Female Returnees
Syrian Women Write their Stories
Female Returnees ... Syrian Women Write their Stories

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Nophotozone: legal assistance and legal empowerment, advocacy for detainees and their families, and families of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

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Introduction

Once again, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports, thankfully, NoPhotoZone in its project of building a self-supporting community containing the families of Syrian detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, in Bekaa, Lebanon, under the leadership of Syrian women.

When designing and planning the Project, the Organization’s team’s perspective was that the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons must receive various forms of support that would lead to joint learning, exchange of experiences, and acquiring new skills, with a view to helping them achieve justice on the short term.

Having asked many of the organization’s beneficiaries about their opinions, we planned for several activities to raise awareness of the issues of human rights and women’s rights, in addition to the idea of justice, community organization, emotional intelligence, motivation and self-esteem, nonviolent communication, advocacy and persuasion tools using social media, and finally, how to use art and story writing as means of expression.

The project targeted 45 women and girls. They were divided into
three groups. The training sessions on human rights and women’s rights were held with each group separately. The trainings were very successful and used the method of mutual interaction and mutual learning among the participants and with them. There was a wonderful atmosphere of intimacy, hope and determination to achieve their goals in order to serve the issues of detention and enforced disappearance in Syria.

The trainings were concluded with an agreement with the participating women, that each of them would take the initiative of improving the living conditions of three women from her acquaintances. That was supposed to be done during the Project implementation period of three months and after they had acquired new skills and experiences. This was the central purpose of the Project, which would ultimately expand this network and enhance women’s support to each other in a participatory manner that meets their needs and fulfills their demands in the case of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention.

That experience was more than amazing and useful. I hope to repeat it with all NoPhotoZone beneficiaries.
We tried to capture the basic theoretical concepts regarding story writing:

How and when did man start storytelling?
A general introduction to the art of storytelling, historical overview, origin, development, and elements.

Stages of development of the mechanisms of narrative (traditional and modern), storytelling rhythm linked to social development.

The relationship of short story with some other writing arts: plays, novels, visual scripts…

Is every narration a story in the artistic and creative sense?
What is the difference between documentation and artistic storytelling?

What is the difference between history and literature?
What is the relationship of the senses and their development and role with the development of knowledge and creativity?

However, basically, the story writing workshop has not aimed at producing creative artistic stories, in the academic meaning of the
word. Also, it was, in no way, our goal to write for documentation, whether at the case level or the event level.

Our goal was to stimulate the act of writing itself, putting in mind its potentials to activate the mechanisms of self-expression, emotional release, and private and public social behavioral critical review. Our goal was the act of writing as a purifying mechanism.

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Practically, most of the women beneficiaries wrote some of their stories, listened to the music that we referred to during the theoretical part. They also read some published stories that we had mentioned to them. They wrote, then began reading their own short stories. After that, we subjected the stories to group criticism and evaluation regarding the elements and concepts that we studied in the theoretical part. In fact, the women were great in showing in their interest, interaction and diligence, each according to her own circumstances and general life experiences, as well as her educational and cultural experiences. In general, it was a very good, fruitful, beautiful and promising experience. Its general title is: Hope for a better future, desire for diligence and self-development.
Believing in the role of art in real life and its impact and contribution to shedding light on live social issues, I have been working, for years, on the employment of artistic skills in productions that serve such issues, especially with regard to the Syrian women affected by the war.

Our project focuses on enabling them, artistically and technically, to possess tools of expressing themselves aesthetically, and to tell their stories through the use of remnants of clothes and cloth in artworks that reflect their aesthetic perceptions following the collage technique.

The training workshops provide a space for thinking about visual treatments, coordinating shapes, materials and colors. In their general atmosphere, they are somewhat close to the art of patchwork, which is usually carried out by a group of women. However, the difference in our training workshops is the privacy and individuality resulting from each woman carrying out her own independent work. This has enriched the training environment with discussions, dialogues and exchange of views, given the
multiplicity and difference of options. Moreover, the training goes beyond that to reach more emotional and sentimental aspects; the concept of the activity is that each participant, or one of her relatives, will keep the fabric scrap that she has worked on. Thus keeps it as part of her memory, going back to a certain stage of her life, and as a tool through which she tells her story. In addition to the artistic value, the work adds a personal emotional value that expresses its innovator, and elevates the work to the level of a high emotional value, especially when the performance of women is linked to the experiences of using sewing tools, which are already available to women in the Syrian society. Thus, every work produced was a mixture of emotion, technique and idea, which made the works produced, in the majority of them, more than good. They had different styles than made each one distinguished from the others. They told different stories highlighting the privacy of each woman, and carrying in their formation a carefully woven memory, and formations marked by aesthetic categories and personal artistic perceptions.
She holds a master’s degree in counseling and guidance; a master’s degree in education administration; a diploma in nonviolent education; a diploma in cognitive behavioral therapy, and bachelor’s degree in nursing.

She participated in a leadership training program with NoPhotoZone by training three groups of women who had undergone traumatic experiences due to war conditions, such as the loss or arrest of a family member.

The Program was titled Self-Confidence, and had different objectives:
- Identifying ideas and their impact on behavior.
- Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses.
- Changing ideas to change attitudes.
- Appreciating words and dialogue.
- Prejudging, observations and feelings.
Self-motivation.
Self-esteem.

The experience was very successful, as the women interacted positively with the issue. A self-plan was developed to overcome any crisis that they may face, with emphasis on motivating themselves for better self-esteem.

Communication with the first and third groups was carried out through the Zoom platform, despite all the obstacles, while the second group training was direct and took place in Bekaa.

The interaction was positive, as the trainees in the three groups felt that the training met their personal emotional, behavioral, psychological and social needs.

Thanks to everyone taking responsibility for this Program, because it is a basic need in our societies that face all kinds of difficulties.
About the three women’s groups in Bekaa within the Women Leaders Project.

Group 16 :1 women who were displaced to Bekaa. Although they fled from harsh conditions to harsher ones, the will and love of life made their participation reveal very distinct capabilities and abilities. The group was distinguished by frankness, which indicated a pressing need for emotional release. At the same time, there was a room for everyone to highlight their knowledge and experiences, where their participation indicated experiences in the field of social work. A large portion of them were graduates of institutes or universities. This is not a praise of them, but rather a statement to show the extent of injustice these women had been subject to. They faced harsh conditions with science and useful experiences.

Group 16 :2 women who were fortunate to receive direct training. Indeed, they had the opportunity to unleash their energies through active participation. The participation demonstrated a good ambition of women who were experienced in community field work. During their participation in the training, they demonstrated an advanced awareness of the components of the

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host community in Lebanon; they were sensitive to the fact that they were overburdening a host community that was also suffering from poverty. They were proud to participate in the Women Leaders Program, and felt that they were doing something useful for themselves and the surroundings.

Group 12: 3 women who has the same compelling circumstances as their predecessors. However, what distinguished them was the absolute courage and candor. They spent more time in group discussions. They were distinguished by realistic thinking and bold opinions, revealing their rejection of patriarchy, and they showed willingness to confront this patriarchy of thinking. It is worth noting that they all take Ms. Noura Ghazi as an example to follow.

All in all, the three groups had the nerve to share their personal experiences (this is usually difficult). I believe that with this boldness and candor, they broke the wall of silence that the surrounding community and family are still building. A final note, in addition to their community struggle, their strongest struggle is to assume the responsibility of raising their children on their own, and in order not to be unfair to anyone, I don’t not generalize here.
I participated in the Women Leaders Training Program carried out by NoPhotoZone. The participants consisted of three groups of women who had undergone traumatic experiences of having a family member lost or arrested. The experience we had together was very fruitful in many respects:

- I met smart, strong and ambitious women,
- I felt their struggle to overcome their crises,
- I saw hope radiating in their eyes, despite the bitter experiences they had faced.

The women were able to dig deeper into the roots of their emotions and understand some things that had been unseen for them.

The importance of emotional intelligence and its effective and positive role in developing a confident and balanced personality in all respects is now consolidated in them.

The movement constraint imposed due to the coronavirus forced us to communicate with Groups 1 and 3 through Zoom application,
while we were able to move to Bekaa and deliver the training face-to-face to Group 2.

