and her family saw smoldering rubble in what had been her grandparents' home just hours prior. An airstrike reduced the family's refuge to dust, claiming the lives of seven souls, including three baby cousins who my owner had kissed goodnight just the evening before. I trembled as I was soaked by her tears of despair. With a single blast, the merciless war had deprived her of family and loved ones.

Shortly after this tragedy, my owner's father came into her room and softly told her to pack. They were preparing to leave the country. In utter shock and hesitating over what to take with her, my owner grabbed me before anything else and placed me at the very bottom of the suitcase. From this point onward, the weight of her world would press down on her. We embarked on a journey, uncertain of our destination and even more uncertain about the future.

Chapter 1

Our first destination was Jerba, Tunisia. My owner unpacked me in a small hotel room she was sharing with her younger brother and sister. She had only known Jerba as a family holiday destination; it was a quick seaside weekend getaway, not a sanctuary. The contrast between her situation and our surroundings was stark; my owner couldn't help feeling disoriented at this hotel at a time of mourning. We were in a place she had often visited on joyous occasions, and this was anything but. She saw families around her laughing and celebrating as she and her own family grappled with the weight of their loss. In those moments, she understood she needed to bridge

the realms of adulthood and childhood, to shoulder the responsibility of distracting her younger siblings as she absorbed her parents' anguish. She visited me every day, but she made fewer and fewer confessions. I wondered, for a brief time, if it was because she had been sharing a room or if her burden had been too heavy to put into words. Soon enough, the absence of childish conversations made it clear that the girl had been forced to mature too soon.

Chapter 2

Her time in Morocco was one of transition. Settling in Rabat, my owner struggled to find her footing. Entering school mid-year, she was lost in a sea of unfamiliar faces, and the classes taught in English and French were like a dizzying swirl. My owner had other struggles to deal with as well. It was at this stage of my young owner's life that I absorbed the tears she shed in frustration with her declining grades, the loneliness she felt without friends, and the stinging remarks of her classmates. The guilt she felt for having left family members behind was extremely evident, as was her longing for her homeland. Speaking to me every day reminded her of the world she had left behind, fortifying her resolve.

Chapter 3

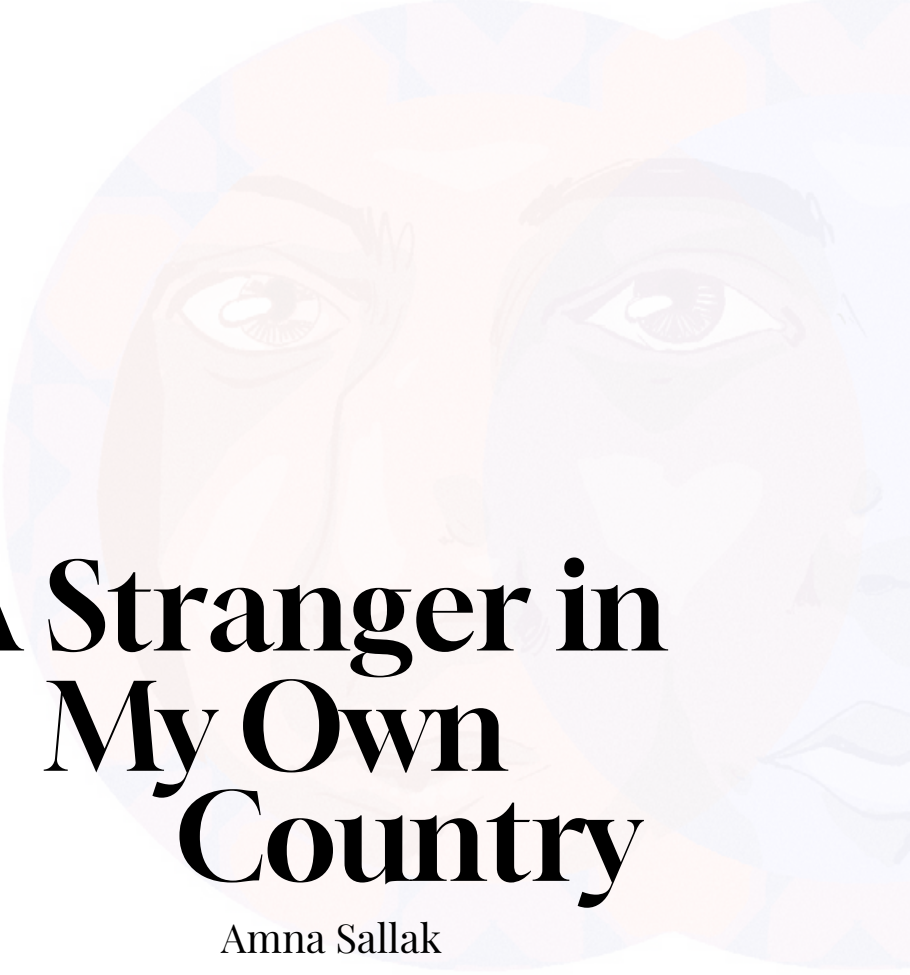
Her time in Spain was a defining chapter in her life. My owner's resilience, empowerment, and unwavering commitment shined through. I watched her metamorphosis as she went from a little girl to a tenacious young woman, from a marginalized outsider to an empowered advocate. I took in the stories she wove into our late-night conversations. I heard about how she grappled with xenophobia and discrimination, as well as the heart-wrenching reverberations of her young cousins' tragic fates back in Libya. My owner's determination only intensified as the chaos in her homeland continued to echo from afar. It was on these nights that I first began to hear her supplications in languages that were unfamiliar to my fibers, as she weaved heartfelt prayers in the languages she had picked up along the way. Her commitment to advocating for human rights solidified during this period, guiding and defining her. She graduated from her International Relations program with distinction. As her voice found resonance within

the halls of academia and the corridors of activism, my threads absorbed the essence of her unwavering spirit and the force of her conviction.

Chapter 4

My owner then ventured to London, yet another chapter of her journey, only this time it was a choice, not another reaction to external circumstances. I remained a steadfast companion, silently following her life's tribulations and triumphs. Over this decade-long journey of intercontinental migration, I have always been there for her confessions, her prayers, and her silent conversations with the Lord. I am still watching her journey as we both await the day Libya sees genuine transitional justice and has the crucial conversations needed to heal its fragmented society. Scattered across the globe, the Libyan diaspora has the capacity to bridge gaps and make significant contributions to a national renaissance. We long for the day when the voices of the marginalized are amplified, justice and human rights are safeguarded, and the promise of a united and prosperous Libya comes to be. I know that other Libyan youths have had the same journeys, confronting and overcoming the same challenges and triumphs with their prayer mats.





A Stranger in My Own Country

Amna Sallak

Amna Sallak is a Libyan woman based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She has worked with international organizations, focusing on empowering women, supporting displaced persons, raising awareness about mental health, and social and economic justice.

According to social identity theory, social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s).

Five years ago, I would visit camps housing internally displaced persons every day as part of my job at an international humanitarian organization in Benghazi, Libya. One thing that caught my attention there was a group of girls. They were always depressed. I repeatedly chatted with them to understand their problems and see how I could help them. It became clear to me that their problems were tied to the host community; the girls struggled to integrate and felt that displacement was shameful. I tried to support them and encourage them to integrate into the community, but they insisted that people would not accept them. At the time, I didn't understand their concerns, or I couldn't explain them because I had no problem communicating with them myself. At the same time, I wondered what made them feel this way.

Ironically, I underwent the same experience those girls had talked to me about for the first time three years later and understood how they felt. The conflict in Benghazi that began in 2014 forced me out of my home, turning me into an internally displaced person myself. I realized that when people are displaced, their identities are displaced with them. Socially, they are placed into an array of categories, and they are often discriminated against by society as a whole and their host communities in particular.

The conflict in Benghazi is not merely a military operation targeting terrorists. It is a social conflict rooted in class and tribal tensions: between eastern

tribes and families from the west, among the eastern tribes, and between the urban elite and rural poor. These conflicts have ripped the city's social fabric apart. My family and I were displaced to the city of Misrata, which was not hospitable to internal migrants. I cannot blame the entire city, as its residents found themselves faced with a state of affairs they had not been accustomed to; they were afraid for their social fabric and feared the eruption of war.

Nonetheless, their fears manifested themselves in divergent ways, and I suffered the repercussions on several occasions. On each one, I felt like a stranger in my own country. The host community would bombard me with all kinds of questions wherever I went: at the gym, in the hospital, and at work. I worked in the humanitarian field, for Doctors Without Borders and other organizations. I was frequently asked questions like: "Where are you from?" "Are you Libyan?" "Why did you come to our city?" "Do you have roots in this city?" "Do you have relatives here?" They always left me at a loss for words, unsure of how to react. Should I tell them my life story? Should I tell them that I am just as Libyan as they are? Or should I ignore their questions?

At the same time, I would wonder: What part of this country do I belong to? What segment of this society do I belong to? In reality, my questions didn't matter. I had been labeled the displaced girl. People would call me "naziha" (the displaced woman) or "the Sharqawi" (the girl from the East). I constantly argued with my father about why we had to live in the shadows, or as I call it, a parallel world, where people have to cope with the trauma of their displacement and the struggle to find their identity in the community now hosting them, all while constantly being reminded that they are strangers and being subjected to emotional abuse just because they are displaced.

After three years of hardship and confusion about my social identity, and observing the host community's social behavior, I decided to move forward and ignore the social labels that people had placed on us.

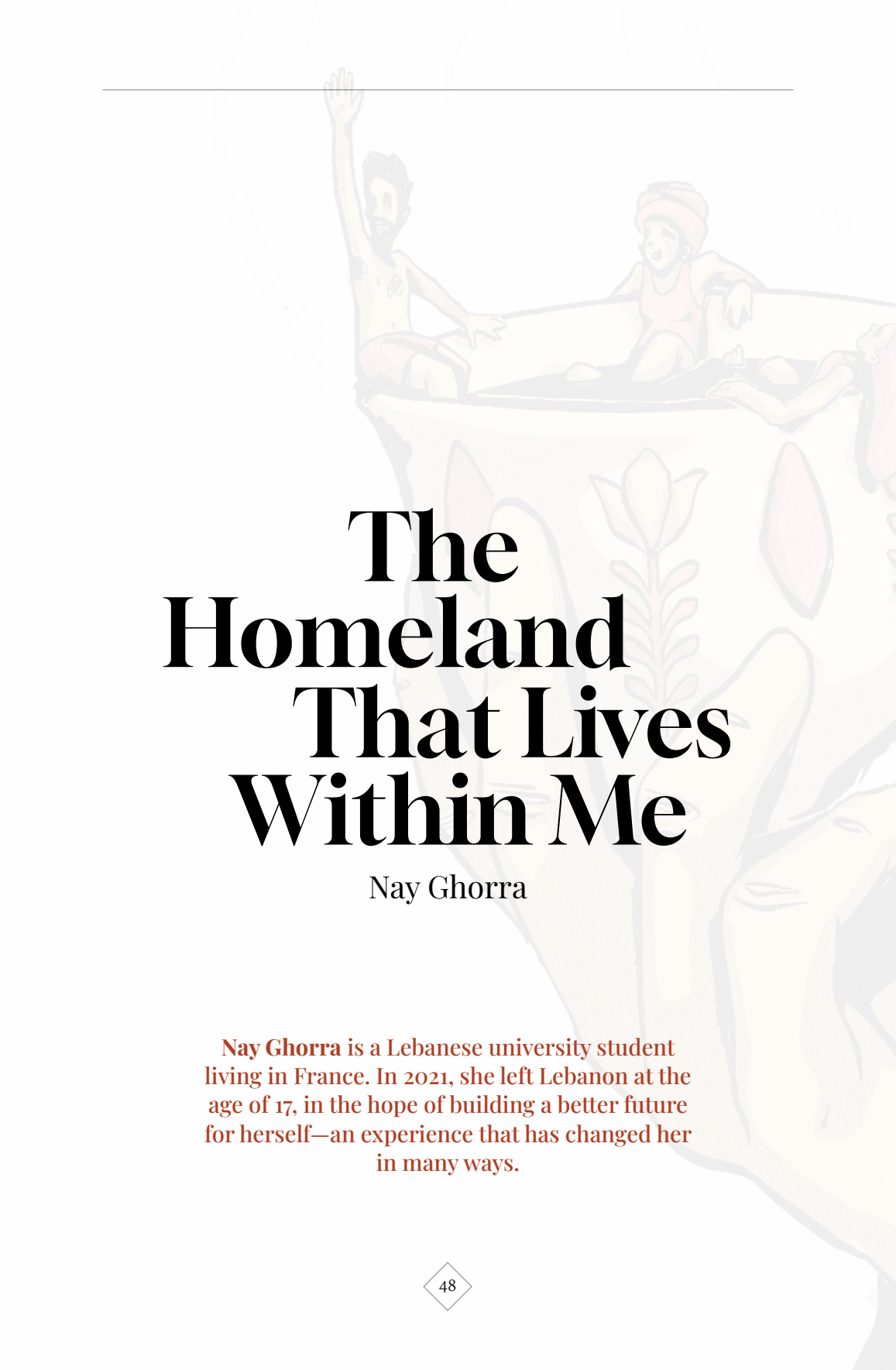
"Home is always somewhere else. Home is both 'here' and 'there' or somewhere in between. Sometimes it is nowhere." — Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Below are some of what I found to be the best methods for overcoming my social identity crisis as a displaced person:

