

Reflections on Displacement, in Three Parts

Author(s): Menna Saber Abo Salem

Email: [menna.421070939@gmail.com](mailto:menna.421070939@gmail.com)

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Through a series of three dispatches, Menna Saber Abo Salem recounts her experiences as a university student navigating ongoing displacement. The series traces practices of resilience that have emerged for her in this ongoing crisis, through interwoven vignettes, poetry and photographs. The work meditates on the university as a dual form of shelter, as both physical sanctuary in crisis and symbolic locus of writerly production as resistance.

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# Reflections on Displacement, in Three Parts

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Menna Saber Abo Salem

## Part I

### My University Welcomed Me as a Soul Torn by War, Not a Student



*Al-Aqsa University, Gaza. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

To those sipping morning coffee in peace – good morning. But to my people, I simply hope you're okay. You, who watches us in silence... let me share a glimpse of what I've lived. Perhaps I'll stir something within you.

After the temporary ceasefire ended – one that lasted no more than seven days – things began to escalate. Shrapnel scattered everywhere. I would wake up in panic, wondering: Are we still alive? I packed a few bags, fearing we'd have to flee and leave our house behind. Day by day, things became increasingly difficult. The military vehicles moved closer, bullets flew through the air, the sound of screaming growing louder. My father came rushing in, shouting: "Hurry! There's just one street between us and them!"

I still don't know how we managed to flee so quickly – just before they shut the door of the shelter, only an alleyway away from our home. We stood on the sidewalk, raindrops gently touching our exhausted faces. There was no space left for us in that shelter. Night

began to fall, and the winds howled and grew fierce. Suddenly, our neighbour called out: “I found a classroom for the whole neighborhood – come quickly! It’s getting dark, and the rain has started to pour!”

We ran as fast as we could and squeezed into a tiny classroom, now holding more than thirty children and forty women. We spent nearly a week there – in fear, hunger, and thirst. Families were separated, scattered across different shelters.

The situation worsened.

The tanks came closer, and we had to move again – this time to a shelter miles away from home.

This is how I ended up living in my university. It was surreal. Was I really stepping into my university not as a student, but as a displaced person?

For almost twenty five days, I lived in exile – sheltered in the university library. I crossed its gates, running from terror and death. Within its walls, I lived moments so heavy they erased my past identity here, as a student.

We endured a severe water shortage, drinking salty water just to stay alive. My sister couldn’t bear to drink it, and for twelve long days she lived without water. We stood in long lines just to use the bathroom. We would steal rare moments just to shower, in conditions barely meeting the simplest standards of hygiene.

Seven of us shared a cramped room, one we didn’t leave unless it was absolutely necessary, too afraid of what was unfolding outside. I couldn’t even make a phone call – the infrastructure and communication networks were completely destroyed.



*A moment of hope. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

One day, I was wandering with my little sister when she spontaneously snapped a photo of a rainbow after a heavy rainstorm – a moment that sparked a flicker of hope inside me. I watched the rain falling, and remembered how I used to run beneath it with my friends Alaa and Rewaa.



*The moon, taken from a university balcony. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

I loved to gaze at the moon, escaping each night to a balcony, staring at it for hours. I'd imagine the distance between myself and the moon – wondering if it was the same as the distance between me and my home. I'd take a few photos, then return to our room, still without any answers to my repeating questions.

Cut off from the world, we were disconnected from everything. Our relatives and friends began to believe we were no longer alive.

But we made some new friends. We would sit together, talking about past days; how I used to rush to catch my lectures, where I would sit with my friends.

After Maghrib prayer, we would sit with Uncle Abu Muhammad 'Al-Hankalulu' – a word only he understood – and turn up the radio, sipping cups of coffee together and hoping the war would end so he could reunite with his family, who were displaced to the south. Stranded with us in the north, night after night, he gazed at their photos – holding onto each face as if it were a lifeline – whispering quiet prayers for reunion, for the day warmth will return to his world.

We'd share plates; I gave him a dish of *manakish*, seasoned with hope and love. He returned it to me, with a book, saying: "It's a Gazan tradition not to return plates empty." We laughed, and I accepted his gift.

We used to bake bread right in our room. Once, my uncle stumbled upon a pack of cheese by chance, priced at no more than fifteen shekels; when my sister and I asked about it earlier in the university yard, it cost over fifty. From the cheese, we crafted the most delicious *manakish*, topped with cheese, thyme, and red pepper. Oh, how many times we made those *manakish* there – each bite mixed with longing and homesickness.

One day, my mother baked a cake – a rare moment of celebration amid a backdrop of exhaustion. The girls were thrilled, waiting all day with glowing eyes and empty stomachs. The cake cost us a lot – not just money, but energy, hope, and longing. But we needed something, anything, to feel human again.



*Baking the cake. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

The cake was burnt in the middle. Yet the girls' happiness was undimmed. Burnt or not, it was our first cake in over eight months of hardship, my dear. We found a forgotten jar of jam, and sprinkled raisins and coconut flakes on top. Somehow, it looked beautiful – the charred centre hidden beneath layers of colour and sweetness.