I was happy that the interaction was very positive in the three trainings. We were able to create a bond of mutual love, even though the communication with Groups 1 and 3 was online.

The positive things were not limited to the esteemed women only, but went further to mean effective, fruitful and clear communication with Ms. Noura Ghazi Safadi and Mr. Jalal Husshuss, who did not spare any effort to make the Project a success, and to provide all training requirements in order to make it advantageous to the trainees and make the trainers feel comfortable and confident.

I am grateful to have participated in this useful project, and I would love to collaborate in the future. It is beautiful to drive black clouds away from our people and plant the light of renewed hope in them.

Thank you, Noura and Jalal, and all the beautiful women, with your beautiful hearts and souls, for the positive atmospheres that shadowed our trainings.
Unplanned Departure

The departure of my beloved ones broke my heart and I’ll keep crying until I meet them again. When he left, I did not realize the meaning of departure. I thought he would be back one day. The battle began while I was sinking into my dreams.
What happened?! He departed leaving tears on my cheeks, but when my beloved son departed, it was a devastating shock; I realized the true meaning of pain. Now, I became alone without support. Life became tasteless for me. Thinking almost killed me, and my mind became noisy.

Shall I go on in this life alone? Who cares?!
War, devastation, departure, frustration, fear.

Oh, my God! What should I do?
I decided to leave, I could not bear it anymore. I didn’t not want to be a victim of anyone. So, I ran away. I escaped the route of monsters to find myself in a forest of wolves; homelessness, bullying and exploitation. I did not find safety. “I submit myself to God; He is my supporter and guardian,” I said to myself, believing that whoever seeks help from God will never be lost.
A New Birth

The story began on a quiet summer morning. Its serenity was broken by a surprise attack by ferocious monsters, which spread terror in our town. They pounced on us, hunting and killing their preys mercilessly, in a way that even demons can’t imagine.
Eighty victims in one go; they were tortured and killed in a spiteful manner that no human mind can comprehend. The townspeople gathered the corpses of their sons to be buried by their dears and families. After that, the town lived in overwhelming darkness, in fear, anticipation, and deadly anxiety. They feared that another brutal attack might be waged suddenly to shed blood again. Not long after that, in another new morning, the ferocious monsters came back. They resembled human beings only in their shapes. They had no connection with humanity. This time, they burned people alive. Among the ones who were slaughtered before the humanity’s silent eyes, was my husband, the father of my
two children. It was a heavy, suffocating, oppressive and dark night. My heart might have stopped beating several times. Whenever I thought that my children would know what happened to their father, I shivered. I began to hear the sound of a movement outside. The sound became louder until it filled the place with noise. When I looked out, I saw the relatives and neighbors gathering their light and essential stuff, belongings and needs, preparing to depart. Bags spread before my eyes like tombstones. It was the last time I saw my home and my city. We were displaced to an area that was far from our town. We thought it was far enough from the raids of the ferocious monsters. But, only few months had passed when fires, barrel bombs, brutal bombing and nonstop indiscriminate arrests started. Thus, we found ourselves facing the same deadly experience again; scattered, we fled in search of a safety that we lost. This time, the decision was difficult; I had no choice but to leave Syria and seek refuge in Lebanon. I had to protect myself and my children, for now I was their mother, father and home. Two children whose only fault is that they were born in wartime.

During the first year in Lebanon, I did not leave the house, fearing for my two young children and grieving for their father, our exile and condition. Then I started receiving support and encouragement from my family, which increased my self-confidence and my belief in life; I started looking for work.
That step was a quantum leap for me; my life changed for the better, my self-confidence increased, and that was reflected positively on my children. I actually started working in a school for Syrian refugee children. At the same time, I was working on empowering and developing myself by attending training courses, awareness-raising and support workshops, which dealt with crucial topics that I needed to know and learn. Then, I participated in women and community leadership programs, which changed the course of my life entirely. I always felt very close to those women; my colleagues, with whom I shared the same suffering and the same conditions of war, oppression and asylum; mothers of orphans who had lost their fathers due to death or arrest. I kept trying to share my experience and story with them, with a view to strengthening and encouraging them, repeating the need to continue their work and self-development, as life was going on and would not stop. I am proud of myself; I managed to change for the better; I made it anew with perseverance and diligence. Big successes always start with small ideas, which are born and then grow little by little, and hope grows with them.

J - O
Survival

When I lost my mother, I felt like a stranger without a homeland. Longing and fear suffocate me. No communications, no electricity and no internet. Bombing, killing, destruction and death are the only things that dominate everything around us all the time.
I put my baby in the cart, and I walk to my parents’ house, which is about fifteen minutes away from my house. I knock on the door again and again, even though I know they have left.

With trembling hands, I take the key out and opened the door. I call... I know that no one is here to answer.

I hug my child and cry in a tired, suffocated and exhausted voice. I sit where my mother used to sit. I recount to her imagined presence all that hurt me. I can’t wait anymore, I have to go to Lebanon, where my soul is. But my fear that my husband might be arrested at a checkpoint, holds me back and prevents me from taking a step.

Bewilderment is another knife now.

Sadness overwhelms me; pain, anger and longing invade me, turning me to an erupting volcano, whose burning lava hits everyone around me. So, I decide to try to get out of the besieged Ghouta, despite everyone’s objection.

We bid farewell to my in-laws and walked the long road. Transportation means were not available due to the lack of fuel. Exerting exhausting efforts, we walked until we got to the checkpoint. It was very cold. Children, women and men were waiting. I saw hundreds of
people who wanted to leave that city of death. It was a mess; noise, hungry children and cold that froze the remaining blood in our veins.

We sat waiting...

The sun started to set, so, we had to return to the start point. Feelings of despair and disappointment almost destroyed hope in our souls. Next day, having nothing to lose, even our lives, we tried again.

We got to the checkpoint again and sat waiting like the other people. Three hours passed, nothing new, nothing changed. A fatal state of waiting for the unknown.

I do not know which strength swept me so suddenly. I felt free of hesitation and fear. I carried my child and said to my husband: “I will not wait any more, I will continue the journey,” and I set off. People stared at me with surprise and astonishment, whispering to each other. Some of them called me,

«Where are you going? Have you lost your mind? Don’t go near the checkpoint, daughter, go back, you crazy!»

I got closer to the checkpoint, asking myself with every step, “Shall I survive? Will they arrest me? Or will they shoot me directly? Will they make an example of me for the people here?”

From a distance... “What are you coming here for?
Stay away and speak.”

“My daughter is 10 months old, I do not have any other children. She is sick and doctors say that there is no treatment for her here, and I have to take her to Damascus, otherwise she will die.”

The divine miracle happened, and unexpectedly we arrived in Damascus safely. We stayed there for about 20 days, during which we obtained our passports, then we sought refuge in Lebanon, where my beloved mother was waiting for me on pins and needles. After a short time, I began to search for the thing that I had dreamed of since my childhood; to continue my education, work and be an atypical woman with an active role in society. And here I am, achieving my dreams. Nothing is impossible. We can perform miracles with our will. The bigger your dreams are, the wider the globe is.

Y-M
Pass

After that damn sense of suffocation, I breathed like a person who had been buried alive, like a fire-breathing dragon, like a volcano about to erupt. Then, I rose, taking my decision: «to be or not to be».

Like the sun that lightens the darkness of the moon and denies humiliation, I threw that file to the Creator, gathered my scattered pieces, and started to look around - how hard it is to reach! When I drew the seeds, I felt, and when I watered the flowers, I tumbled again... I begged: Oh my God! If you are not with me, who will be?! Then, I heard that charged voice calling: Get up! Rise! Do not be afraid! You are an unreachable woman. That is true; I am not a person who betrays; I have a cause, and a messenger must arrive; I have promised, and must pass.

D - R
All the bridges, that I have been trying to build, collapsed; and here I am: a woman in her fall.

My spring has gone, passed away. My dreams are mere illusions, and my leaves have fallen and drifted by wind.