1. I found that empathy during times of conflict and insecurity is essential. The hostility I repeatedly faced in public places or my workplace was humiliating; it offended me and left me asking myself why people treat strangers so badly. Nonetheless, I decided to take care of myself, because I can't change the reality around me or people's opinions, but I can change how I feel about their behavior towards me. I learned to listen to them and keep my mouth shut, as I didn't need to be right all the time. Host communities struggle with their own internal conflicts, and the pain and sorrow of these communities is no less intense than ours. They do not feel safe either, and they are simply trying to protect their cities, homes, and families.
2. I learned lessons from rejection and judgment. I realized that people will judge you for many reasons no matter what and sometimes, it isn't personal. It simply means that you are not one of them. I learned to love myself and grow as a person; I learned to become a stronger woman and to rely on myself. I learned to stop hiding my identity and seeking another one just to integrate into the host community.
3. I eventually stopped avoiding conversations with members of the host community. I decided to consider these conversations an opportunity to introduce them to my culture and raise awareness about internally displaced persons. I'll admit that I discussed this matter with only a few people from the host community, but that's okay. Though few in number, I raised their awareness about displaced persons. Moreover, internally displaced persons must always remember that their displacement does not deprive them of their rights as citizens and that they should be proud of their identities.

It doesn't matter where you are coming from. All that matters is where you are going. — Brian Tracy



A faint, stylized illustration in the background shows a large hand holding a bowl. Inside the bowl, there are three people: a man on the left with one arm raised, a woman in the middle wearing a headscarf, and another person on the right. The bowl is decorated with floral patterns. The entire illustration is in a light, muted color palette.

The Homeland That Lives Within Me

Nay Ghorra

Nay Ghorra is a Lebanese university student living in France. In 2021, she left Lebanon at the age of 17, in the hope of building a better future for herself—an experience that has changed her in many ways.

If you had told me that I would be living in another country four years ago, I wouldn't have believed you.

I have been here in France for four years, and I still feel completely lost. I don't know where I'm headed, and I don't even know what I'm doing; mainly, I believe, because I had to leave Lebanon at such a young age. I wasn't even 17-years-old when a series of crises (the last of which was the collapse of the local currency and the banks' seizures of people's money) in my country, Lebanon, compelled me to apply to universities abroad. I decided to leave so I could specialize in the field I love. France was a natural destination, as I had graduated from a francophone school, and the French government was facilitating the arrival of Lebanese students at the time.

I always read immigrant stories, but it had never crossed my mind that I would be writing my own one day.

I don't want to give you the impression that I am ungrateful, because I am grateful and this gratitude comes from the bottom of my heart. I had the opportunity to go to a wonderful city in a stable country, where I have met extraordinary people and formed relationships that I will cherish for the rest of my life, and to pursue my studies in the field I've always wanted to specialize in: Applied Foreign Languages. The focus of my studies is learning English and Spanish, and my program also includes an introduction to sign language and translation studies. Life is good here. Despite all of that, however, I can't help but sometimes feel dissociated from reality—I drown

in my thoughts, wondering "What if?" What if my country had embraced me instead of France? What if I were there with my parents, my siblings, and my friends? What if the port hadn't blown up in 2020? What if my older brother hadn't left and decided to emigrate before me? What if just one of the corrupt officials in my country had been held accountable? I'll never know.

It is confusing to be a young person who lives between two homes. It makes me feel like I have no home. I am constantly searching for the feeling I used to get after coming home to my parents at the end of a long, rainy day at school, or for the smell of my favorite meal. My home in Lebanon is no longer my home. It has lived without me, and I have lived without it. It is no longer familiar to me, nor am I familiar to it. The apartment I currently reside in here in France is no better. It is just an assortment of walls, sinks, and cabinets. In both countries, I sleep in a bed that isn't my own.

I have replaced places with people; people are my new home, even though they leave as well.

Although I dearly miss my family and friends, I think leaving home has left me with an even worse feeling, a sense of guilt that I can't shake off. I feel guilty for abandoning my parents. The notion of going to a distant place to focus on myself feels incredibly selfish. Where did I get the audacity to leave them after everything they've done for me? After all the money, effort, and time they put into raising me and making sure I was happy? Now, they are growing older, and I am growing up here, alone in exile.

Maybe I feel this way because I'm sensitive, or rather, far too sensitive. Maybe everything is far simpler than I make it out to be. Nonetheless, I wish my country hadn't given up on me so easily. My Lebanon let me down and stopped fighting for me long ago. My Lebanon betrayed me. It almost killed my brother four years ago, on August 4, 2020, and it has yet to give me an explanation. One way or another, however, I keep returning to my Lebanon because, in the end, I love it. The moment we part is always the hardest because that is when I feel closest to it. My Lebanon has been cruel, but I love it dearly, and I always will.

August 4, 2020, was a turning point in my life. I was not directly hurt by the explosion, but my brother and over 300 families were. In the days that followed, I went to Beirut to help clean the shattered glass on its streets and mend wounds. Our house isn't far from Beirut, but it's on the hill that bore witness to the calamity. I went down to its devastated streets with other youths to help clean up and do what I could to help those hurt by the catastrophe, and maybe also to help myself process what happened and feel like I had done something, albeit something small, to help. To this day, I can't forget the looks on people's faces and the tears I saw. I saw tears of despair in the eyes of those who had lost their businesses and homes, and the unbearable tears of pain they shed as they accepted what happened. Indeed, they were certain that the government wouldn't help compensate them for what they had lost. Everything they lost was gone forever.

When I came to France, I realized the full extent of the impact that the explosion had on me. Thunder terrifies me; the wind terrifies me; loud noises that remind me of the explosion terrify me.

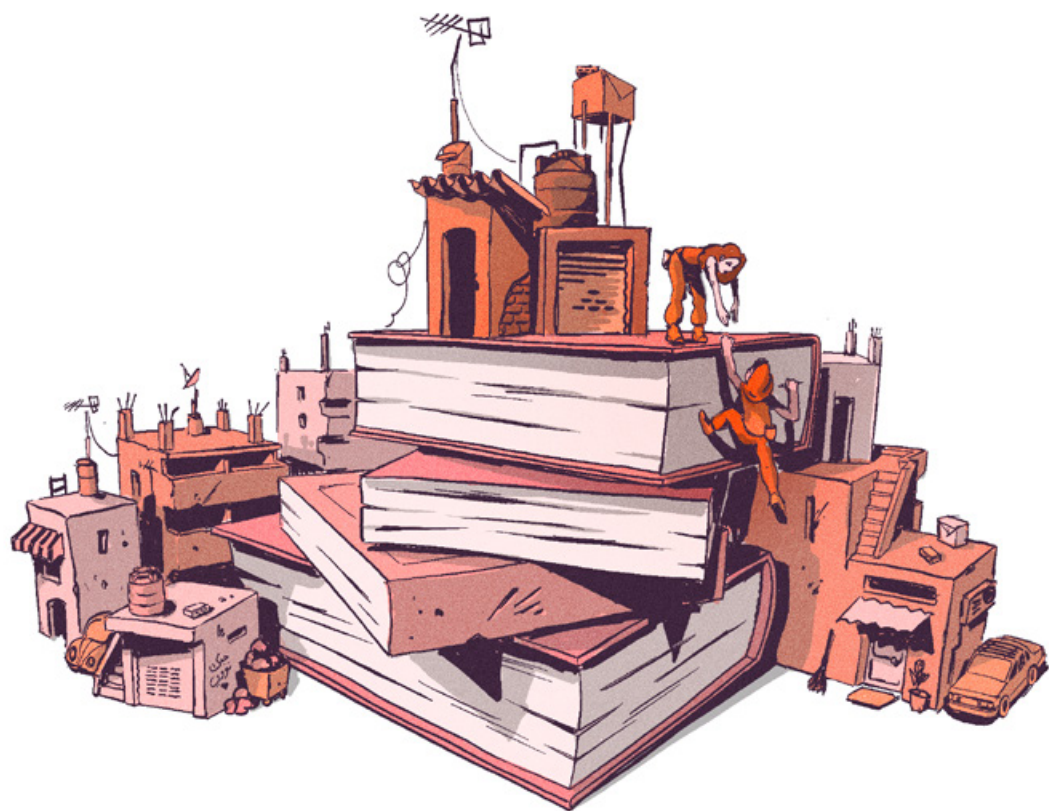
In those moments of fear that leave us seeking a place to hide and feel safe, I find myself lost and alone.

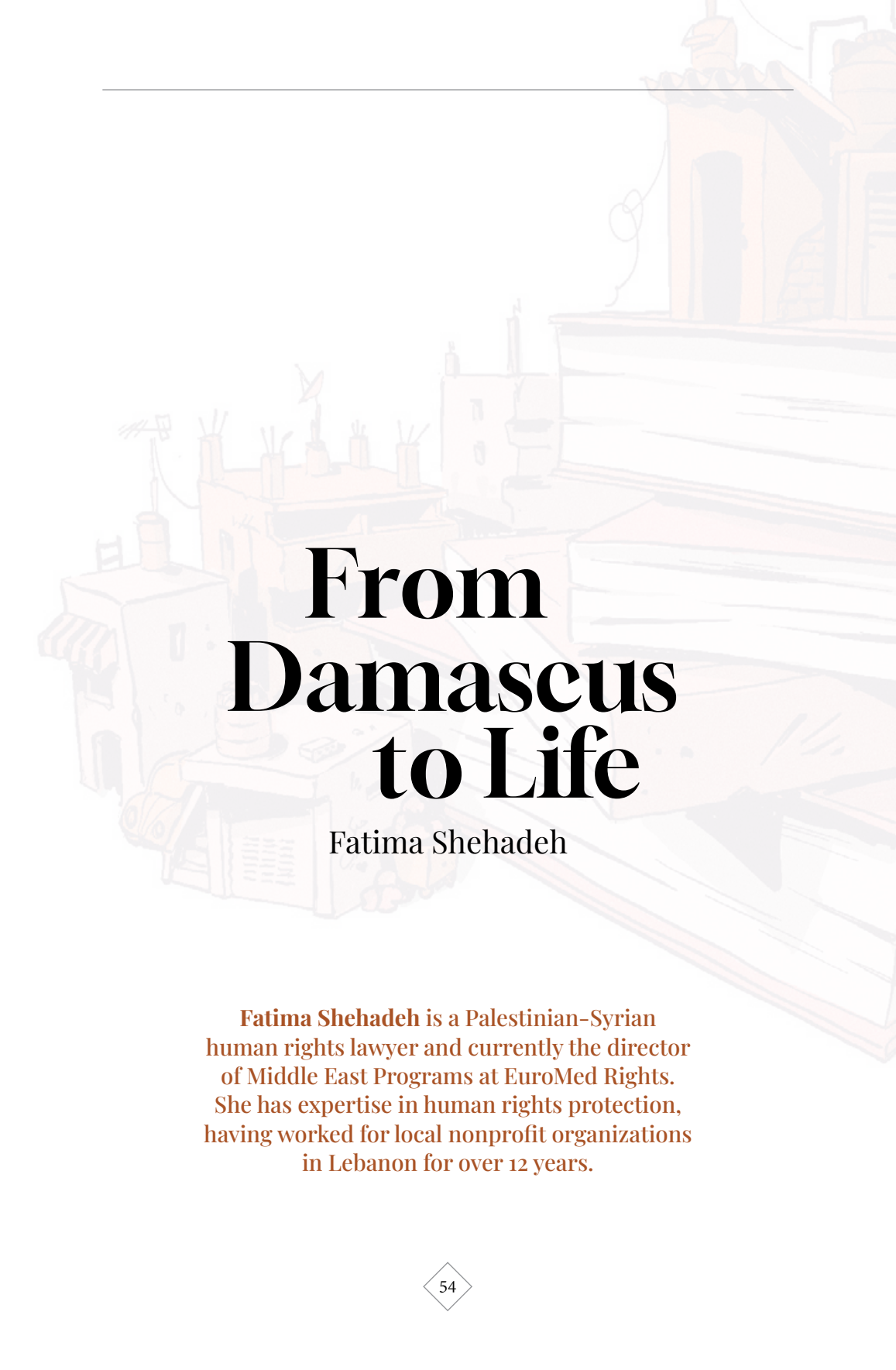
It has been four years since I settled in France. During that time, I've learned that, even though I no longer live there, my homeland will always remain a significant part of who I am. I like to use the example of the Lebanese students living with me in the same student residence to illustrate this idea: there are about 30 of us Lebanese students living here, and in each of our apartments, you can find the customs, rules, traditions, and small things you would typically find in any Lebanese home.