It reminded me of us – scorched inside, but with just enough decoration to appear fine. A fake smile masking the ruins within: damaged, but dressed up for the world.



*A view from displacement. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

After twenty five days of displacement we returned home, carrying new memories, and fresh farewells, particularly to dear Uncle Abu Muhammad. We parted with a hopeful promise: one day, we'll sit again beneath a quiet sky, sipping coffee, letting laughter rise, unafraid. We dream of that – of one more cup of coffee with Uncle Abu Muhammad and his family.

This story is only a fragment of our displacement,  
a chapter written within the walls of my university.

The story isn't over yet, but...

I fear my words are too many, and the space too small  
to contain this pain...

I wish I could tell you more,  
Pour my heart out – word by word, tear by tear...

but what use are words  
in a world that no longer listens?

You might wonder, as your quiet eyes trace these lines:  
“Is this the end of the story?”

No, my dear... it’s not.

The story still beats inside me.

There are wounds no word can touch.

There are chapters buried deep in my chest,  
screams that never made it out,  
tears that dried before they could fall.

I write, fearing that my words are fading into hearts made of stone,  
into a world blind to sorrow, deaf to justice.

A world that sees injustice and applauds,  
sees truth and questions it,  
sees hearts shatter...

and smiles as if nothing happened.

Is there still someone out there, who embraces truth without ridicule?

Tell me... before I go on.

To everyone who’s enjoyed a peaceful cup of coffee, unaware  
of the planes tearing down what we’ve built, I ask you:

listen.

Truly listen to my words.

Maybe then,

you’ll begin to see the world with different eyes.

Maybe then,

you’ll finally wake up.

## Part II

### The Wall That Spoke Poison: Between Bullets and Words on the Wall, from Draft to Displacement



*The pillar, and the wall. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

Once again, we have had to pack the bags of exile, parting with our kin through tears, trying to piece together our scattered selves in displacement.

I sit on a chair facing the mulberry and jujube trees, a tender breeze caresses my face, easing the summer's blaze and lightening my weariness. My little sister draws a home on one of the pillars of the house where we are sheltering, but on the opposite wall I read these words: "This terrorist's house will be replaced with E.J. Safra Synagogue SOON".





*Drawing the dream house. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

Inside, preparing the first draft of this reflection, leafing through the dictionary for words that might capture my emotions, bullets of the quadcopter would not stop whizzing past my head. I stepped back from the house's window and continued writing, pouring my thoughts onto the page, setting them free in hopes of lightening the burden on my chest.

Suddenly, the thunder of artillery came, the skies tearing open as planes rained down missiles in unimaginable madness. It felt as though the flames of war had been rekindled, determined to rob me once more of all I hold dear. The memories came flooding back, swirling in my head, eating me alive. I don't want to run again – into the unknown, to a fate I can't see coming.

When they wrote those words on the walls of this house, we were fleeing from one displacement to another, escaping flying shrapnel, chasing bullets, and missiles pouring down like rain upon our heads. Perhaps they wrote those words as they also tore down my home in Jabalia, while I was running from death, while I was trying to survive.

The same question haunts me each time my eyes fall upon their message on the pillar wall: why did they name us terrorists?

Could my younger sister's drawing of her dream house suggest such a thing? I remember the drawing wasn't even there when they wrote their poisonous words.

What do they really mean by terrorism?

And what did they see in an abandoned house, empty for years with nothing inside but two beds and a closet?

What made them write such things?