My history has gone, taking my memories with it. I am a fruitless tree that no one wants to buy; a drained river, a perfume blown away by wind. I am fragmented like this shattered nation; my summer is cold, my winter is dry, my shores are deserted and my sun is about to set.
I Find Myself

I grew up and lived my childhood in a town where women have a stereotyped lifestyle. I dreamt and aspired to be a strong, influential, decision-making and important female. But customs and traditions prevailed over everything and blew all my plans and dreamed in the wind.
Getting married at an early age, I started a new life, giving birth to three children who looked like beautiful flowers. They are my most important achievements now. I went through many difficult circumstances, from the brutal war, to displacement, and then to the loss of my dears. My husband got sick. Life became more difficult, especially with the raising of children and taking care of them. Pressures built up over me, until I got close to the brink of despair. I was unable even to cry. Once, suddenly, my youngest flower, with her blue eyes and bright fair hair approached me laughing. She wanted to play as she didn’t know anything else yet. She asked me to hold her. I refused because I was too tired. She looked at me with her beautiful eyes and wonderful smile, and said, “Mama, you are strong.”

Her words made me feel that a big door was about to open before me, bring in a light that would drive out all the gloomy darkness, despair and fatigue. «Mama, you are strong» was a sentence that made me reconsider my life. Even if society remains the same, even if stupid customs and traditions remain unchanged, I am the one who will change. I am the one who should change. I believe in myself, in my abilities, in my strength and determination. I feel as if I am rising from the rubble. Until this moment, I still rise, and will remain so until I regain my ambition and fulfill my childhood dream.
Cobwebs

We were like a necklace of flowers... Our dreams were peaceful and beautiful. We used to be awakened by Fayrouz’s songs. We would meet our beloved ones and neighbors and chat. Then, suddenly, the sun set, the night fell, the wind blew, and the electrical cables touched each other, making annoying noise.
We were unaware of what we were doing. Pellets fell on the heads from the sky. Fear and panic were among us now, what else were we to expect?! I couldn’t sleep; the sounds of dogs and cats preying on those who were on the ground, were frightening. The neighborhood was awakened by smells spreading in the city. We discovered corpses everywhere, as if the roads were covered with red carpets. Cries of children and women filled the place. Oh, my God! We were surrounded by cobwebs. I was looking for a solution, when knocks on the door terrified me. I did not know where they came from: from inside the house, or from behind the door! Paying no attention to what could fall on my head, I devoted myself to the farewell of my beloved, whom I decorated with my hands. “Please, forgive me if I go out leaving you behind,” I said to her, feeling ashamed in front of her because she was unable to move.

The sounds and noise became louder. I casted one last look at my memories, and wished I could carry everything before my departure. He came to my side and said, “Take the necessary things only. It is only a few days and we will come back.”

With my eyes on my beloved, I went out. “Goodbye!” I said to her. Through the bus window, I looked out at the black strands dropping from the sky, and fragments of houses were flying like popcorns. Tears were my friend all the way, and because of them I stood in front of the checkpoint person at the edge of my wasted city. «Soon, you will eat potatoes grown in this place,» he said mockingly.

The bus stopped at the borders of a country that I had never heard of except on the news. There, I realized that my dreams had flown like balloons in the air. I became a refugee on the borders of the homeland.
The Unknown

Nights go by and I do nothing but crying. I no longer remember that I am female. A long time will pass before recovering from the suffering I went through. I got tired, debts crushed and humiliated me. My husband was arrested and left four children behind. He disappeared in the darkness of prison. I don’t know if he is dead or still alive.
Mental disorders caused me severe depression that shattered my spirit, and left me with bad scenarios running through my mind and denying me sleeping. I visited my father in prison. The road to the prison was terrifying, tiring and dangerous. When I arrived and entered that place, I felt as if I had fallen into a monster’s mouth. I saw my father in a miserable physical and mental health condition. He was completely amnesiac. I looked for him in the people’s faces, while his empty eyes were looking for anything to adhere to in that narrow space. Someone called him, approached me and said: “This is your father.” I lost control on my tears, as well as my entire self. I started screaming unconsciously from the bottom of my heart like a madwoman. Why? What did he do to you? All this injustice and oppression, what for?

I started to visit him weekly, hoping that he would recover. Then, I had the fatal shock that bled my heart; he died. I was told that he died in detention while I was preparing his release papers. How did he die? They said that there had been violent clashes around the place and a shrapnel hit him in the chest and he died. I completely lost myself when I lost my twin brother, the twin of my soul, who also was arrested. After that, our economic conditions worsened. Everybody turned their backs on us. I was let down with my children. I got sick and became unable to take on life’s tough responsibilities. The doctors said that I had a malignant disease. But I rejected and resisted that reality. I have no choice but to be the mother and the father at the same time. I don’t deny my difficult situation, but I’ll continue to resist. Till when? I don’t know, but I will continue to fight and wait for the unknown.

Dalal
Jasmine and Rice Water

The fragrance of jasmine spread everywhere. Its smell fainted and the limbs of its children dispersed, covering the ground. When the first jasmine fell, we almost could not distinguish between the young and the old. Sadness resided in our hearts; our streets were haunted by ghosts and the smell of blood. Despite of this, I remained strong and full of hope with the existence of my little homeland.
I saw him coming from afar; his quick paces stole my beautiful moments. With every step, fear stole my soul. Knocks at the door made my happiness tape fade away. I opened; the one who had been my security and safety is lying there motionless.

For the first time, I wished I wasn’t from the city of grapes and blood. My heart slipped out of my chest; my little homeland was bleeding and collapsing before my eyes. I stood as if I were a dead tree trunk. Inside me, a voice was insisting: He will survive! He will not pass away! I looked at his face, what would happen now? From the depth of my broken heart, I screamed, Oh, My God! Oh, My God. I realized that it was not a nightmare, it was real. My first black night began.

Fear confuses me; my loneliness is a bleeding wound. I have never thought that the love of jasmine is so painful. The arrow of jasmine has struck my heart and killed me. The morning comes back, I get up the weakest creature on earth. My fear flies before my eyes like the leaves of autumn trees. I thought them to be golden fruits that would support and strengthen me, but they are mere pale yellow leaves. I am disappointed. I was a temporary case for them; and very soon everyone was busy with their own country and time. Interlaced with jasmine, grapes and blood, I remain; they are my present, but my roots are swaying with the wind.

There are no more fruits; they have been plundered and blown over in the wind.
Those holy angels seem to be wading in the trivial maze of life, while everyone is staring with open eyes. Everyone wants a price for small services. The masks fall, the fragrant of love fades away. Sure that I have lost my homeland, the city of Jasmine, I decide to transform grapes to perfume, to forget the smell of blood, and to live among the people with whom I share pains, so that I help my roots extend and the name of grapes to remain in mind. Lost and confused, I go on through a strange and dreary forest. Frightened from the inside and strong on the outside, distracted and torn, mighty and steadfast, I gather my remaining pieces, water my roots with rice water and they sprout and begin to grow again. Struggling and persisting, I maintained the love of jasmine and grapes watered with rice water. What hurts me now is that there is nothing encouraging me to pick a narcissus flower and place it next to my morning cup of coffee. Oh, rice, your water has become salty and painful. My wound is bleeding, and pain captures me. This way, I live my day with the memory of jasmine, the love of the country of grapes, the smell of blood that does not leave me, and the rice water that burns me.

R -S
عائدات
“Mom, could a war, like the one we see on the TV, happen to us? Why don’t you bring all the hungry children, whose homes were destroyed to live with us? Our house is big and we have a lot of food.”
My little girl's innocent questions and suggestions soon finished when ... the war reached us.

Whenever we heard gunfire, we fled our homes and sought refuge in the nearby villages. We would stay there until the situation calms down, and then return. This time, we departed and remained away for a long time. Destruction, killing, displacement, hunger and humiliation increased. We could no longer bear staying away from our home, so, we decided to return at the earliest chance. Our house was on the edge of the village, we took advantage of a short lull, and returned. We returned only to bathe the children and bring some clothes. When we arrived, I couldn't see my house in need of cleaning, and refrain myself from cleaning it. The sight of the dry jasmine tree and roses, pained my heart. My husband stood outside watching the situation and hurrying me. As quickly as I could, I bathed the children, cleaned the house, watered the jasmine tree and the roses and took some clothes. Before leaving my room, I left my doll, which had become my daughter's. I left her to guard the house in our absence. After a long time of homelessness, hunger and fear, I put my injured brother on a wheelchair, and walked, with all my family, on a long road. We struggled to reach our village, our home. I couldn't believe what I saw! Our land was planted with all kinds of tasty vegetables, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. The roses grew large and bloomed. The jasmine tree extended and became a fence surrounding the whole house. I ran quickly to pick some vegetables and cook for my family; I wanted to make salad and serve it to them. My husband awoke me before I could do anything. In spite of all this, I still have hope that we will return to our home, to my jasmine tree and roses. I'm sure that my home is safe, and my doll is still waiting for us to return.