We have small coffee cups with lavender flowers drawn on them; we have homemade zaatar prepared by our mothers and grandmothers; kishk from the mountains; and eastern spices. We borrow kitchen items from one another and share meals together. We have been making tabbouleh, manakeesh, and hummus since we found shops here that sell Lebanese products and bread. We take off our shoes before entering each other's rooms, and on Sundays,

we gather for “family lunch,” talking very loudly and waiting for the host to start eating before we begin. We listen to Fairuz, and suddenly, we’re all in Lebanon together, or rather, Lebanon joins us in our exile.

My country has betrayed me, but it also shaped me. I feel a mix of love and anger for it—something like the bitter taste of wormwood mixed with rose syrup and my grandmother’s lemonade. Despite everything, however, I am grateful to be a citizen of Lebanon, and it will always have a place in my heart.





From Damascus to Life

Fatima Shehadeh

Fatima Shehadeh is a Palestinian-Syrian human rights lawyer and currently the director of Middle East Programs at EuroMed Rights. She has expertise in human rights protection, having worked for local nonprofit organizations in Lebanon for over 12 years.

In the midst of chaos, we find untold stories; voices cry out to be heard and journeys draw the contours of the extraordinary spirit of humanity. My story is one of these journeys; it is a tapestry stitched with threads of determination, hope, and a firm resolve to succeed against the odds. December 12, 2012, is a pivotal date that will forever remain etched into the memory of this Palestinian-Syrian woman who fled Damascus as it was being devastated by war. Sharing my experience leads me to a world in which courage is coupled with compassion, identity shapes destiny, and every struggle turns into an opportunity for change.

My journey began that day; the day I fled to Lebanon because of the ongoing conflict in Syria. I was in my senior year of law school at Damascus University, and I was eager to graduate and kickstart my professional career. However, between March 2011 and the day I fled Damascus, I saw painful, horrific scenes that will always remain engraved in my memory.

I will never forget one particular summer morning in 2012. After warplanes had roared through the city's skies throughout the previous night, we were awakened by the sound of a massive explosion like none we had ever heard before. It shook the walls of our home. I was overwhelmed with panic. I kept running around the house hysterically, grabbing my pillow and bed covers, until we found out that the explosion had not been nearby. Rather, it was a blast relatively far from us that shook the entire capital.

The day my family and I fled Damascus was difficult for us all, and I can remember every detail. The water and electricity had finally returned after

a 10-day outage, and as we were cleaning the house and taking showers at six in the morning, a massive explosion in the street parallel to ours leveled eight buildings in an instant. I was petrified and momentarily lost my sight and hearing. There was a fog all around me. Everyone was covered in dust and blood. A flurry of mortars followed, one every three or five minutes. We had no choice but to flee to my mother's homeland, Lebanon. The image of a mother in tears searching for her three children will stay with me forever, along with the many other heart-wrenching things I saw.

In early 2013, and throughout my first two years as a refugee in Lebanon, I confronted many obstacles. Seeking refuge in Lebanon is not the ideal for a woman. I was repeatedly discriminated against, underestimated, and ignored because of my identity, with no consideration for the milestones I had reached. I was met with prejudice on the street, in shops, and even at my work. In Lebanon, Palestinians are not allowed to work or own property, significantly reducing the job opportunities available to me compared to others with different residency statuses.

For Palestinians coming from Syria, matters are even more difficult, as the Lebanese government has yet to set clear regulations for us. Whenever I was presented with an opportunity, I had to work three times harder than the average person to prove myself and demonstrate my abilities and skills. Despite the severe security risks, I had to return to Damascus twice at the peak of hostilities in order to take my university exams and graduate that same year.

My identity and experiences have shaped who I am today, and I am proud of everything that I have accomplished. Obviously, my career path was not conventional, and it did not follow a linear trajectory. Nonetheless, I have left a meaningful impact on the lives of the people I have worked with. The start of my career in the humanitarian field, in 2013, was painstaking. I entered the field driven by a passion to help my people after the unbearable traumatic incidents I had seen. Initially, I gave English classes to Syrian children in the Burj Al-Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut. Soon afterward, I transitioned to protection, becoming a psychosocial support facilitator. I worked with child refugees who had lived through the brutal Syrian war. The scenes they had

witnessed left them with psychological scars. One girl, a 12-year-old named Malak whose family had been displaced from Daraa, witnessed her father's murder. Blood was a consistent theme in her drawings when I worked with her. Mohamed, a 10-year-old boy who had lived in extremely dire conditions in Aleppo, witnessed the killing of several relatives over the course of the conflict. I tried to ensure that these children could reintegrate into society. Fortunately, I saw the fruits of my efforts as the children managed to start new lives and enjoy their childhood, away from terror and bloodshed. Some of them were able to migrate to Canada or European countries with their families.

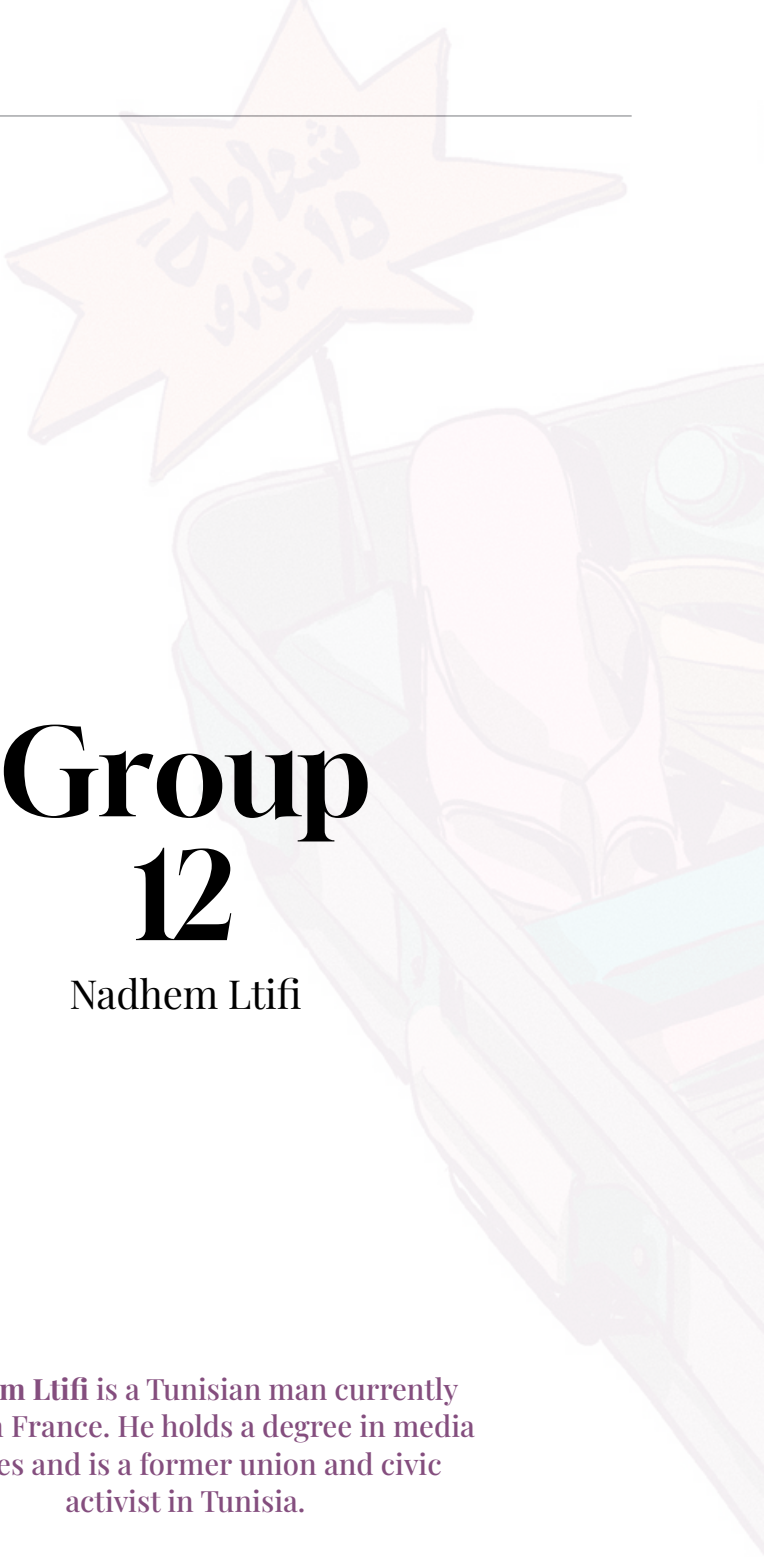
My journey opened my eyes and helped me discover my real interests, leading me to the field of project management. And so, I worked with a diverse group of non-governmental organizations. Working with people of diverse cultures from different backgrounds has been the most fascinating aspect of my career. I have worked with Palestinian and Syrian refugees, marginalized Lebanese communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, stateless persons, migrant domestic workers, and others. I have always sought to keep learning and undergoing new experiences, and I have successfully changed the lives of some of my colleagues.

For instance, I mentored a colleague with a background in the social sciences who had never worked in public affairs. He is a Lebanese citizen who worked as a waiter at a cafe. I trained him in legal aid, donor reporting, grant writing and methodologies, and project monitoring and evaluation systems. After a year and a half, this young man used this knowledge to establish a robust system for tracking the impact of legal aid services provided to vulnerable communities in Lebanon. Since then, he has gone to work for one of the largest international organizations in Lebanon, and he told me that my mentorship skills changed his life.

At present, I am pursuing my master's degree at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, specializing in Arab democracy and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. My education will allow me to advocate on behalf of the voiceless and talented marginalized youths of our region.

Today, I believe that my resilience, hope, and determination to change the course of my life have played a crucial role in helping me cope with displacement. My journey, with its highs and lows, is similar to that of the thousands of refugee journeys around the world, reflecting the essence of the refugee spirit. It is a testament to the fact that we are human beings, not numbers, and it highlights the infinite possibilities born of suffering when it is confronted with courage and compassion. I hope that my experience inspires others to embark on their own journeys, realizing that every problem is an opportunity for growth, and every struggle can lead to personal and societal development.





