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The Work of the Witness

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IN THE mornings, as others stumble toward their coffee, I wake and gather news of the dead. First, I check WhatsApp, where, on the best days, I will receive a picture of bread—my family has eaten today. On the worst days, I learn of relatives starving, sick, or killed. Next, I turn with loathing to social media. Too weary, anymore, to brace myself, I compel my thumbs to scroll (could there be a more banal verb for this, the perusing of atrocities?). Horror follows abomination follows tragedy, a gliding series of symmetrical tiles, each one smaller than my hand.

Watch, I tell myself. I see what must have been a building, though all that remains is a smoking hill of sharp debris. *Watch*, I tell myself, as thin men in sandaled feet rush into the frame. They begin pawing at the slabs of cement, rebar, brick. Shouts ricochet. The camera moves closer. My ears begin to ring. I long to click away. *Watch. These are your people.* I force my eyes to stay.

Bear witness. This, an admonition often repeated through these killing weeks. *Bear witness*, a cry against the fierce, orchestrated attempts to deny the devastation wrought in Gaza and the West Bank. *Bear witness*, we tell ourselves as helplessness threatens to engulf us on our far end of the telescope. *Bear witness*, we say, yet three months into a livestreamed genocide, we must ask—what does all this looking do?

Gazans have indeed sought our eyes and attention amid these days of peril. Defying Israel's targeting of journalists and their

families—which has made this the most dangerous conflict for journalists on record—Palestinians have risked everything to document and share. From the first hours of the carnage, they have rushed toward bombed-out buildings, swinging cameras to capture arriving doom. An immediate, reflexive instinct: to record, expose. As if the scale of violence had shocked even siege-worn Gazans into thinking, *This time, surely, Israel has gone too far. Surely this cannot stand . . .*

And so, mere meters from strike sites, their hands still shaking from terror, these survivor-creators have broadcast the unmaking of their world. Their dispatches are an act of resistance, transmitting truths systematically excised from legacy media. From the start, Israel has forbidden all outside journalists from entering Gaza, save for the few reporters they escort on orchestrated tours. These journalists are prohibited from speaking to Palestinians while on the ground, and are required to submit their reports to the Israeli military for approval before publishing.

Chillingly, many of the young, now-famous faces of this living archive—people we presume to call by their first names, Bisan, Plestia, Motaz—have focused on creating content in English. In this, they have made clear that these images are not simply intended to capture their intimate experience, but to move the unseen audiences of the West.

And at first—when we in the West were not yet accustomed to the bombing and siege of hospitals, still unfamiliar with the ashy pall of dead children’s cheeks—this footage pulsed with moral urgency. Back then—in the recent, unreachable past—it was possible to think that acts so egregious would condemn themselves. Even Israel initially nodded to the idea of red lines, sprinkling flimsy denials over still-smoldering debris—*we didn’t strike a hospital, we only kill terrorists, we aren’t using white phosphorus . . .* But soon even the thinnest pretense was dropped. *Let them watch*, the regime seems to say, disseminating its own footage of razed neighborhoods, Palestinians blindfolded and stripped. It has proved to itself that the red line does not exist.

It is gutting to watch this realization dawn on Gazans’ faces, too. Across grinding weeks of slaughter—throughout which the US has denied Palestinian casualties while vetoing international

ceasefire resolutions—Western-facing reporters have grown more anguished, and angry. They confront a world in which their genocide garners millions of witnesses, and yet continues apace. “I shared enough and God knows it was for him and my country,” wrote Motaz Azaiza on social media in early December. “Our situation is tragic far further than you can imagine!” His words were both indictment and lament: “Remember that we are not content to be shared, we are a nation that is getting killed . . . how alone we are!”

Bisan Owda’s daily dispatches are a time lapse of a young woman pushed from shock and sorrow toward a shattered rage. For weeks, her posts have been a testament to her past life as a *hakawati*, storyteller—eloquent and moving reports, often edited with text. But by December 28, she appears on screen with a thinned face, her brown eyes smoldering. “Now I’m really questioning, until when? I mean we’ve recorded all kinds of massacres, against hospitals, schools, civilians, in the streets, in the shelters, everywhere . . . and nothing has changed . . . I mean we’ve recorded everything, we’ve shown you things you’ve never seen in Hollywood. We’ve recorded them. And nothing has changed.”