R-B
The Pink Doll

It was not a normal day. It was like removing a fetus from its mother’s womb. It was impossible to let it go unnoticed. My husband’s question that day needed an answer from all states, rulers and judges. «What have we done to flee that way, like cowards, to cross the borders sneaking like drug or contraband smugglers?»
I prepared my children early in the morning. I only packed our important things, including my children’s toys, which they could not sleep without hugging them.

We reached the borders. We found a person signaling to us to hurry up before anyone sees us. We started ascending the mountain. It was a very hot Ramadan day; the sun was right over our heads, and our hearts beat like a drum in a huge wedding. My husband held our one-year-old daughter, while I grasped my five-year-old son’s hand, carrying the toys bag in the other hand. We went up and up. Oh, my God! It is a huge mountain with no end; it is not a plateau or a hill. Fatigue began to appear on our faces. I became unable to hold my son’s hand, while the smuggler’s voice was urging us, “Hurry up! Hurry up!”

I opened the bag and started throwing things away. I threw my daughter’s doll. It was a beautiful pink one. The doll looked at me as if it wanted to say, «It is okay! Goodbye.» I am sorry, my dear doll, my arms can no longer hug you, and it is hard to describe how I do feel. That day was full of agony, sense of separation, suffocation and oppression. We wanted nothing but safety and living in peace. These were all our needs.

Rukaya
They were dark nights. The only things that stick in my mind right now are the ropes and walls that are colored with the UN emblem. It is the beginning of a new exhausting and arduous life. I had only two options: to be a weak quail, or a lioness struggling to protect her children. What a cruelty!
Does war make all these troubles? Is there no candle to light my way? I wonder, not knowing that I have the candle. Yes, Yes, I see it glowing with the hope for a better future. It is my little princess with her big eyes, inside of which I see everything I want. She holds a paintbrush and colors, portraying her inside on a transparent sheet to show me a prosperous future. I see what she is drawing. It is not like the Mona Lisa or Picasso’s paintings. In her colors the smell of blood overlaps with and the smell of roses and the color of soil. Why not! Beautiful paintings travel to blonde cities. Let my little princess and many children be the heroines and heroes of painting exhibitions and books that have been written, printed and decorated with their signatures. Why not! They are the most beautiful generation to be born out of displacement. They are the children of my homeland and here they are: heroes and young. They are marking the dawn that will be born from that wounded country. Yes, it is my country and it is sick; it has been sick for a long time, but it will not die.

There is nothing more beautiful than a tear shed from oppression, but turned to be a joy of the birth of a new generation that knows well what they want and how to get it.
We, the people of that quiet little village, which we used to call Almanssiyah, used to live a simple and happy life, until the year of calamity came; the year of demanding freedom came to rob the dearest thing I have.
Only after the war, we knew that our village is very important for others. What would happen now! Were we going to die under bombing, to be beheaded, executed, or what?! We were an ideal family; a father, a mother and children, but fear, hunger and pain became part of it.

We started to hear the sounds of explosions and gunfire in the nearby. We consoled ourselves, thinking that they would not reach our village. But this wish did not last long. The news reached the people of the village that human monsters had entered neighboring areas and slaughtered the old and the young alike. Since that day, they planted hatred in our hearts; they planted sectarianism. I looked at my children, saying to myself: Oh, God! Protect them! Do not let me see them slaughtered before my eyes. Frightened, we run, to our basement and stayed there for a long time with many people. We shared fear, hunger, children’s screams and the sounds of tanks, explosions and bullets. All that hatred! Why? What a hate?!! When we found out that they had brutally slaughtered an entire family -the father, the mother
and the children, fear gripped us. We remained that way for more than a month, then, they started to tighten their siege around us more and more. And thus, our village, Almanssiyah, became a military post.

The situation lasted for another three months, without food or warmth. My children cried from hunger, pain and cold. My husband could not bear to see his children like that, so he decided to leave the village by any means. For more than ten days, he looked for a safe path, to no avail. Then, we heard that the regime forces had opened a crossing for the people of the village to leave. We were happy at first, but fear lingered in our hearts, because, with our own eyes, we saw them, killing, slaughtering and burning. However, the father’s agony for his children banished the fear from his heart, and he risked his life.

Sometimes, I regret that we left Almanssiyah, because, on that day, I lost everything beautiful in my life. The truce and the opened crossing was no more than a lie and one of their plans. They set up a checkpoint and stopped us, with many other people who had been forced by fear and hunger to leave, just like us.

We got to the checkpoint, frightened. We waited in patience. What would they do to us now?! Soon, they began snootiness, arrogance and uttering words that hurt the heart and soul. Then, they took all men and young men, arrested them brutally. They mercilessly hit and cursed them. As for us, the women, they let us go. Since that day, I stand alone, with my two young children, a girl and a boy.

My son, who had not completed his seventeen years at the time, and my husband were arrested and never came back. I lost pieces of my heart. We were forced to flee.
We stayed in houses other than ours. The scenes of war, destruction and fear roaming over our chests. I became the mother and father of my two young children. Our suffering increased more and more. We were displaced again to a farther place, until we reached Lebanon. I can’t describe my agony for my little girl when she hears others saying: Dad! I almost feel the hatred that filled my heart for those who deprived her of her father. Even my son, who is hardly eleven years old, assumes responsibilities that are bigger than him and me. «Why had this happened to us?!»

S - Y
Where Is My Right?

She grew up in a modest and conservative family. She was 11 years old, a diligent student dreaming of completing her education and becoming an effective individual in the future.
She dreamed of becoming a doctor or a teacher. One day, she was shocked by her mother’s decision, “You will not go to school anymore, and you will not complete your education”. The girl felt very sad and tried to persuade her mother to let her return to school, but in vain. This was nothing but the start of girl’s problems. Sooner, the restrictions followed: Don’t go out! Don’t talk to your cousin or to anyone else! Don’t laugh in the presence of others! Be serious.

One day, to the girl’s surprise, her mother said that a man would propose to marry her. She objected strongly, but to no avail. The mother and father persuaded the girl to accept the proposal. Her grandparents opposed the marriage, because the bridegroom chosen was a relative of the mother’s. The mother sat with her daughter and convinced her of marriage, of the new house and the luxurious life to come. She said, “With your husband, you will have the life that you have not had with me”.

The girl liked the idea of the white dress and bridal veil, and began to dream of the freedom that she will live with
her husband, the freedom that she missed at her parents’. She dreamt of making her own decisions. But, after marriage, she was captured by the decisions of her husband’s parents. «Do not think of going to the park or anywhere else except for necessity,» said her father-in-law. And her mother-in-law said, «Don’t get too happy, you have no word in this house; you are just for cooking, cleaning and serving.» Moreover, whenever something was broken, or something went wrong in the house, it was the girl who was blamed for it. When the girl complained to her husband, she discovered that he was helpless. She suffered a lot to establish herself there, trying hard to please everyone, but to no avail. Although the husband loved the girl, his mother’s jealousy was stronger than his love, and troubles were made badly worsened.

The husband was confused between his parents and his wife; in a moment of anger, he divorced her. After a short time, he regretted it, but alas, it was too late. The girl’s dreams died, and she, full of disappointment, bemoaned her fate and the life she had spent in agony. Now, she asks her mother and to the whole world: where is my right?
عائدات
The heavy rain behind my window increases my sense of drowning. Now, I dive into the darkness of my room and get lost in the space of my empty home; nothing but darkness, cold, loneliness and sadness.
When I put the rope around my neck and stand on my favorite chair—the companion of my long isolation—hope breathes its last breath getting out of my chest, and without hesitation, I decide to catch up with it. Just a moment before my jump into the emptiness, my fate is caught by light knocks on the door. It must be my imagination, getting up in one last attempt to deter me from jumping. However, the knocks continue, insisting that they are real. Strange! Who do I still have in this world?! Is it possible that someone, who has slipped my mind, still knows the route of my house and my door? No, no, it must be a passer-by coming to the wrong address. The knocks stop. It seems that the knocker has realized his mistake and gone. On my second attempt to pass away, and in an incredible coincidence with my determination to push the chair, the knocks on the door return; stronger, this time. How and why now?! Does this knocker see me, or what am I about to do? Is it possible?