Group 12

Nadhem Ltifi

Nadhem Ltifi is a Tunisian man currently living in France. He holds a degree in media studies and is a former union and civic activist in Tunisia.

There we were, having just arrived at the migrant reception center on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Too many suspended dreams to count hinge on these irregular journeys. I noticed that many of the people were in uniform, and that everyone was speaking Arabic, even those in civilian clothes, which let you know that they worked at the center.

We sat there, the sea sand still stuck to our weary bodies, scattered around the entrance of the center, amazed at the sight of the sheer number of migrants.

A young man in his thirties approached us and asked us to gather around him: "Is everyone here?"

"Yes," we replied, looking at him in silence as we waited for him to tell us what he wanted to say.

He quickly took down our names and nationalities. When he was finished, he said: "You are part of Group 12. Remember this number well, as it is your only identification here."

A little later, they asked us to stand in a single line so they could test us for COVID-19. We laughed a little during the process, amused by our reactions and the sounds we made when the nurse inserted the swabs into our noses. We desperately needed a laugh; we'd have laughed at just about anything.

Thank God, the test results all came back negative, which was a relief because I knew that testing positive would mean having to stay in this horrid place for over two weeks.

Although I wanted to and my curiosity lingered, there was no time to get acquainted with the group. I took a little distance from the group, and Hadi and I approached a few children so the others wouldn't notice what we were about to do. We took our phones out of the plastic wraps we had placed them in before taking off so they wouldn't get wet.

Having my smartphone reassured me, as it was crucial to this journey's success. My other phone, the one everyone knew about, had done its job when I used it to inform the others of my safe arrival on Italian soil.

I used my teeth to tear the plastic off the phone with bated breath, then I took out a prepaid card from my wallet to get credit on my phone. I moved further from everyone else and tried to get the internet to work, but to no avail. I asked someone who had been there for over a week for help; despite his experience, however, he couldn't fix the problem. I was determined to see my mom and dad; I wanted to laugh and tell them I was okay.

With no hope of internet access, I decided to call them through the phone, hoping a minute would be enough. I wiped my tears before the call, as though they could have seen me through the phone, and... I called...

"Hello, Mom."

"You did it, my son!"

I broke into tears as my heart was torn apart... I didn't know what to say... "I'm alright, Mom, I'm alright."

I kept saying that I was alright until my phone credit ran out. After that, I went to a spot with fewer people, and I cried.

When I went back to my group, they told us that they would be photographing us, exactly as the smuggler "washwasha" had told us they would when we made the deal.

"Stand in a line."

We stood in a straight line in the order that our names were registered upon our arrival. The photographer asked me to remove my cap and my glasses. Four pictures of me were taken from four different angles.

Like I was a criminal!

After the photos were taken, we waited for a while, then they handed us some clothes, and we were all wearing almost the same outfit.

We took our bags and headed straight to shower. The crowd was immense, and everyone was waiting for their turn. We waited about 30 minutes to get a little water to wash the salt off our bodies.

The next step was the hardest.

I swear it felt impossible. We had to find a mattress and a place to sleep amid the crowd of migrants, but we managed. I won't go into the details of how we did it; what matters is that each of us got a mattress. We managed to secure a spot in the middle of the path leading to the bathroom, splitting into two groups: one with their mattresses on the right and the other on the left.

We had just finished when our friend Ali stood in the center and asked, in his distinctive voice: "Does anyone want these things?" referring to some of the clothes and other items we were given.

Everyone replied: "Do what you want with them." Right away, he began setting up something like a little market. Everyone smiled as he shouted: "Come! We have shirts and shoes, one euro a piece!" It reminded us of the atmosphere in a village market.

This skilled merchant made us laugh heartily. How could he not, especially after he pulled out the cigarette packs he had smuggled across the border and started roaming through the crowds to sell them? Ali made money as everyone laughed.

"10 euros for Karelia, 5 euros for Oris!" he yelled.

He was truly hilarious. Even when we sat down for dinner, he would stare at his plate of over- cooked white rice, which gave it a doughy texture, and scream: "Is this my dinner?" as he roared with laughter.

We laughed so much before returning to try and get some sleep.

I remember sleeping very little that night. In the morning, we had breakfast and waited for our group, Group 12, to be called to leave the island. We all took turns charging our phones as we stood in a small, crowded space where 100 people were waiting their turn.

Italian police cars were everywhere, and we noticed a few young men in a fenced house. It turned out that they were not allowed out because they had been infected with COVID-19.

Over the little time we spent trying to explore the area, the number of police cars had doubled. We started discussing whether we'd be leaving for Rome or Milan. Shortly after, the names of the groups were being announced through a megaphone. Sick of staying in this disgusting place, everyone was eager to hear their group's name.

Group 1 was called up first, and the rest followed. We waited a long time before our group was finally called. After that, Group 14 was called. Giving our fingerprints was the last step before we could leave this place. Once all groups had completed this process, we got in cars that drove us, laughing and singing, to a giant ship. We stood in awe as we stared at it.

A young woman approached us and with a grin told our travel companion, Salim, that she was a Palestinian who had arrived here as a refugee and is now welcoming refugees. She divided us into different rooms on the ship, and we lined up to board, unsure of our next destination.

(To be continued...)





“Your Accent Is Strange, Where Are You From?”

Aya Chriki

Aya Chriki is a Tunisian visual artist based in France. She holds a master's degree in creative approaches to the public sphere. Her work focuses on visual arts as a tool for shedding light on migrant and refugee women from the Middle East and North Africa.

“**Y**our accent is strange, where are you from?”

I have gotten used to this question; it is posed to me often.

My mother will sometimes ask, “Why do you frown at anyone who asks you this? It’s a natural question to ask; your accent catches people’s attention because you’re not French.” To me, however, this is not a casual question. It constantly reminds me that I am not in my country, not in my place.

Who would want to live with this question constantly lingering in their mind? Who would want to feel estranged from the language they speak every day?

Before I go on, allow me to introduce myself: I am Aya, a Tunisian visual artist and master’s student living in France. I am 27 years old, and I have a strange accent.

In 2018, I had just graduated when I was granted the opportunity to experience migration for myself after receiving a six-month scholarship in France. However, the weather in northern France; offensive jokes like “You’re Tunisian? I hope you’re not a terrorist;” and my longing for the homeland ultimately led me to pack my bags and return to Tunisia after completing my training. When I was on the plane back, I said to myself: “Aya, you’ve tried migration, and now you’re on your way back to Tunisia. If you ever decide to leave Tunisia again, it will probably be for good.” In January 2019, I returned to Tunisia fully convinced that I wanted to live there. Yet, here I am now, four years later, writing this text from the small, nine-square-meter home

I obtained through the Regional Center of University and School Works in Rennes, France.

Many factors made my migration experience challenging. I chose to leave; I am not a refugee fleeing war nor a political activist who risks imprisonment. I am just an ordinary person with dreams that pushed me to leave my hometown which, to my dismay, stood in the way of fulfilling my aspirations. Never one to be a prisoner of reality, I decided to fly far away.

One factor that makes things difficult as a voluntary migrant is that I sometimes feel it is inappropriate to speak about the challenges of migration, the difficulties of living here, and the difficult moments I go through. I do not feel entitled to speak about my exhaustion or moments of defeat. When I do speak, I often hear: "You chose this! If you're unhappy here, why don't you go back to Tunisia? Stop complaining; your situation is better than that of many others!"

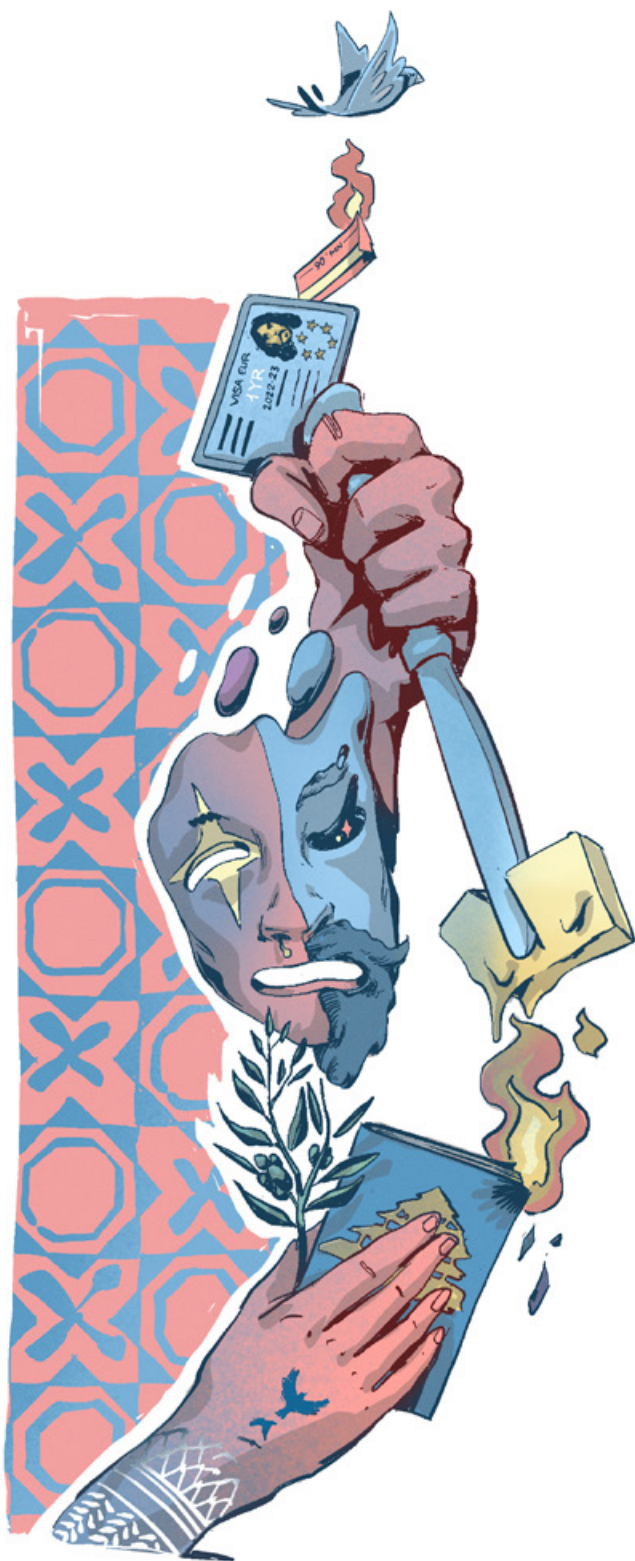
The bureaucratic procedures are lengthy, the process for renewing residency permits is dehumanizing, and the anxiety is unbearable sometimes. But the hardest thing of all is my sense of instability. I feel like I am neither here nor there. I once read an article by a Tunisian living in France who wrote: "We, who left our homelands, have become like the month of Ramadan for our families, an annual occasion." I couldn't sleep after reading those words. I cried for the first time since I had arrived two years earlier. It's hard not to cry as I write these words, and it's hard for me to understand, even four years later, why the idea of becoming a mere annual occasion for my family frightens me so much. I have already become just that.

I've had discussions with friends who migrated across the world after having claimed they never would, just like I had. We pose this fundamental question to ourselves: "What is more important in life: to live among those we love, to fulfill our dreams, or to be happy?" But how can we be happy if we are forced to choose between stability and emotional support on one hand, and achieving our goals and fulfilling our aspirations on the other? Why must we choose between one and the other at all?

This debate boils down to two options: either you stay in your homeland where mobility is limited, procedures to obtain a short-term visa are arduous, you work 15-hour days for a meager salary, and public transportation is impractical; or, you suffice with seeing family only once or twice a year in exchange for a comfortable life.

I once read a post on LinkedIn describing migrants as survivors, not because they fled their countries, but because of the effort they put in every day to secure a better life. In that post, the author praised migrants for their courage and resilience in the face of loneliness. I have spent countless hours supporting my friends here. "Come on, we're survivors," I tell them. And whenever things become difficult, I tell myself: "Aya, you've overcome far worse: you're a survivor." Today, however, I no longer want to be a survivor. I no longer want to be courageous. I just want to live.