The dilemma of the diasporic Palestinian: In exile, we are forced to witness Palestine from a distance, and yet remain intimately bound to the events unfolding there. We straddle multiple vectors of power and oppression, and struggle with how best to respond to the murder of our kin. I feel the sting of Owda’s words, the moral implications of my position as a tax-paying US citizen. Yet, as a Palestinian with roots in Gaza, I have wrestled with my own questions of disclosure. I, too, know the impulse to publicize my family’s tragedy, to demand witness of others.

In the first week, I considered posting a picture of my father as a six-year-old refugee in Gaza. This, my small contribution to a discourse which seeks to make our humanity legible, and thus worthy of mercy. But I hesitated, unwilling to instrumentalize my father’s innocence. All my life, I have watched our beauty and worth precluded as a matter of course. What did I hope to gain, by exposing his sweet, young face to the world?

In an organizing meeting I attended shortly after, we debated the merits of sharing the worst images of violence, the most horrific videos. The broad consensus in the room was that the visuals of dismembered and crushed children would be what moved the Western world to act. I raised my voice in doubt, groping for language to articulate what gives me pause. No, I do not believe this genocide should be sanitized. In fact, I want to shatter Western innocence. I want to detonate their delusions of morality, incriminate their alibis of *self-defense*. It is responsible and right to engage and amplify these images; there is no sensitivity worth protecting at the expense of the murderous truth.

And yet, and yet. Our bodies are so precious. They grow more precious every murderous day. I feel protective, wary of the mass dissemination of our grief. A growing conviction that such images should be in some sense earned, reciprocated with gestures of committed action—or what is this looking for? A common poster slogan at protests: YOU CAN'T SAY YOU DIDN'T KNOW. We are saturated with this knowing now. If we never saw another photograph, our purpose would still be clear. This week's photographed corpses should have been saved by last week's ceasefire; the same will be said every week until this evil ends.

Ultimately, I posted the photo of my father, his face redacted. Not an appeal to, but an interrogation of, would-be witnesses, an attempt to turn the gaze back onto the spectator. What does it feel like to encounter even this small disruption in access to us? If it triggers surprise or frustration, what does that say of the viewer's expectation, their intent? Is compassion for this boy conditioned on the legibility of his face?

Sometimes, it is an act of power to withhold, to refuse to show. "They can't see us," I have often said, speaking of the masters of the West. What I mean is, "If they could see us, the current world order would collapse." This is true of so many bodies upon whom oppressive, extractive power rests. Their un-humaning is inherent, a prerequisite to these systems' continuance. Our invisibility is not a matter of lacking images, but of a social-political vision in which true witness is precluded.

This is why legibility fails.

Witness, in the English, usually carries connotations of criminal court. A witness is one who speaks to the veracity of an alleged event. Perhaps the motivations of Gazan reporters, at this later point in the genocide, might be read more through this frame. Despite their professed feelings of futility, Owda and Azaiza, along with others like Wael Dahdouh, continue to document Gaza's deepening catastrophe. At great risk to themselves, they provide us with the evidence of criminal cruelty, bankrolled by the West. One hopes the day will come when this proof is used in trial.

Yet I have been pondering not the English, prosecutorial *witness*, but the Arabic. In this, our language, the verb *to witness* comes from the root شهاد. This is also the source of the much-maligned word شهيد, *shaheed*, which means, literally, *witnesser*, but is often translated as *martyr*. It is a word with many folds of meaning and history. It carries connotations not only of seeing, but of presence and proximity. To be a witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch.

Shaheed is the word Palestinians use to describe those lost to Israeli violence, a word which has drawn condemnation from American universities and press, who once again presume to know the meaning of Arabic-rooted terms, without bothering to investigate. They allege the word *martyr* glorifies death for death's sake. But in this context, it should be read as honoring the truth these brutalized bodies speak. Their flesh, marked by colonial violence, makes visible the wild injustice they endured. Which is to say, their martyrdom tells us the truth about our world.