As I step off the chair and walk towards the door, all the people I have known in my life cross my mind. “Who is there?” No answer. I slowly open the door. I look straight forward and see nothing but gray emptiness. When my eyes look slightly downward, I see him standing there, looking upward with his calm, confident and beautiful eyes. We look at each other without saying a word. Where has this little boy come from? What does he want? I don’t remember that I have ever seen him. Suddenly, he says doubtlessly: “God loves you.” He does not add a word. He smiles, turns back and, without looking behind, disappears in the darkness and cold of winter.

I don’t understand what has happened or why. I don’t know who has been that one who has broken into the beginnings of my death. However, I come back, put the coffee pot on low heat, hang garlic bulbs on the rope that is hanging from the ceiling, drag the chair—my companion—towards the kitchen window, and sit waiting for the sunlight.
Just a Life

My life is a musical notation, where the tunes rise at a time and fall at another. Sometimes its musical lines fall because no beautiful musician has written, or no passionate composer has melodized them. Just a dry timing that is measured by pain and sorrows; its time pointers run in reverse. No one shows you the way.
No artist moves his brush against the wall of your heart, dyeing it with the vibrant colors of spring instead of the one dark color. My life... each time I restore, it collapses again. It began upon a loveless decision made by a male and a female. A decision that responded to the orders of customs, traditions and life norms, which had destroyed thousands of human minds.

In a world of instincts, and under the slogans of religion and sharia marriage, I came as a child who soon was shattered and became rubble. I came to this world overwhelmed with the banalities of life. On my first day at school, I got lost. I didn’t realize that it was a sign that my life would be a loss.

With each school stage, the levels of fanaticism and intolerance increased around me. I grew up and the specter of the so-called marriage age began to hover around me. I wanted romance, love, celebrations and a white dress. But what happened was different.

At the age of fifteen, I was in the ninth grade, and despite my refusal, I was engaged. Four months... and then the storms of the marital war began. Do you expect me to tell you about false fantasies? About novels, tales and stories such as Romeo and Juliet, Qais and Layla, Antara and Abla?! No, ladies and gentlemen; my life was different. It was dry, full of traps and endless pitfalls. What do you expect from a marriage without love or harmony?! From a monster who sees his wife only as a prey.

Nine years of wasted life, during which I gave birth to three candles who lit a part of my life and darkened others at the same time.

I was twenty-four years old and pregnant, in my fourth month, when my second life began. A divine miracle released me of my prison, which I thought to be eternal. The words “you’re divorced” were repeated three times to set me free and make me dance with joy.

As I entered the tenth month of pregnancy, the countdown to my survival began. My due date came, what the obstetrician saw made
her shiver. From behind the curtain, I heard her telling my mother that my condition was serious, and was worsening every moment.

In the hospital, I was screaming and crying out. Five hours in the normal delivery room, to no avail. My baby and I entered the danger stage. There was no choice but a cesarean delivery. The obstetrician was trying to convince my mom to do the operation when the nurse shouted, «Oh my God, a miracle is happening now!» My sweet bride, my daughter, was born. She was silent, blue and cuffed inside me.

Just three hours after our discharge from the hospital and coming home, the war erupted again between me and my ex-husband, on one side, and between me and my family, on the other. This time, the war outbroke about the fate of the newborn who had just come to this world, where the others started to decide on her life from now, each according to his or her interests; my ex-husband wanted her to stay with me, so that he would have a better chance of getting married again, while my family pressured me to give her to her father, so that I could remarry, instead of raising her and then he would take her from me when she grows up.

My mind was confused between the two choices. I thought of my mother’s words. Aware of my father’s and brothers’ mentality made me decide. If I was to keep my daughter with me, they would exercise oppression, violence and coercion on her, the same way as they had done with me. So, I submitted to the fait accompli and left her to her father’s family. A new pain began; I was already banned from seeing my three kids and now they were four. Every now and then, they would sneak and come to see me. I used to do the same at times, glancing at them outside the school, and sometimes at the mosque.

The war began, and my children left with their father and his wife. Eight years of my life had passed in terror, fear, deprivation, hunger and tears.
Then, we left Syria into Lebanon. That step brought me to the first turning point in my life; I started to work. My mother decided to return to Syria and she pressured me to return with her. I refused. My father’s threat and insistence that she should return to where he was, made her decide to return with my sister. At that point, a new phase of my life started; I started to live on my own and make my living. By time, my character grew stronger and matured; I got to know myself again, and I began to love and respect it more. Then a friend of mine, introduced me to an educative program on women’s issues. I applied and joined the program. It was the great step that turned my being upside down, transforming me from a weak, distressed female to a female trying to prove herself and her abilities. After that, I joined a theater group, I became stronger, bolder and more conscious. I participated in campaigns against early marriage and became a social activist.

Despite all the fatigue and difficulties that I have gone through, which exhausted me, wore out my heart, confused my mind, and disturbed my soul, I am still alive. I live to achieve my ambition and make my dreams come true. I hang on to the threads of hope that tomorrow will be prettier. The older you are, the more matured and experienced you become. You will wake up and sip your morning cup of coffee, sure that this life does not deserve all that sensitivity. Difficulties go and others come; laughs die, others are born; some go, others come; It is … just a life.

S - A
My Friend Muhannad

His eidolon has not and will never leave my mind for a single moment. At the beginning of the revolution, he kept postponing his conscription into military service for fear of carrying weapons. He did not want to kill or be killed. In his early youth, he was very serious and everyone sought his advice.
Then, the day came and he could no longer defer his conscription, which became a fait accompli. After the training course, he was sent, as a soldier in the rank of sergeant, to Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib.

That night, during his watch, the Free Army came, attacked the checkpoint, and took him hostage. They asked his family for money. His family paid the money they could afford. So, he was released and provided with a falsified ID card, so that he could move. However, he hid and never showed up. In 2012, his family was displaced from their house and town. They separated, his mother and father were in a place, while he was in another. After several months of displacement and deprivation, he missed his mother and father and decided to go to them. It was an unfortunate day; he was stopped by a checkpoint, where the ID card given to him by the Free Army was checked. He was arrested. Since then, we have not known anything about him.

His name is Muhannad. I am five years older than him. He is my friend, my companion, and my nephew. My grief for him will never come to an end.

Malaka Abdul Majeed Al Fahl
Jungle

I was the princess of the house ... I was the only girl among three brothers. But who knows what destiny has got for him?

Our town was, like me at that time, very small. There were no dispensary or clinics in it. When my body temperature suddenly rose, mother did not know what she should do. She carried me and rushed to the nearest town with a doctor.
The doctor gave me medicine to lower the temperature of my little body. At first, my mother relaxed and felt happy. But, after only half an hour, while I was clapping to the rhythm of a beautiful song, my mother noticed that my left hand had fallen motionless beside my body. She tried to raise and move it more than once, but my hand would fall down every time. She rushed, carrying me, to the far away hospital.

My parents were terribly shocked when they knew that my left hand was permanently paralyzed because of a medical error by an indifferent doctor.

Had my father’s tear fallen on the ground then, it would have burned it.

I grew up like that. Repeated treatment attempts managed to restore some movement to my fingertips, but my hand had no hope of returning to its normal status. I surrendered to the fait accompli, then I adapted myself to it and no longer cared.

My father fell on hard times, and our economic situation worsened. I had to work, to help him, and stand by him like my brothers. I was seventeen years old when I worked at a store for home appliances.

I dreamt of a divine miracle that would save my father from his troubles.

On a tiring day, I finished my work early. I was on the way home when my brother’s friend stopped me and offered me a ride home. I accepted because I was so tired. He was a handsome young man and I stole peeks at him, praying that he would be my match. We chatted along the way. In his looks at me, I felt a little love. He told me he would talk to me about a private matter. My heart beats increased, and I began to shiver. The words came out of my mouth in a low, almost hoarse voice, “Go ahead.”