Survival in exile? The irony is that as I write this, all other foreigners in France and I are threatened with having our residency permits revoked and paying fines for daring to publicly support the Palestinian cause. Yes, this is happening in the land of republican values and the white man's human rights. This state of affairs makes me hope that one day, our countries will allow us to dream instead of forcing us to leave in order to achieve our goals. I hope that relationships with our homelands will cease to be toxic. I hope migration will one day truly become a choice, a second option that allows us to leave our comfort zone rather than having to leave to find one.





I Never Wanted to Leave

Mohsen Al-Zaher

Mohsen Al-Zaher is a writer, actor, and theater director based in Brussels, Belgium. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in theater direction and is preparing to publish his first book, *Twilight at the Horizon*, which delves into farewells before departures and migration.

The complexity at the heart of South Lebanon makes it difficult to encapsulate the situation there. Once a Palestinian region, French occupation forces declared it part of Greater Lebanon 100 years ago. Marginalized by the Lebanese sectarian authorities, who were effectively colonial intermediaries, the people of the South received the Palestinians fleeing the Nakba and the Naksa and rose up against Zionist oppression, launching the Revolution of the Deprived (Thawrat Al-Mahrumin). Caught between domestic marginalization and Zionists' grapes of wrath, it grappled with an identity crisis in a desert of poverty where blood is cheap.

In later stages of our history, its enmity of Zionism was seized by doctrinal binaries that spread the dream of liberating Jerusalem envisioned by an ideology of martyrdom and Jihad. Noble as this loosely defined objective seems on the surface, it is built on the structural-cultural desertification of the South's neighborhoods, with many of the region's thinkers and philosophers assassinated in the 1980s.

If You Are Not One of Them, You Are Not...

A full package includes a mystical doctrine, an ideology that lays out a sequence of incentives to belong, and has checkbooks that cover the state's tab. However, this package contains not a single cultural oasis, and it has given rise to an implicit split within the community between those who support it and those who do not. The former were displaced and forced to lead nomadic lives like those of the Bedouins. The latter, like the *hadir*, stay

put in the cultural desert.¹ Our region was not home to a single theater south of Sidon, the "capital of the South."

You Never Were and Never Will Be

You find yourself besieged by bursts of neurosis that turn yellow in times of disaster and green in times of reward, just because you were born there. A southerner who flocks to the Southern Suburb of Beirut, like its natives, comes from a Shiaa background. He is similarly stereotyped as an armed street thug drawn to the victimhood narrative inspired by what happened to his Imam Hussein bin Ali in Karbala—a religious fanatic whose faith is defined by contradictory fatwas. He is accused of being a traitor loyal to Iran and always seen with suspicion. He does not know how to make polite, "classy" conversation, and the people of the fork and knife in our homeland label him "vulgar."

Not every Shiite fits this description, and even if they did, "wazwaza" is a social phenomenon born of poverty and not exclusive to the culture of a particular community.²

Every Day Is War

I was displaced from my village to the Southern Suburb, where, like many others, I lived at the mercy of those monopolizing representation of our sect. At a point where politics, regionalism, sectarianism, and tribalism intersect, I found the stereotypes pounding me like the faithfuls' palms pound their chests on Ashura, even at work. After having been displaced from my home to the Southern Suburb, in order to further my education, and after having engaged in political activism that dragged me into fierce wars during my time at university, I had to flee once again. I was pushed out by water, gas, and electricity cuts, and the greed of those who provide private alternatives that fill these gaps in basic services that should be provided by the state for a fee.

1 Hadir is a term for stationary people typically used in contrast to Bedouins.

2 Wazwaza is a term in Lebanese dialect that means vulgarity.

Things were no better outside the Southern Suburb; in fact, those private alternatives were cheaper in the Southern Suburb than anywhere else. Nonetheless, the area's notoriety for street crime is not totally unwarranted. The most prominent culprits are the unaccountable armed gangs that offer private alternatives that fill gaps in state services and aid the beneficiaries around them. They are met with almost no resistance; one of these halfwits with a pistol can bring 20 thinkers and 100 university professors to their knees.

I Fled to Furn El Chebbak

I fled to Furn El Chebbak—a predominantly Christian neighborhood, and that's good enough. Being in a Christian area means that we, the "deprived" and marginalized southerners who are stereotyped, can look forward to living among less savage people associated with western culture; polite people whose streets are clean. Having been pampered by the French since the era of the Mutasarrifate (19th century), who took care of their churches, schools, and people's needs, the Christians of the East's Jesus gradually became more civilized than our Hussein. My grandfather being a landlord from Furn El Chebbak is about as likely as an illiterate man selling his cow's milk in a southern village.

During this second displacement, the fees increased but the supply of basic services remained as inconsistent as they had been in the Southern Suburb. The racism, both implicit and explicit, was obscene. When you come from "Shiastan," you need to shed your skin and constantly explain yourself to be accepted. I couldn't bring myself to tame my southern accent or integrate foreign words into conversation, nor allow myself to publicly demean my region with caustic derision. I am aware that this makes me an outlier among city-dwelling southerners, some of whom go so far as to conceal their background and immerse themselves in the dream of a promising, westernized Lebanon; a Switzerland of the East.

I Found Myself Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place

This displaced theater artist was looking for a stage to shelter in, and since the minbar of the Husseinis does not embrace or create haram art, he had

to resort to the "safe spaces of NGOs" amid the insecurity that prevailed across the country.

Yet, the overwhelming force of the collapse and the explosion;; the Syrian refugee crisis, refugees who had witnessed hearts being eaten and undergone war and displacement; the sexual freedoms within a society that has yet to separate religion and state; all these "flashy" causes are favored by western-supported organizations, which, one after the other, trampled upon the rights of this downtrodden southerner consumed with cleansing his image of nonsensical stereotypes.

You could readily find a southerner in Moscow to attend an art festival held up in an interrogation room for two hours, for no other reason than that he shares the name of a wanted individual. You could see him have his visa to the Gulf rejected although he had been invited to attend a theater

festival—the same festival that his colleague with a Christian French name received a visa to attend on her first attempt.

"I sat there deprived of opportunities, watching artistic nonsense, simply because I did not fit into the western agendas of these institutions."

"Given the excessive intersection of injustices, I found myself perpetuating the victimhood narrative they had imposed on me... and so, I migrated."

I never wanted to leave. I was no hero; I was forced out. Setting aside the stereotypes that put you in a box, the collapse, decay, and contradictions we live with—be it the currency crisis, the plunder of our deposits, and the corrupt banking system, or the state of constant war—we, particularly those of us in the South, were suffocating. The paperwork needed to get to the bliss of Europe was tormenting. I spent a lot and lived austere. I even wrote a play about my experience with the humiliating embassy procedures and performed it at a café in Beirut. A café instead of a theater because the rental prices of Beirut's theatres are more brutal than its explosion.

In the Continent of Prosperity

Everything is striking here: the water and the electricity, the roads and the lights, the theaters and the fashion, the beauty and the women. Everything comes together beautifully, piece by piece, like a Quranic verse or an exquisite patch of mosaic. Nonetheless, the militarization of migration policy constantly looms over you, tightening its grip on us amid the splendor. The process of obtaining your residency permit is enough to remind you that there is a price to pay. Everything you receive is brief, to be used for an interval: a visa valid for a year, a one-day work contract, a train ticket that lasts an hour. But the torrent of paperwork you have to do is eternal. Training diplomas and qualifications, insurance, warning notices, and reservations; phrases and euphemisms... Too often have I had to be guarded in my actions and to choose my words carefully, always mindful that a colleague might feel like her life is in danger if I playfully waved a butter knife at the table. Too often have I had to quietly take in the obnoxiousness of Lebanese people who hide their background, especially those coming from Beirut's Southern Suburbs, only to be scolded for directing a "weapon" at her. She was eager to teach me civility, since people here are not monsters, and we should know that we frighten them.

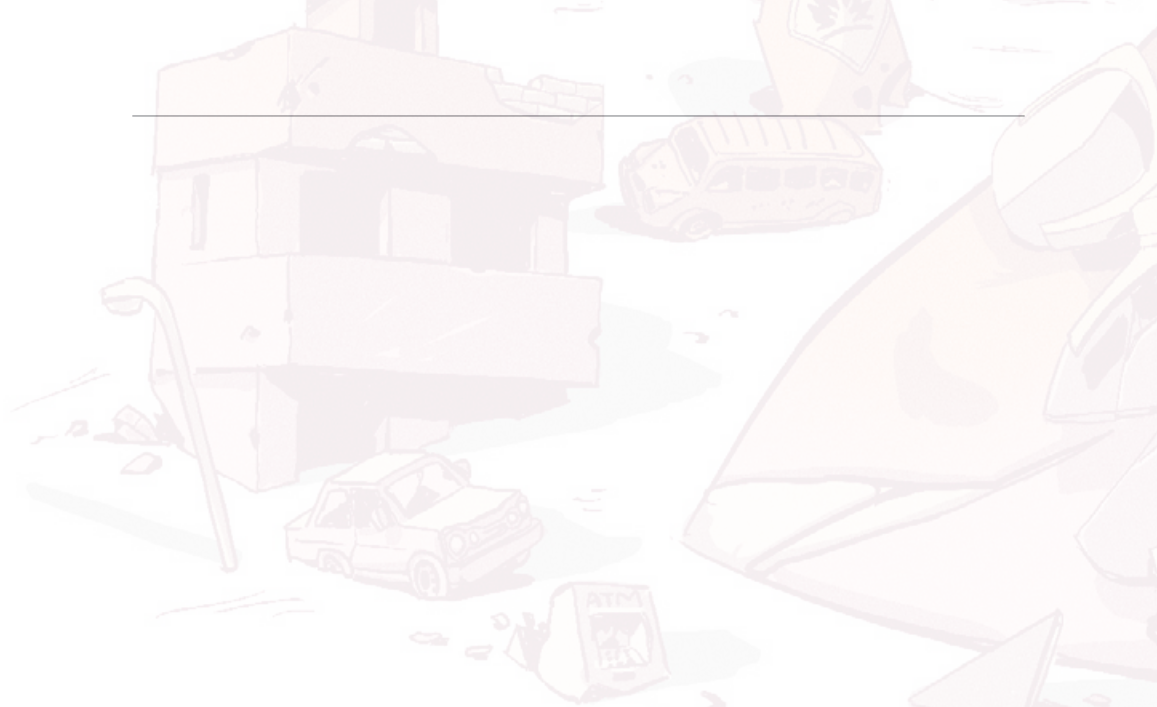
I am still trying to wrap my head around how this is not considered racism! I try to respect those who have abandoned where they came from and donned a European mask, ashamed of their roots, insulting our country in the company of Europeans, labeling it backward, behaving just like the displaced city-dwelling southerner! I am still trying to come to terms with the double standard in calling our countries "third world" instead of calling them formerly colonized; in claiming that the prosperity of one part of the world is not tied to misery in the other; or in asserting that resource-rich nations are not subject to the whims of veto powers and that they, in reality, hold the fate of these countries in their hands. I struggle to comprehend all of this because I want to determine whether we do indeed enjoy equal opportunities on this earth.

I Strive to Explain to the World

Wounds of departure still gnaw at me during melancholic moments. I try to accept that comparing tragedies is neither fair nor appropriate. I am fully aware that the guiding thread of my struggle lies in creating, through my theater, an alternative to a history that is constantly being erased in my region and in my language. I now live as a student of the arts, studying in the morning, working in the evening, and searching for a scholarship to ease my financial strains. I invest as much of my time as I can in my artistic endeavors as I strive to obtain a new passport that could break the curse of my blue one.

I will learn what I will learn, build what I will build, and fight what I will fight, promising myself, every day, that I will someday return.





You Are Alone

Firas Al Hallak

Firas Al Hallak is a Lebanese multidisciplinary audiovisual artist based in Ghent, Belgium, and Beirut. His work explores artists' influence on screen-centered culture and has been showcased in numerous local and international exhibitions.