### Part III

## War and Art, A Lost Childhood, About My Little Sister

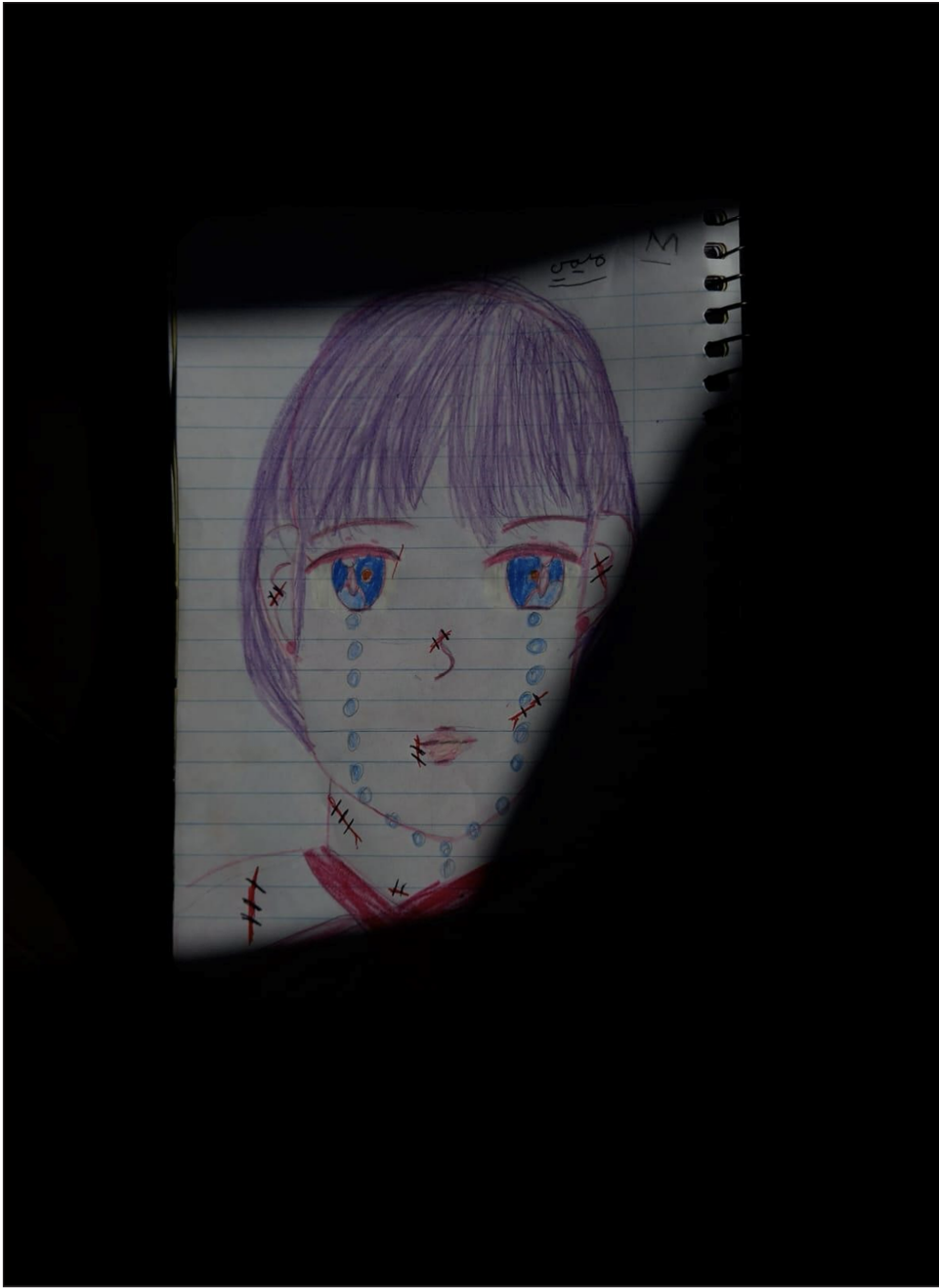


*The bracelet. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

I'm washing dishes and bowls, complaining about the cleaning fluid for the dishes, and wondering if it's nothing more than water and dye, washing them again and again to no avail.

My younger sister comes carrying a bracelet in her hand, which she made. Its pink beads are similar to the colour of our scattered remains, and the red ones, the color of our waterfall of blood, our non-stop bleeding; this is what my younger sister, only thirteen years old, tells me.

What's going on inside her brain? She's supposed to be a child! I was shocked by her words. But in fact, this did come from the mind of a child. She assumed what she was saying did not go beyond the morning line, or the breakfast sandwich inside her lunchbox.



*A portrait of Mimi. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

My sister draws characters inspired by her ideas, and creates stories that express each character. The newest character is Sally, and the oldest is Mimi. Mimi is a girl who lost her home and family during the war. She was displaced many times, from one alley to another, and from one shelter to another. She sustained injuries several times, both minor and moderate, until her last injuries, deep wounds, led to her martyrdom.

Once, my sister drew mountains and trees on the wall of the house we currently live in – not our house, as we lost our house during the war. I later discovered that deep down, she believed that this scene was part of heaven, perhaps peace from her perspective.



*The mountain mural. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

“What do you see on the far horizon? Tell me what stirs in your imagination.”

“I see towering mountains, and fierce rocks standing against the sea’s waves. I glimpse lush trees, mastering the art of defying seasons – befriending the wind, resisting to survive. A clear sky reveals itself, arms open wide to the migrating birds, welcoming them with love. If only the sky would open its gates for me – to hold me, to set me free from this hell.”

My younger sister, with her small heart and big dreams, her simple colors; she tried to turn ugliness into beauty, on the worn-out walls. I am amazed by her thoughts, and what is inside her head. She sends some pain inside me, mixed with some hope. She sends inspiration inside my chest, and draws a smile on my face.

## Biography

**Menna Saber Abo Salem** is a fourth-year student of English Language and Teaching Methods at Al-Aqsa University. She is 20 years old. In her own words, "This genocide produced writers... I am telling the world, and writing the stories of my people and *my* story." Menna loves writing in both English and Arabic, as well as translating between the two languages. She writes many short texts you may find published on her Instagram page. Menna is interested in voice-over presentations. Her latest work is titled *I Roam the Streets and Collect Street Sayings*, in which Menna narrates street sayings in colloquial Arabic, alongside their English translations.

You can find this, and more audio pieces by Menna available to listen to, at:

[soundcloud.com/minna-abo-salem](https://soundcloud.com/minna-abo-salem)

Menna's short-form writings and poems can be found on her instagram page, at:

[@mennasaber.as](https://www.instagram.com/mennasaber.as)