He said that I was beautiful, and spoke about my good upbringing and morals. “Whenever I see you, I feel like you are the girl of my
dreams,” he said.

In fact, it was me who thought to be dreaming. I couldn’t respond or continue speaking. When he asked me about my silence, a tear fell from my eye. I fear such beautiful words, love or admiration. “I wish you to be my life partner,” he added. There were Moments of silence, and, immediately, I remembered the state of my arm, my deficiency, perhaps, which I thought I had forgotten forever. However, I took heart and told him that I liked him too. I told him the story of my arm and how it was paralyzed. I was talking to him with my eyes fixed on the floor, dreading a shocking painful comment, answer, or response.

To my surprise, he said: “There is no need for this fear, we are all subject to such situations.”

Oh God! Nothing else mattered now. That was enough for me to love him. Four months had passed, during which we met at my workplace. Then, one day, he came and said: “I can no longer keep away from you.” And asked me to marry him. I agreed immediately, without hesitation, though I knew that our marriage would be khatifah because he was not able economically to meet the traditional social conditions of marriage.

Never mind! I was like a little sparrow in a cage, and now the cage door was opened.

However, his family’s attitude of our marriage was frustrating. They opposed our attempts of joy and disturbed our dreams. I was standing outside when he told them about our marriage plan, and I heard their heartbreaking words.

However, they finally yielded, hoping that he would divorce me after few months. His family met my family, they made reconciliation and agreed on a dowry. That way, things were done.
My husband and I lived with his family in the same house. It was the beginning of a new journey of agony. I tried hard to do my best to please them. I got up early, worked hard at home from morning until evening, in the hope that I would win their sympathy and change their view of me. By time, this was what really happened, or, at least, I thought so.

Surprisingly and unexpectedly, my husband started to change his manners with me. I tried to understand the situation and look for the reasons behind this sudden change, but in vain. My life and dreams began to darken.

One day, he came home holding a red rose. Smiling, he approached me and presented it to me, saying: “I’m sorry.” He apologized for all the bad treatment he inflicted on me. He looked sincere and affectionate. And because my love for him was above everything else, I believed him. Then he asked me to put on my best clothes so that we could go out for dinner. I was overwhelmed with joy.

On the way, he stopped abruptly and shouted at one of the men standing in a public square: “When did you come back from your trip?”

“Who is this?” I asked him.

“A close friend,” he said and asked me for permission to step off and say hello to that man. He did so and asked my permission again to take him with us on our way to his nearby house. The man got in the car with us.

It was a rainy winter evening.

Suddenly, my husband turned off the main road and entered a path surrounded by thick trees. The place was like a lonely forest. “Why did you turn this way?” He replied that he had to relieve himself. He stopped, got off and pulled away from the car. The stranger’s hand extended to touch my neck, I screamed, rebuked him and called my husband in a strong, loud voice. He rushed back to us, took out his military pistol, but… he pointed at my head! He threatened me to keep silent. The
strange beast got off and said: “Take off her clothes, quickly!”

I resisted, screamed and begged, to no avail. They were two monsters alone with a prey in a remote jungle. I got a blow on my head that took away most of my consciousness, leaving only a few words hovering around me like a dream. “Hurry up, lay on her, photograph her. No, no! You can’t sleep with her.”

When I woke up, I found myself at my house, inside my room. Is it possible I was dreaming? What is this dream and why? But my headaches and its injury, and the pains of the rest of my organs, assured me that it was not a dream at all. My eyes fell on my husband, sitting beside me, and he answered to the questions of my eyes before my tongue.

In a dirty frightening animal voice, he said: “You have only two solutions; either you go to the court and ask for divorce, giving up all your financial rights, or I will send your pictures, in which you are sleeping with a stranger, to your family first, and to the court second, and this way you will lose your rights and your reputation forever, that is if you do not lose your life.”

He gave me one hour to choose between what he called two solutions, then he went out and locked the door.

When he came back, I spoke before he could breathe a word: “I will go to the court and ask for divorce and give up all my rights, but what about the pictures?”

“They will be deleted completely,” he said.

Frightened and out of breath, I stood in front of the judge. Suddenly, a divine power, which I have never felt, came over me. Unexpectedly, I told the judge everything that happened to me in detail. The judge was moved by my story to the point of tears. Immediately, he asked the court police to protect me, called my family and explained to them the full circumstances of the case. They believed the judge and supported me in filing a lawsuit against him.
Then, the investigation on the incident started and my husband’s monster friend was identified and they both were arrested and confessed. Two years after his imprisonment, during a court hearing, he came up to me, shackled. He cried asking me for forgiveness. He explained to me before the judge that he was not fully aware, and that he was impelled to do so by his family, who paid a sum of money to his friend as a price for his action. He regretted and said that he did not want us to divorce.

My heart softened, and the idea of forgiving him began to creep into my mind, especially when the judge told me: “You are a clean and innocent woman, and God loves forgivers.”

I looked at myself through the eyes of my ruthless community, my physical disability, the stigma of a divorced woman, the lack of laws that protect women. I waived the divorce case. Let bygones be bygones. We had four children, and I left the past behind. I don’t really know if my decision was right or wrong, all I know is that I will never forget that day and that jungle.
Like a fantasy, you waddle along an endless route; roam seeking survival in a deep sea, even though you hold the anchor; hear the adhan chanted, taking you away from yourself and dropping you into the depth of memories, to the day when you left jasmine, which was cascading from balconies in agony. I will never, never forget.
I crept at night, hugging my family, and bidding farewell to a lifetime of dreams and hopes; I crawled here, I rested here, and here I made fun and laughed without asking anyone for permission. I hid the longing with a sigh, and wiped away my tears. Here are my roots, why am I uprooted?! My homeland is violated, freedom became an irresponsible act that leads to the unknown and death. In my homeland, the jasmine was slaughtered and collapsed; fear became a companion; we feared ourselves, disagreements, divisions, wars, displacement and destruction. We wallowed silently. Woe unto us! we adored our homeland, but now it groans because of treachery, because of those who are selling it in the name of loyalty and subordination.

I gathered my scattered pieces and headed to the unknown. I got to the borders. It was an evening of horror. My children were terrified. The first face I saw was the face of one of those who came and took our safety, insulted our family and violated our house, changing it to wreckage. The one that had once been our shield.
I will never forget the agony of my children, the pain of my husband when he was insulted with the ugliest words. My eyes met his for a moment. The memories flashed on the screen of my mind as if everything is occurring now. He was surprised when he saw me. I saw him looking at my children. Then he turned his sight away in a defeated way. Oh My God! He overlooked us. When he approached us, I was frozen in horror. But, he stopped and signaled to those with him to stay away. He came back towards me walking slowly. The broken sad look in his eyes contradicted his confident steps. I was astonished by what I saw. Perhaps, I was dreaming. Is it the end now?

«Are you leaving?» He said. I couldn’t respond.

«This is the right thing to do for your family,» he added. I will never forget his words and his looks at my children. “I’m sorry; I was forced, I had no choice”, these were his last words. “Perhaps I’m asking too much, but all I want is forgiveness. Perhaps I’m asking too much, and perhaps I will never be relieved”. Then he walked away. Oh really?! He’s gone!

I turned to my children, and I was struck by pearls racing over their cheeks.

We continued our journey and reached the next borderline. There were no sympathetic looks, but rather a state of disgust, disrespect and exploitation. After a while, we arrived in a house that might provide us with safety.

As a scared light creeping into a dark room, a feeble hope started to creep into my soul. Maybe we’d spend few days here, and then go back home. Years have passed and the hope has become a pain urging us to persevere on the hope that things may change. My country’s wound is deep. Oh, the country of jasmine!
My children have grown up. They are not like those of their age; worldly life has not tempted or attracted them. Their goal is that we stay together; some of them have sacrificed their personal life and are working day and night; some are working hard to finish their learning, and would hopefully reach their ambitions. Proudly, I look at them. For them, I am like Mont Qasioun for Damascus, or even like Barada River. Maybe I am the perfume; aren’t I a Damascene jasmine tree?
Oh, Door, I Hate You

For a moment, I imagined that it was a terrifying dream or nightmare, and asked myself: Is it real? I wished it was a dream to wake up from it as quickly as possible. My cuffed hands conveyed to my infant daughter a feeling that made her cry painfully.
From the unsuitable way in which I carried her, she sensed that some terrible thing was happening, not knowing what suffering was waiting for us.