In exile, you are alone
Even in bars
Even in your sleep
Even when you're on the phone or sending emails
Reflections appear only in mirrors
You are less here and less there

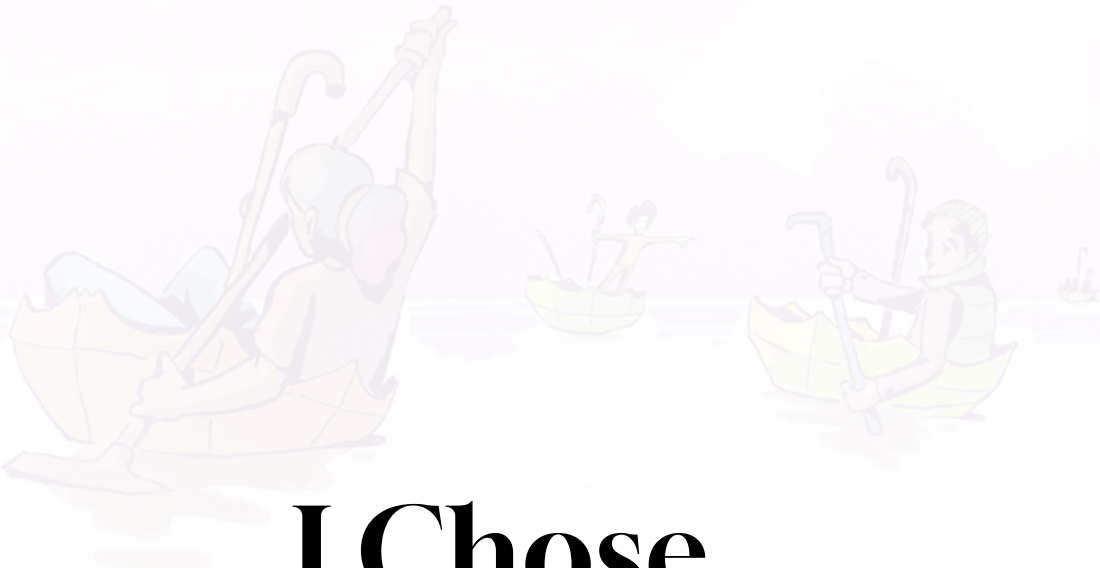
You are still heavy
Like a building
Like a moving car
Like an ATM
Like an entire city

This heaviness cannot be measured

The problem of birth
The stagnant condition of our lives
As though our city committed suicide but didn't die
What do you do with a body that wanted to die but couldn't?
What do you do with a broken face?
What do you do with a ravaged body?

A body that awakens early, to darkness in the West
And gazes into the mirror to lift its sluggish eyelid
The eyelid that shields my head
From what I have seen and what I am afraid to see



A faint, stylized illustration in the background shows several people in small, yellowish-orange boats on a body of water. One person in the foreground is seen from behind, rowing. Another person is visible in a boat further back, and a third person is on the right side, also rowing. The style is simple and artistic, with soft colors.

I Chose to Embrace Life

Joelle El-Cheikh

Joelle El-Cheikh is pursuing a master's degree in international security in France, focusing on migration. She is a human rights advocate and social and political activist. She has written several journalistic articles, mostly on current events in her homeland, Lebanon.

I always thought that seeking refuge was tragic. A tale of separation, pain, and abandonment. A sad twist of fate. I had watched and listened to the stories of asylum seekers from across the world, unaware that, one day, fate would leave me in the same boat; or rather, in my case, on a plane bound for France.

Since I first set eyes on it, I have been struggling to grapple with the implications of the French state issuing a document in which I am referred to as a "refugee." Do I really qualify as a refugee if my experience pales in comparison to those of the people who have endured perilous journeys, crossing the Mediterranean or treacherous land borders in search of safety? Is it right for me to express my longing for my homeland at a time when others are suffering from torture, starvation, and violence in all its forms in theirs? Do I have an obligation to earn, somehow, the title of "refugee"?

When my mother was four years old, she had to take shelter in the basement of her home as gunshots and the sounds of other weapons filled the streets of Beirut. That was in 1978, that is, during the Lebanese civil war. When I was four, I had to flee Lebanon in a taxi after Israel launched its assault. I was 18 years old when I first took to the streets and joined the Lebanese revolution demanding change.¹ At 19, I found myself curled up in a corner of a room, trying to avoid the shattered glass that was all over the place following the catastrophic Beirut explosion on August 4, 2020. On that fateful day, at

1 Protests erupted in Beirut on October 17, 2019, following a government decision to impose a tax on WhatsApp. The protests quickly spread across the country, with protesters demanding that the political class be pushed out of power, accountability for corruption, and political and economic reforms.

precisely 6:07 p.m., families lost loved ones who would never gather around the dining table again, and other families lost their homes. I will always remember the moment the ground shook beneath our feet and my little brother chillingly pleaded, "Mama, I don't want to die."

That very same day, our mother brought us all together and told us the bitter truth: there is no future for us in Lebanon, not anymore. My mother had been receiving death threats because of her work as a political journalist, and danger had now reached our doorstep. Before I had the chance to grasp what was about to happen, we were on a flight to France, with no clue about what awaited us.

I still think about my room back home sometimes, and I remember that I left my pajamas on the bed, assuming, naively, that I would be back soon. I sometimes wonder if I left the door to my balcony open.

However, we never set foot in our homeland again.

The process of applying for asylum was long and exhausting, and we were told that the wait for a decision would be even longer. Social service employees at the asylum center provided us with information about our rights, responsibilities, and place of residence. We felt supported and respected. They never mistreated us. They made sure we felt safe—a feeling we had been denied for a long time. I felt alienated and isolated because I couldn't speak French, so I couldn't express my thoughts and feelings. At that moment, I fully understood the significance of language; it is the essence of our identity. Back when I could speak in my native language, I was known for my sense of humor, intelligence, and speaking my mind. But what impression did I give as I was struggling to speak another language without my friends by my side? Adjusting to my new life was not a smooth process. However, with time, determination, and countless French lessons, I gradually settled into my new home. Yet, to this day, it stings when my friends ask if I plan on visiting them any time soon, and I force a smile and say: "Yes, maybe in a few months."

Then came the crucial moment of my interview with the French asylum officer. I was asked to recount the series of events that drove us to leave

Lebanon. The interview was going smoothly until it was about to end. The officer looked into my eyes and said: "You do realize that if we grant you asylum, you won't be able to return to Lebanon, right?" At that moment, everything froze. I didn't have the strength to move or give an answer. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I struggled to regain control. Is that really one of the implications? Will I truly never set foot on my street again, never meet up with my friends, or go to our favorite cafe? Could all of that really turn into a mere memory from the past?

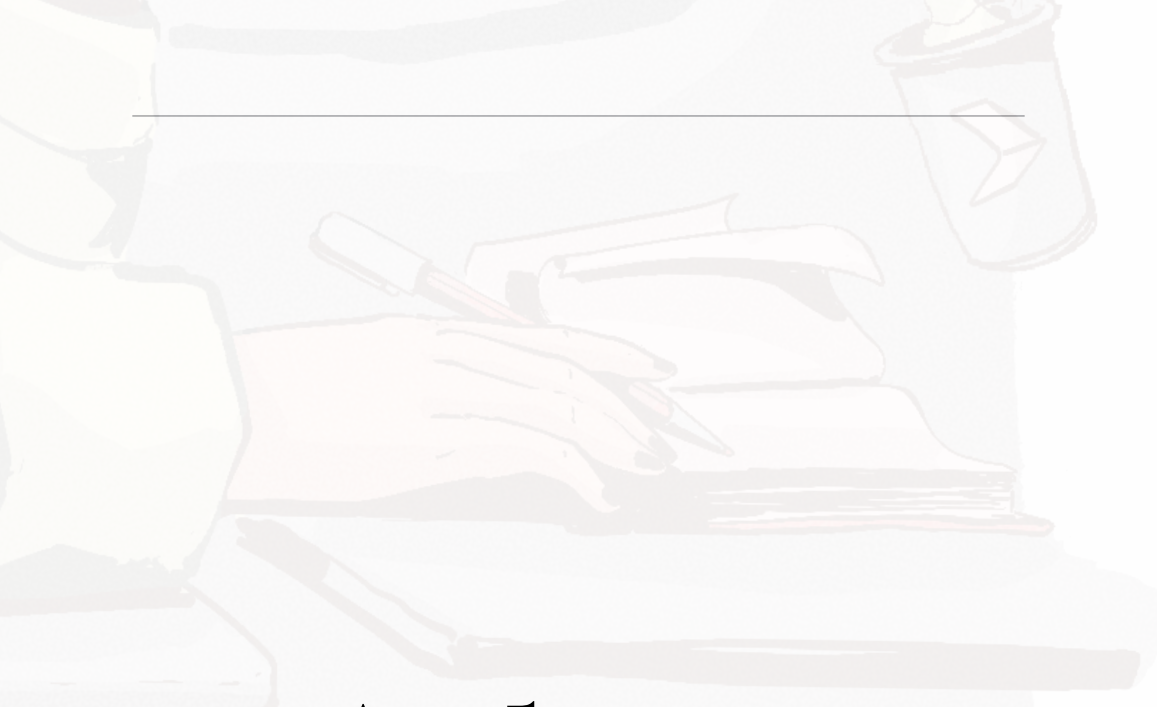
You undoubtedly know how this story ends by now. Our request was approved. I worked hard to learn French, even working at a French organization for eight months. I am writing this story at the library of the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po), which accepted my master's degree application. Meanwhile, my brother and mother live in a quaint town called Auch, which I sometimes call "home." I am a refugee. However, while my journey was arduous and may have been the most challenging phase of my life, my story is not a tragedy. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the thousands of people who have lost their lives seeking a better future or those who were mistreated and left without shelter for days or even weeks on end. They deserve better.

Like most refugees, I have been given a new chance at life. I want my story to be one of hope—a story that illustrates how fragile life can be and how quickly it can turn upside down. You could be leading an ordinary life and suddenly find yourself applying for asylum. I never thought it would happen to me, but here I am. It is perfectly natural to long for your homeland as you strive to stay far away. I carry Lebanon with me every day, as a symbol of my heritage, and I will always fight for justice and accountability. Building a life away from my homeland has made me realize that there is no need to choose between identities, that we can remain true to ourselves as we embrace change.

Today, I see the world differently. More importantly, perhaps, I see it with more empathy. Single mothers, grandparents with foreign accents, children with mixed backgrounds; each of us is on a unique journey. I am immensely

proud to be a refugee. Bearing this title means that I have chosen to fight, adapt, and evolve. More importantly, it means I have chosen to embrace life and to continue to do so every day. I refuse to be overwhelmed by circumstances. My way of life is constantly changing. However, I will always strive to be at the forefront of the push for change and growth and to rise to the challenges that come with it.





Asylum Is Not Usually a Dream

Rayan Mansour

Rayan Mansour is a Lebanese-Venezuelan writer and social worker. She draws inspiration from her experience as a migrant, as well as from her Latin American identity and Middle Eastern roots.

A room. From my mother's womb to the moment I accidentally found myself seated in first class on a plane at 17, walls had been the only constant in my life. My siblings and mother remained in their seats in economy, while I sat on a large red seat. "It's your lucky day," an elderly woman sitting beside me said. Her gray hair rested peacefully on her shoulders, and her smile was as warm as the Turkish tea they served us. Yet, I didn't feel special or lucky. I felt confused.

From the sky, Venezuela looked different. At times, it looked like an old friend; at others, a distant acquaintance. The elderly woman smiled at me again and asked: "Where are you from?" Another constant in my life: this question I could never answer. I began to recall my best friend's tears soaking my shoulder as we hugged one another farewell, my father tightening his grip on the steering wheel as he drove us to the airport, the children rummaging through garbage, the last time I saw the empty house I had once called home, and the white walls of my bedroom with nothing but a black sharpie "hope" graffitied on them. For the first time, I answered this question honestly: "I don't know where I'm from."