In the strange, pseudo-intimacy of social media, the most revelatory moments are the least scripted. And they are certainly not expressed in English, however impeccable. In an Instagram Live on December 5, I watched Owda weep as she spoke candidly, in Arabic, of her exhaustion and fear. Some bilingual viewers translated her words into English in the chat. Other viewers, responding to the English, flooded the comments with praise for her heroic strength. But when Palestinian journalist Faten

Elwan joined her stream, she offered not encouragement, but comfort. *Don't be brave*, she urged, also in Arabic, her voice trembling with emotion of her own. *Don't be strong. Bisan, don't be anything. Just be yourself.*

Herself. What of that self do we, her distant followers, know? And how much of it will survive? Owda's tears bear witness to the world behind her weeping. Only she knows, exactly, what she mourns. But her sorrow, like every Palestinian's, points to the deep violation that is war. Contrary to the myopic depictions in Western media, grief is not our natural state. We must recognize that Gaza is a vastness of which this slaughter, and our glimpses of it, are only the barest piece.

تَعْبَنَا, تَعْبَنَا, I hear over and over again, when watching Gaza in Arabic. It could be rendered in English as simply *we are tired, we are tired*, but a more accurate translation would be *we have come to the limits of ourselves, we are empty, exhaustion consumes us.* تَعْبَنَا, تَعْبَنَا, Gazans repeat, speaking in plural even when interviewed alone. As miraculous as Palestinian *sumud* may be, it is not limitless. Our endurance should be a means, not an end. What Gaza longs for—deserves—is justice, liberation, and life.

My relatives, like Owda, have expressed both *sumud* and lament. Like Refaat al-Areer's prescient poem, in which he foresaw and reclaimed his likely coming death, my own relatives have sent missives of how, should they die (God forbid), they want their stories told. From my twenty-five-year-old cousin Nabil: "We are still here. We are in the evacuation zones. We do not know where to go. All the places are crowded and epidemics are spreading . . . If we don't meet, write about me. I loved life, I loved the field of pharmacy, and writing, and I was a peaceful, dreamy person."

Standing with one foot inside the horror, witness is never abstract. For all my misgivings about legibility, I honor the wishes of those living on the land, beneath the bombs. I am asked to hold eulogies on standby. I am asked to tell their stories. And whether or not I pick up my phone, I can never truly look away. Every Palestinian can attest: Each day of continued genocide is

an irrevocable mark on the soul. Each dropped bomb takes part of us, even when our flesh is spared.

As long as Palestinians are alive to record and share their suffering, the duty and dilemma of witness will remain. As we look, we must be aware that our outpouring of emotion has its limits, and its own dynamics of power. Grief and anger are appropriate, but we must take care not to veer into solipsism, erasing the primary pain by supplanting it with our own. As the Mojave poet Natalie Diaz has observed, empathy is "seeing or hearing about something that's happened to someone and . . . imagin[ing] how I would feel if it happened to me. It has nothing to do with them." Or, put more succinctly by Solmaz Sharif: "Empathy means / laying yourself down / in someone else's chalk lines / and snapping a photo."

Rather, we—those outside of Palestine, watching events through a screen—ought to think of ourselves in relation to the legacy of the shaheed. Our work as witnesses is to be marked; we should not leave it unscathed. We must make an effort to stay with what we see, allowing ourselves to be cut. This wound is essential. Into this wound, imagination may pour—not to invade the other's subjectivity, but to awaken awe at the depth, privacy, and singularity of each life. There, we might glimpse, if sidelong, how much of Gaza's suffering we will never know. This is where real witness must begin: in mystery.

Perhaps the fundamental work of witness is the act of faith—an ethical and imaginative leap beyond what we can see. It is a sober reverence of, and a commitment to fight for, the always-unknowable other. This commitment does not require constant stoking by grisly, tragic reports. Rather than a feeling, witness is a position. It insists on embodiment, on sacrifice, mourning and resisting what is seen. The world after genocide must not, cannot, be the same. The witness is the one who holds the line of reality, identifying and refusing the lie of normalcy. Broken by what we see, we become rupture incarnate.

Or, much better expressed in the words of my cousin, the pharmacist,

ما زلت مصراً نحن لم نعتد القصف ونخاف من كل حدث ولم نعتد مشاهد المعاناة ، ان القلب دائماً ما ينفطر ولم نعتد المجازر الذي يرتكبها الاحتلال فلكل شهيد حياة

I continue to insist, we have not gotten used to bombing and we are afraid of everything happening to us. We have not gotten used to the sight of suffering. No, it always breaks our hearts. We have not gotten used to the massacres perpetrated by the occupation. No. For every martyr, there was a life.