Our tragedy began in those sinister cellars, numbered doors and shattered rotten walls. It was a very large, strange, frightening place that emitted the suffocating smell of detainees’ stench wounds and rotten corpses. There were frowning and frightening faces looking at us with hatred and contempt. There were moaning sounds, and somewhere, a young man was crying and screaming at the top of his voice, “I kiss your feet, sir, kill me, and relieve me of this pain and suffering.”

There, I saw dreariness, savageness and oppression at every corner.

Handcuffed, blindfolded and almost naked men waiting for their turn of torture. They, no doubt, wished to die a thousand times. They searched us as if we were criminals, then they took us to a room. When the jailer opened its iron door, I was shocked by the large number of women inside. They were pale, sad, desperate, deprived of all human rights. Where have I seen such a scene before? I wondered. I was astonished and completely unable to understand what was going on around me. A thousand questions run through my distracted mind.

Some of them looked at us with sadness, others with compassion, and others rushed towards me like crazy, taking my daughter out of my hands. They were caught in a storm of crying mixed with words, most of which I did not understand. Seeing an infant girl, who was less than two months old, in that place, which was not suitable even as a barn, was crazy shocking.
In the middle of that dreary night, my child almost died from crying. Her voice reached the tyrants’ offices upstairs. Disturbed by her crying, one of the criminals banged on the door and screamed angrily: “Shut her up”.

A woman prisoner answered in a bleeding, broken voice, “The baby is hungry.”

They took me and my baby to another room that had cameras all around. Prison is not only four walls; it is not just a torturer or a torture chamber; it is man’s fear and horror of man.

I could no longer breastfeed my hungry child. I didn’t know what to do to her or how to feed her. I tried to silence her. How could I warm her? How could I change her wet clothes? When they made sure that I was unable to breastfeed her, they decided to take her to an orphanage. I refused this vehemently. They brought me back to the room. They agreed with old female prisoners to persuade me let her go out for fear of death. Others advised me to keep her with me. They said that she would be lost and that I would not be able to find or recognize her after my release - if I was to be released alive. A prisoner said that one of her relatives faced the same problem; she kept looking for her children in orphanages for one year after her release, to no avail. A torturer came and said: “Don’t think if you keep the baby with you, you will get out of here because of her.”

I finally made up my mind; I would not give her up no matter what the cost was. Some prisoners helped me take care of her. In the first interrogation session, I was blindfolded. Fear and horror dominated my entire body and mind, to the point that I could not answer a simple question like: “What is your name?” My answer was: “I don’t know.” The torturer was standing beside me, which I was not aware of. Unexpectedly, he hit me severely. When I would pass out, they would pour cold
water over me. «You will confess or I will keep you here for fifty years,» the interrogator said.

He did not know that I had lost my memory and senses, and that I was unaware of anything because of the terrible fear.

They returned me to the room, where I found my baby exhausted by crying. I sat on the floor, hugged her, and started to weep with her. We stayed like that for several months. We were moved through those living graveyards. Cold and illness almost killed my baby. I saw her dying before my eyes and could not do anything for her. I lost hope of saving her and started screaming and hitting the door with both hands and with what had remained of my strength. They attacked like beasts and took me down to underground cells with black and numbered doors. The cells were attached to each other, like the jaw teeth of a large monster. Behind each fang, there was a scary story. They pushed me in and closed the bloody black door. I could see nothing around me but ghosts of death. My baby got tired of crying, and I got tired of standing for long hours. A jailer came and threw blankets to us. I did not know that those blankets were full of harmful and poisonous insects. We covered ourselves with them because of the severe cold. They smelled stench, which made me worried about my daughter. I put my hand on her face and, suddenly, an insect stung me. I felt pain, but could not see anything in the darkness, which blinded me. I heard people laughing loudly somewhere. I
knocked hard on the door and screamed, “Get us out of here.” They approached the cell and started laughing. I begged them to get me out of that place. “When you repent and stop making troubles in the room, we will return you up,” said one of them. I did not know night from day, nor did I know how much time we had spent in that cell. When my daughter’s condition worsened and I had a skin disease, they decided to get me out.

My daughter’s crying, which increased day after day, and her constant screaming, made them decide to take her soon to the orphanage. Suddenly, they knocked on the door, entered and surrounded me from all sides. The older prisoners had agreed with the jailers against me... It is enough for me that I resisted as much as I could.

N - H
A War that Came to Us

People may realize the value of the blessings they have only after losing them. Here we are; we have lost everything, our homes, our possessions, and our dearest beloved people.
Longing almost bursts inside us; longing for our land and home, which were our paradise on earth, our security and safety that have gone away and like a dream, we have been driven away from everything we used to cherish. We have never wanted to leave, we resisted and endured unbearable pain, hunger, oppression, fear and humiliation.

We fled our country with tears filling our eyes, hoping that one day we would return. It was extremely difficulty to arrive in Lebanon, the only refuge for us, but we found safety after all that suffering. We started a new life trying to live in dignity without asking anyone for our living. But, we began to face difficulties when trying to find a job, because Syrians were denied employment. If only they realize that we are war refugees, and were we able to return to our homes, we would have return.

Despite my suffering, I am very happy that I go to education centers, where I learn new things that I could not learn owing to the conditions of war in my country. I am learning English, which has become essential in life. No matter how severe the difficulties we face are, we will overcome them to build a bright future.

H - B
She left me there alone, terrified in the darkness, hovering like a lost astronaut in that sticky liquid. I wasn't able to forgive yet, she deserted me for seven whole minutes.

Seven Minutes
In my mother’s womb, I listened to the compliments, kisses, and blessings that welcomed her coming to life and fell on her like heavy rain on the other side of the world.

Those were the longest seven minutes in my life. Minutes that finally determined the one who would be my mother’s cherished and favorite firstborn.

I started to race her in doing everything, even if it cost me not to complete my favorite cartoon.

When we had measles, I didn’t imagine that the disease would put an end to her life. It never occurred to me that my jealousy of her would make me wish to lose her, for she was like a torch that lighted our home and our entire lives. We all were cured of that repulsive disease, except for my sister, Hanan. I have not forgotten, and will never forget that day when my father carried her, wrapped in her white wool blanket, and put her in a small wooden box that concealed her wheaten-colored face which shined like a grain of wheat under the sun. Hanan had deserted me again.
I bought a turquoise sweater and hid it at my sister in order for Munib to wear it when he is released. I thought of hiding his ID card, so that he would not leave the house, but he stopped leaving it in the drawer. He started to hold it all the time wherever he went.
“Wake me up; I have to go to work early.” “But, I want you to finish your schooling.” “I will work in the summer and continue my schooling when the school opens.”
“Don’t go out! I don’t know why I’m worried about you!”
“Mama! It won’t be long, the work takes few hours only. Just make me a delicious meal for lunch.”
Banan is his little sister:
“Wait a thecond! Don’t you want to take thith with you?”
“What’s this?” “A pieth of paper; I thee you taking it with you!” “Yes, yes. It is my ID card. It fell from me! Give me a kiss; good of you to bring it.” In the afternoon, I heard the shop’s roll up door being closed. My husband’s shop was in the house. “What happened?” “I saw the police coming from afar, so I closed and came in.”
“Let’s have lunch, then. Don’t wait for Munib, he will eat when he comes back
from work. He asked me to cook him a meal that he likes very much.”

The door was knocked on hard. “Who are you? What do you want?” “Security. We ran out of gasoline. Come out and pull us some from your car. We will search the house. You, come here! How old are you? Why is your shoulder plastered? “I am 13 years old, sir, my shoulder is broken.” “Broken or you were injured during a demonstration?”

“No, I swear, it’s broken. If you do not believe me, you can remove the plaster.”

“Okay, okay. You, hurry up, bring the gas and let’s go.”