I grew up with my family amid social, economic, and political turmoil in Caracas, Venezuela. Generation after the other, we have struggled with challenges. Since then, I have witnessed the deterioration of the country that had once sheltered my grandparents from the horrors of the Lebanese civil war. Because of everything from the pictures of politicians flooding the city streets to selling household items to pay the bills and having to work to

cover my school fees at 15, even sleep became a nightly struggle—both my reality and dreams were nightmares. In this nightmare, my mother's earlobes were ripped off by a thief snatching her gold earrings. What kind of life are we leading if we are constantly in fear?

Lebanon, a word I only knew from bedtime stories and nursery songs; a place that lies somewhere between wonder and fantasy. My mother would tell me how, in Lebanon, people picked their own fruit, children played safely in the streets, and people smiled no matter the circumstance. However, when I set foot on Lebanese soil, leaving everything I had ever known behind, I felt heavy. I became my grandfather, returning to his homeland after 30 years, a new person unfamiliar to people and places that had not changed.

Months turned into years in Lebanon, and I found myself noticing changes, not just around me but within me as well. This journey marked the start of a series of metamorphoses, and self-discovery continues to push me forward. Getting through my time at university, when I had almost no money, felt easier than seeking meaning in these new lands. How am I supposed to know what my dreams are if I don't even know where to find them?

During the years I spent studying for a profession that others had chosen for me, I would cry myself to sleep in confusion. I forged friendships with people who didn't understand me. This left me with the same feeling every day: I was caught in a spiral, content with mere existence. Where had my ambitions gone? How could I get new ones? Thus began the most difficult and loneliest period in my life. Once again, it was all happening within the walls of rooms: my new shelter and classroom. Nonetheless, I had one sanctuary that was not a room: my journal. Writing became my refuge. When I wrote, I didn't always have to be tough; I could be whoever I wanted to be, and I could admit that I had no idea what life meant to me.

After filling notebooks with my emotions for over a year, confessing only to pages of my journal, I realized that some of my struggles weren't mine alone. I was holding my grandfather's hand in his final moments in a quiet hospital room when I was inspired to channel my pain towards making an

impact, just as he had when he fled the war. That room forced me to mature faster than expected, so that I could support myself, my family, and others. The words I'd kept bottled up began to break free, demanding to be spoken. I eventually mustered the courage to create an Instagram account on which I shared my reflections under a pseudonym. This account became my safe space, somewhere I could share my thoughts and art freely. A while later, it became a safe space for others as well. However, I was not content with hiding behind anonymity anymore. What had I been hiding from? The support I received from strangers online made me realize they deserved to know my name. In 2022, I self-published my first book titled, *All the People I've Been*, a collection of short stories that explores the constant transformations we undergo over the course of our lives. Although this book didn't make me a bestselling author nor fill my pockets, it enriched my character and allowed me to connect with people who have since become dear to me.

Today, at 24, I'm writing this from another room: my office. I am a social worker who interacts with refugees every day. They trust me with their stories, and, together, we seek sources of resilience and try to find steps that can ease the weight of the challenges they are facing in their journeys of migration. Becoming who I am today was never part of my plan, and I am grateful for my journey. Nevertheless, leaving everything behind and seeking asylum in another country is not something people usually dream of. We dream of peace, good health, family, love, and education. So, when will people live peacefully in their homes? Will humanity ever achieve the unity required for us to do so? True, everyone is fighting some sort of battle or another, but refugees and migrants have been fighting theirs for too long.



Exile

Alya Joreige

Alya Joreige is of Lebanese, French, and Greek descent. This multicultural blend of languages and histories from an essential part of who she is and has given her a unique global perspective.

She holds master's degrees in international affairs and human rights.

In December 2004, I left Lebanon with my family. I was four years old at the time, and we thought we would be back soon. We left for my parents' work and assumed it would be a matter of months before we returned. However, following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005, violence spiraled, extinguishing our hopes for a return, which never came.

We oscillated between moments of hope and profound apprehension, especially during the period between Syrian troops' withdrawal from the country and the 2006 war with Israel. This emotional roller coaster set the tone of our exile. We were left swaying to the tune of unpredictable events, between hope and its disappointments.

I am the daughter of exiles with Turkish, Palestinian, and Syrian roots. I grew up hearing stories laden with the sorrow of migration and exile, and the aches of longing and loss. My parents raised me on tales of the Lebanese civil war and the exile it imposed on them, which added to the legacy of traumas and experiences that define our family history. And so, I grew up around a dilemma: Should we leave or should we return?

I prefer to speak of exile, not mere migration, because exile entails a deep rupture and a kind of sharp longing. Self-imposed exile can sometimes imply that it is a choice, but it often means leaving your home against your will. Like migratory birds spreading their wings to escape the harsh winter and flee the deadly cold, you maintain an intimate bond with your land. Like

those birds, I, too, have learned to fly, but part of me remains rooted in the land of Lebanon, unable to break from it.

My relationship with exile has evolved substantially, and I did not begin to understand it deeply until recently. I remember being proud of living outside Lebanon as a child. Over the years, however, that pride turned into shame that stemmed from feeling that I do not qualify—that is, that I am not Lebanese enough, not as Lebanese as others. My exile has shrouded my identity and sense of belonging with doubts. It has left me with a heavy sense of guilt for enjoying the opportunities of life abroad and for having the privilege of exploring new horizons as others remain back home, some of them living under difficult conditions. My exile has instilled a deep sadness within me, aggravated my identity crisis, and created invisible barriers between my homeland and me.

The Lebanese American writer Etel Adnan says, "Exile does not kill passion; to the contrary, it strengthens it, but it also makes it utterly desperate. Exile is the awareness of this marginalization and irreparable loss. Exile means losing the closest thing to identity, a loss tied to history and geography."

These words deeply resonate with me. They capture my sense of marginalization that manifests itself in my relationship with the Arabic language, which is intertwined with complexities, guilt, and internal conflict.

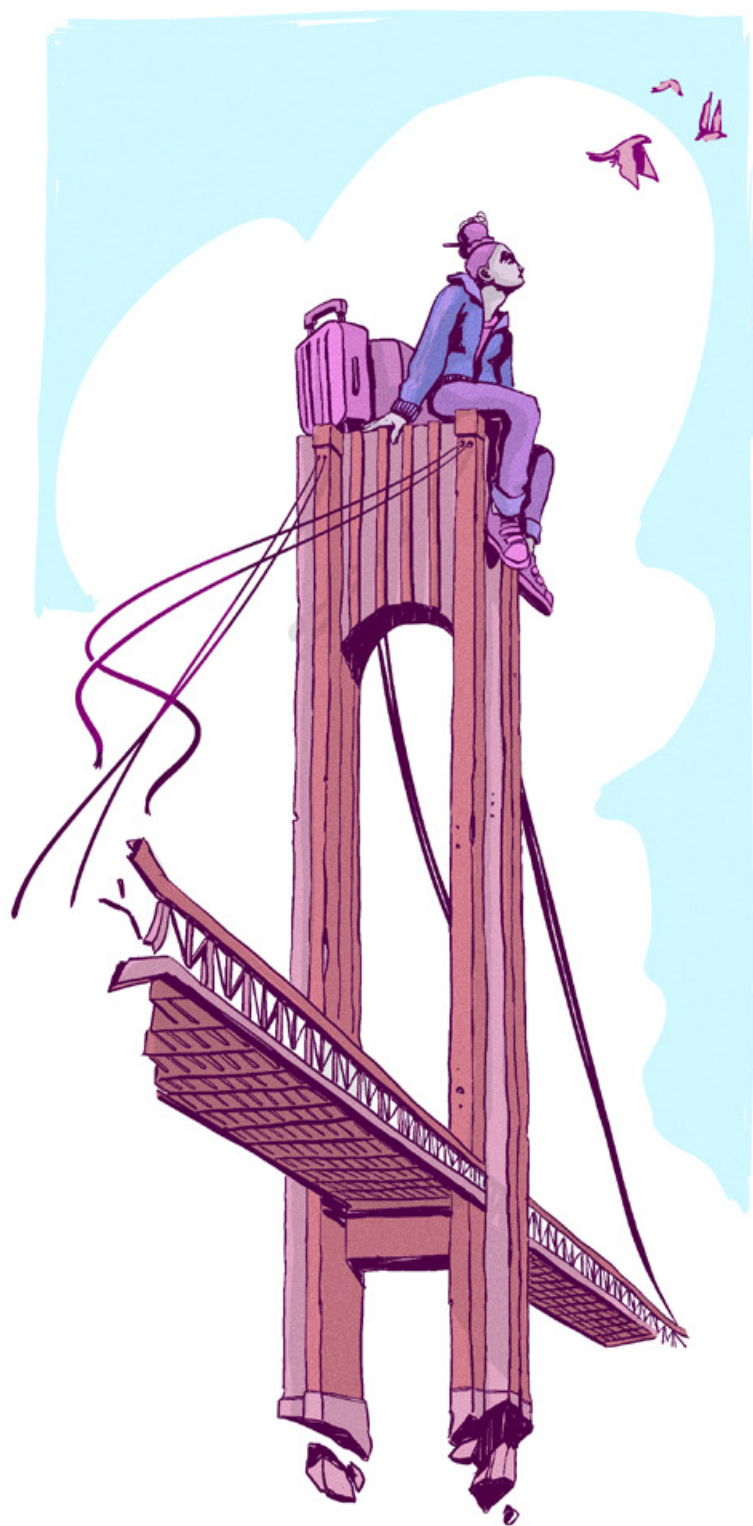
The constant pressure to master Arabic and the fear of being criticized for not speaking it fluently create invisible boundaries that isolate me, amplifying my struggle with an identity that feels both mine and somehow distant. Exile has intensified this inner conflict with a language that embodies my roots and identity but also serves as a reminder of my distance from Lebanon, fueling a deep sense of loss.

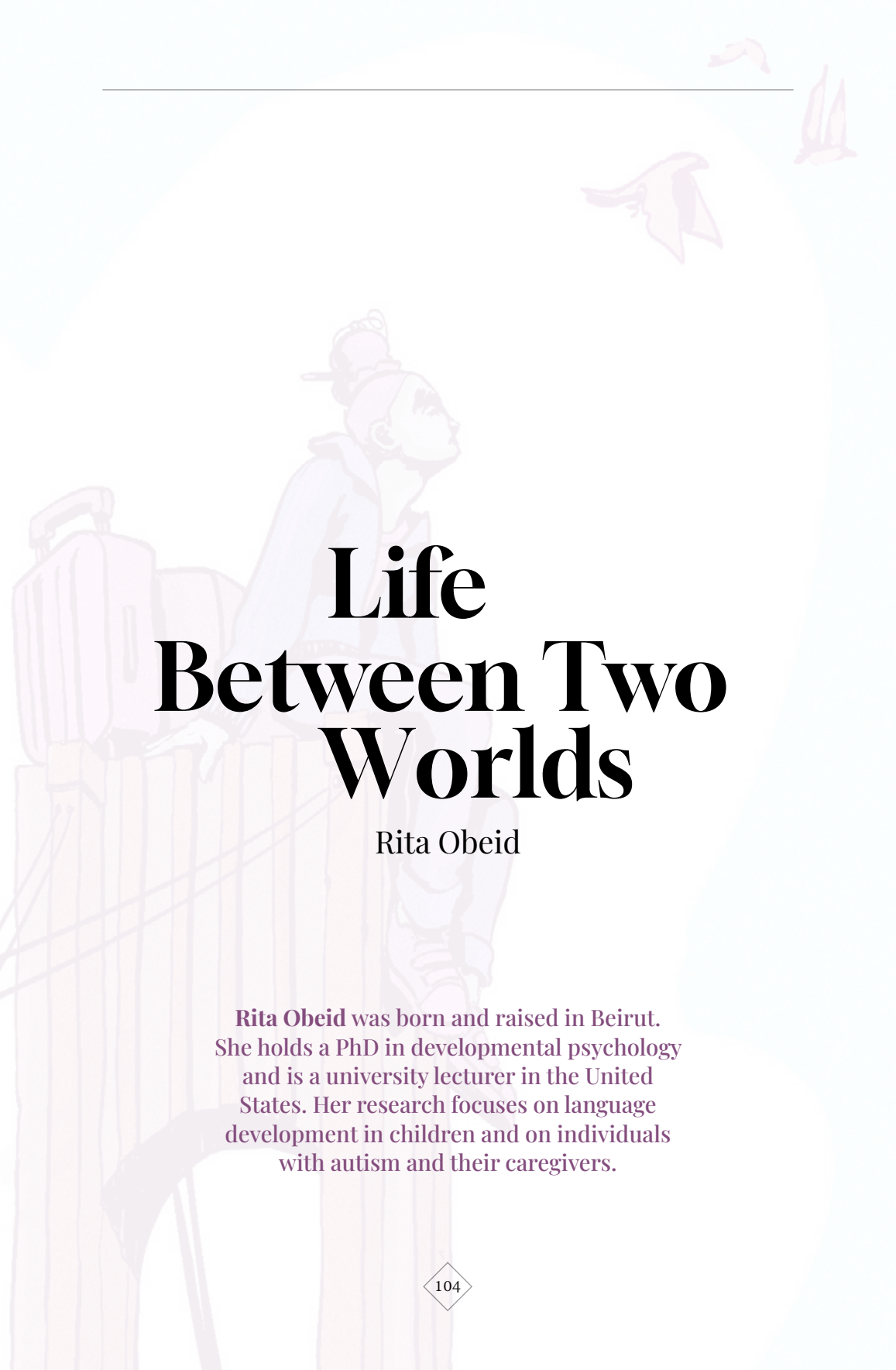
The Arabic language that reflects my identity and roots embodies a painful duality at the same time. It is a mirror of my culture, but it also reflects my distance from Lebanon, fueling my sense of inadequacy. It always resists me.

It seems to me that my exile is an attempt to uproot me. Paradoxically, however, it has also strengthened my connection to my homeland. Although they may be lethal at times, these roots are firm. The experience of being away from my homeland has breathed new life into my immense love for Lebanon and deepened my latent sense of belonging to this country.

Exile has shaped who I am today, leaving an impact on both my personal and professional choices. It has also intensified my overwhelming desire to return to Lebanon one day, forge close ties with it, and build a sense of belonging to my culture that is worthy of the term.

Sometimes, however, I wonder if this bond with the country is more a dream than something real. Is it an illusion, a fantasy, or intransigent persistence at a time when, sadly, the country has dramatically changed, making it increasingly difficult to see myself in and identify with it? My profound internal exile goes beyond geography or borders. It is a lost country, a final exile I may never be able to fully adapt to.



A faint, stylized illustration in the background shows a woman in profile, wearing a headscarf and a long coat, standing next to a large suitcase. She is looking upwards. In the upper right corner, there are three birds in flight. The entire scene is rendered in a light, sketchy style with a soft color palette of purples, pinks, and blues.

Life Between Two Worlds

Rita Obeid

Rita Obeid was born and raised in Beirut. She holds a PhD in developmental psychology and is a university lecturer in the United States. Her research focuses on language development in children and on individuals with autism and their caregivers.

I was sitting in the airport after 24 hours of travel, waiting at the baggage claim area with two suitcases that contained my entire life. I could do nothing but sit there, wring my hands around my acceptance letter to a PhD program, and nervously prepare myself to show it to the security officer at the airport. At the time, I thought to myself that reaching America was an achievement in itself. It was the second time I had ever taken a flight out of Lebanon. And after following endless signs through three different airports, I figured that making it to America was my first win.

My stay in the United States was supposed to be a stepping stone, a brief layover that would end with a return home once I obtained my PhD in psychology. Twelve years later, however, and my ambitions continue to keep me here, in this new home.

After getting through customs, I reached down to check my phone to see when my friend would pick me up, so I could finally set foot in my new "home." My arrival left an empty taste in my mouth. My second stop was not my own apartment. I hadn't even rented one yet. My uncle had contacted some acquaintances and found me a place to stay for a few weeks.

Throughout the car ride, I stared out the window, my eyes jumping from sight to sight, before landing on a gorgeous hanging bridge reaching far across the narrows from Staten Island to Brooklyn. The Verrazzano Bridge captured my attention, perfectly encapsulating my excitement for this new phase of my life. That same excitement may have been what carried me across that bridge day after day, which became my daily commute for the next six years.

As soon as I got to the doorstep of my temporary home in Brooklyn, I learned my first lesson about life in New York: the umbrellas placed at the door are not (as I had assumed) decorative; they are placed there to shield people from the rain that constantly pours, even in the summer! On my first day in New York, rain was the last thing I had to worry about. My mission, that day, was to register for the doctoral program—a seemingly simple task, but I was in one of the largest cities on earth and had no idea how its subway system worked. My hosts asked their daughter to ride with me to Manhattan, and from there, after countless wrong turns and a lot of backtracking, I got to the Graduate Center. I stood there, staring at the magnificent landmark right next door. The Empire State Building towered above me, and the privilege of catching a glimpse of this beauty every day dawned on me. The city mesmerized me with its chaos, its hustle and bustle. The world was now at my fingertips, but at the same time, I was just a very small piece of this city. New York breathed life into my soul.

After two weeks, the mounting pressure of potentially overstaying my welcome at my hosts' house drove me to look at apartments. I found an apartment that would allow me to keep part of my stipend, meaning that I could afford groceries. I moved my two suitcases to Staten Island, crossing the beautiful Verrazzano Bridge for the first time.

Upon my arrival, glaring problems immediately made themselves known. When you end up in a place with a fridge but no real kitchen, it doesn't take long to understand why renting a \$500 apartment in NYC is never a good idea. A shabby brown curtain separated my apartment from the second floor my landlords lived on. So, it won't surprise you to learn that I packed up and found a new place soon after. I found a one bedroom that I could barely afford, but I had a kitchen; a kitchen that quickly showed me my limitations as a chef and how easy my life had been back home.

Then, one random day, sitting on a bus riding past the Statue of Liberty, after months of being a visitor in NYC, a switch flipped, and this was home, a home I loved that would teach me so much for the next six years. I mastered the art of running after the buses I was about to miss, I got used to standing

in the piercing snow as I waited for the train I would take every day, and, despite missing the beach, my hatred of winter diminished.

I finished my PhD and worked in the Bronx for a year. After six years in NYC, this layover-turned-love-story reached its conclusion. I loved NYC, but the daily four-hour commute to and from Staten Island had taken a toll on me. I went back on the job market and found a job in Cleveland, Ohio. When I went there for my interview, it felt like I was back home as I walked across the beautiful campus. The architecture at Case Western Reserve University reminded me of the American University of Beirut, so the ink on my contract had hardly dried when I started packing. My two suitcases had become 22 boxes, which I shipped via United States Postal Service to Cleveland.

Here I am now, doing the research I enjoy. I work with many passionate students. I found exactly what I was looking for: a job that is meaningful and rewarding, one in which I can always grow and learn.

My time in the US has taught me so much. I learned how little I truly know. I learned about the beauty and growth born of diversity. I learned that I want to keep learning and growing, and I want to support anyone who is on a similar path. I have been on a bumpy road since leaving Lebanon; my life might have been far easier if I had stayed back home. Staying would have saved me the pain of missing family and friends. But for all its beauty and its charm, my home in the Middle East is broken. Here I am, having turned a layover into a life and having left a piece of my heart in every place I have called home along this journey.





This Is What I Wanted to Tell You

Thea Khoury

Thea Khoury believes that the written word can weave realities that are more just. This testimony is a tribute to her father, whom she looks to for guidance, and her homeland, Lebanon, which is currently in crisis.

Pop,
I hope the dark treats you well,
You went before your time, but
I'm kind of glad,
You didn't survive to see your country bleed,
Something I didn't imagine I'd ever need,
Telling you my thoughts,
Post-mortem,
There was no time to discuss,
Your deep roots have now taken rot,
Leaving the country in a damp spot.
This comes right out of the heart of the Middle East,
Goes out to the Palestinians, the Syrians, the Lebanese,
These wars continue to cause
Shattering loss,
To all those cursed to be born
On the lands the messiah walked
He was also attacked –

The violence prevails, and remains
The heavy cross that burdens these nations
Whose people are victims of corrupt negotiations
That have normalized mass human rights violations
Yeh,
The Messiah walked through these lands, but
Politics raped them redundantly,
Natural elements existed, abundantly.
This system is flawed and it's because of religion,
It's what they make of its law.
Civil uprisings have taken the country by storm,
People are angry, they don't know to whom to resort,
No one's there to hold accountable,
Don't get me wrong, I love my country,
But this government is responsible,
For mass suicides in response to hunger –

There's this one guy, he shot himself mid-day,
In the streets of Hamra,¹ he laid to rest,
This was his protest,
The note that he left,
Was written on his criminal record – his slate was clean,
His note read: I'm not heathen, but hunger's a heathen²

1 Hamra is a vital street in Beirut, Lebanon, and a key economic, diplomatic, and cultural center.

2 These are lyrics from a song by the Lebanese musician and activist Ziad Rahbani Ana Mosh Kafer.

It was out of need,
This is a shout-out, to all the fathers like him,
Strugglin' to feed their kin, so – they'd rather die
I want to thank you, pop,
For holding your ground,
you lived through a war,
30 years of accumulated psychological scars,
You fought for your country, you died on its land

But when you needed redemption, no one extended a hand,
It pains me to see, the war you fought rages on, come what may
There are no opportunities,
And compromise
is the price my generation is expected to pay.

This comes right out of the heart of the Middle East,
Goes out to the Palestinians, the Syrians, the Lebanese,
These wars continue to cause
Shattering loss,
To all those cursed to be born
On the lands the messiah walked
He was also attacked –
The violence prevails, and remains
The heavy cross that burdens these nations
Whose people are victims of corrupt negotiations

That have normalized mass human rights violations
Yeh,
I had a friend who was into peace,
He loved like there was no other way to be
They picked him up, now it's all over the news,
Federal budgets spent, to ambush some shrooms?
The guy was incubating spores,
But publicly was made out to be a criminal – a mastermind
Endangering the lives of innocents,
This is all happening in parallel to the chaos,
But thankfully we've got the cops,
Puttin' hippies behind bars, servin' their homeland
“Protecting the peace”

Ridiculous, but it's an accurate analogy,
Of the state's reactions to people,
Demanding reform,
They should probably ingest that psilocybin they caught,
Take a trip,
Expand their minds a little bit,
I'm sick of this bullshit, suffocating – on edge,
I need to take a breath, PAUSE.

Now my city, is only what it once was,
Yet another attempt to rid itself of its scars,

A wounded animal, strugglin' to breathe,
Disregarded in a gutter,
Tryin' to heal, along with other lands,
Attacked and fleeced,
And left naked and ashamed,
Somewhere in the Middle East.
Then came the feather,
The one that broke the camel's back,
Media did not portray it as a Zionist attack,
They blamed it on local negligence,
And claimed that there was not enough evidence,
To throw,
The terrorist militias in power,
Into the melting pot,
A blast,
That reduced my city to mere ash,
300,000 displaced; 6,000 wounded; 200 dead,
And that led,

To no government response,
Instead,
People fled,
To support the capital
Youth armed with brooms,
And food to distribute,

It gives hope to see society react like that,
It's reassuring,
It's our instinct,
Here we are, here I am,
I'm fighting for my country, will I die on its land?
Will we find redemption through the thickening fog?
It settles in my mind and locks me in a dark
Cell.
So that's what's up, Pop,
That's what I've got to tell
I really hope you're doing well,
I just needed to get some weight off my chest – to release,
Thanks for lending an ear, Pop,
I can feel you,
And I pray that you finally rest in peace.



Justice
Truth
Dignity



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

Since I left Lebanon in 1976 to establish myself in France, I have been asked many times, with the best intentions in the world, if I felt more French or more Lebanese. I always give the same answer: “Both.” Not in an attempt to be fair or balanced but because if I gave another answer I would be lying. This is why I am myself and not another, at the edge of two countries, two or three languages, and several cultural traditions. This is precisely what determines my identity.

Would I be more authentic if I cut off a part of myself?

From *In the Name of Identity* by Amin Maalouf