When they left, my husband waited for a while, and then:

“I will see if they have left the place.” He returned afraid and worried:

“They left our house and entered my brother’s. They arrested Munib and Amin, my nephew.”

“What? They took Amin?!! How did his mother let them take him?!! How could she let them take her son?! If I were her, I would burn them before allowing them touch a hair of my son.”

“You do not understand what I am telling you. They took Munib... and Amin.

“Yes, yes, I got you. The police took Amin, and I say, how could his mother allow them take him!??”

“They took your son Muniiiiiiiiiiiiiiib with him.”

My mind heard Amin’s name only. It seems that it refused to hear Munib’s name. When it was forced to hear it, I passed out. Munib was returning home and saw the police in our house. He went to hide at his uncle’s house. But when the police left our house,
they raided his uncle’s house. They arrested them. They tied them outside our house for five minutes, but we did not know, and then they took them away.

One, two, three months passed and no news about them. My tears dried up, my heart wore out, and life became meaningless and empty. I did not realize night from day anymore. Whenever I laid my head on the pillow, I felt pain. How would I sleep or rest, without knowing where Munib is? Without knowing if he is alive or dead? Oh, my God! I am losing my children, one after the other.

We heard the sound of fire exchange in the nearby. “They are attacking the Four Seasons checkpoint,” someone said. We knew that Munib and Amin were handed over to this checkpoint, which transferred them to the Air Forces Intelligence Branch. Without hesitation, I picked up a knife and rushed out. My husband stopped me and forced me to return home:

“Are you crazy? Where are you going?”
“I want to go to the checkpoint and kill the officer who handed Munib over.”

I started crying and screaming.

After a short period of time, our area was bombarded. All my siblings were displaced; I remained alone. Then, we were besieged. I would visit their empty houses. Whenever I opened a door of theirs, I would search for them in the rooms and bring their things out. I took my older sister’s shawl and smelled it; her smell was still on it. Oh God! If only they would return for a moment to see them.

A year and four months had passed. The telephone rang:

“Hello...yes...what?! Really! When?”
“What’s the matter?!” “Your son, Munib, was transferred from the Air Forces Intelligence Branch to Adra prison. Tomorrow, my sister and your sister will visit him.”
“He is still alive, then? Are you serious? And me! I want to see my son.”

How could I go and see my son?! We were besieged. Next day, his paternal and maternal aunts visited him. Munib had been in Adra Prison for two months, but could not communicate with anyone because he did not know any telephone number to call. Then he asked someone whether he knew any one of our family in prison.

“Yes, there’s one in the second dormitory whose family name is the same as yours. I will see if he has any telephone number.”

“There is someone whose family name is the same as yours, his name is Munib. Do you know him?”

“Yes, I know him!”

“Good, do you have the telephone number of any of his family?”

The man returned to my son and gave him the telephone number that the man had given him. When Munib knew the name of the prisoner in the second dormitory, he said:

“He is my uncle! Please tell him that I am his nephew.”

“In fact, your uncle is very sick, they tortured him with electricity for that he is sick, and sometimes he gets confused.”

My son called the number. It was the number of a relative of us. Next day, they visited him. When they came back, they called me, and calmed me. They said that they had given him my number, and he would call me, when he could.

Next day, at night, a strange number called me. I was happy because I was waiting to hear his voice, to feel his breath, to make sure that he is still alive. A year and a half had passed without seeing him. Finally:

“Hello, hello, who is speaking?”

“It’s Munib, mama, how are you? And how are my siblings?”
I started screaming. “Why are you manipulating with me? You are not my son, Munib. This is not my son’s voice. Who are you?!”
“I’m Munib, mama, I swear. What happened? Have you forgotten me?”
“No, liar, you are not Munib. This is not his voice. You’re doing this to drive me insane.”
The call ended and my soul ended with it. A week passed, I was depressed. My sister called and told me that she had visited him. She said, he was fine, but sad because I had not known him! She told me that his voice had changed because he had grown up. After her words, I relaxed and felt better. Next day, I slept well, but when I woke up, I said to my husband:
“You will die.”
“Why?!”
“I saw your father in my dream, he kissed me and took a dear thing from me.”
Next day, at dawn, the telephone rang. My husband picked up the handset, listened for moments and, suddenly, he started to shout:
“No, unbelievable, it cannot be true!”
“What’s the matter?”
“They’re telling me that my brother has passed away in prison.” The jailers were taking a group of prisoners to the breathing yard of Adra Prison, when a mortar shell landed and killed them. My husband’s brother was one of them. Had he died before giving the telephone number to my son, Munib, he would have been unable to call anyone, and we would not know anything about him.
When Munib was released, we were still under siege. He went to his aunt’s
home and called us. I felt that I was talking to someone else. He, suddenly, grew up, his voice changed and became coarse. Two years, what else has changed in him?

I was ready to scratch the sky to escape the bloody siege, not only because we knew nothing about our fate, or because we suffered from hunger, fear and lack basics of life. In fact, all that mattered to me was to see Munib.

I started to trouble my husband to find me a way out of the siege. There was no way. The only one was to give my little children sleeping pills, so that they would not cough or make any sound that might draw the guards’ attention. Then, I would tie them on my back, and creep on my stomach for a long distance. My husband refused this solution. After a while, he, suddenly, dashed in, saying:

“Get ready with the children; you will leave through Al-Moadamiyeh tomorrow, with the Red Cross.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll join you later. Now, everyone who is under forty is not allowed to leave.”

Next day, after so much suffering and torment, we crossed the berm. Security forces filled the place and humiliated everyone who passed before letting him or her get on the bus. They stopped my little son at the crossing:

“You! You stood at the frontline and shot us, didn’t you?”

“Me?! No, sir, I swear. I cannot carry a gun yet.”

“Get the fuck outta here! Get on the bus.”

We moved on. Suddenly, a broadcaster from Al-Dunya TV approached me, accompanied by shabiha who stopped me, putting the gun on my head:

“She asks you and you answer. Do you
understand?”

I had no choice; either I lie or die. I would not know what could happen to my children then! I had to be strong and escape the siege. I had to rescue my children and see Munib. That was all my worry. Without hesitation, I said:

“Yes, I will say whatever you want.”

“You saw the terrorists who displaced you, destroyed your homes and killed you, didn’t you?” My tongue dried out in my mouth. I looked at the broadcaster, but inside, I was laughing, crying and remembering; who were the terrorists who had done that? My son, my brother, my husband, my people, my relatives?! The misfortunate people?! Before answering, an elderly woman passed by on the stretcher, and the cameraman shifted the camera to her.

“Shoot here! Shoot here! This is a more important event.”

I took the chance, and run away with my children to the bus. The buses set off.

The first checkpoint which stopped us was the Air Forces Intelligence Branch. Soldiers got on the bus and started to take the young men. They took my little son again. He was carrying his sister. He gave her to me and said:

“Mama, I did not want to leave, you forced me, and now you hand me over to them.”

Oh, my God! His words stabbed me like knives; they pierced my soul.

“Sir, he is a mere little boy. He hasn’t done anything. Where are you taking him?!”

“I will return him to you, don’t worry.”

I got off the bus and followed him. I saw young men, children, being interrogated. I wept.

“They haven’t done anything, I swear. We lived with the terrorists against our will. And now, here we are, with you to protect us.”
Red Cross vehicles arrived. The Red Cross men talked to the checkpoint officers and they released the children, letting them to get on the buses. We were taken to shelters. When I left the shelter, I called my sister to see my son Munib. “Munib! He traveled to Lebanon, today. If you had called a little earlier, you would have seen him.”

I stayed at my sister’s for fifteen days until our papers, extracts of our civil records, passports and other official papers were issued. Then, I traveled to Lebanon to see Munib.

With my little children, I arrived at the address which my sisters had given to me. I saw the people, but “Where is Munib? I don’t see him!” I greeted them. Happily, they embraced me because we had safely arrived. My eyes kept looking for him.

“Where’s Munib?”

“Munib is at home. Don’t worry. We would like to surprise him.”

“Well, where’s the home? Is it far?”

“The house is in this building, on the third floor.”

Unconsciously I ran to the third floor, where I found an apartment with an open door. There, I saw a young man standing and smiling at me. He was wearing a turquoise sweater.

W - H