

Through Some Trials to Live, a Gazan Survival

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'Through Some Trials to Live, a Gazan Survival' documents the author's experience of completing her undergraduate degree in the midst of the war on Gaza. This extended, creative essay provides an in-depth account of the conditions threatening the author's education and aspiration to write, whilst also describing the lived reality of the conflict and its consequences for her family. Using typography as a further mode of expression, it challenges conventional expectations of first-person accounts written in English by exposing the material conditions that make writing itself precarious. Rather than treating English as a stable and readily available medium, this essay reveals what it means to endeavour to write and communicate whilst surviving occupation.

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Through Some Trials to Live, a **Gazan** Survival

Marah Khader Al-Astal

It was June 15, 2025, Sunday, 10:30am.

I was evacuated at **Al-Mawasi** with my family, hardly sitting on that old brown sofa at my sister, **Doa'a's** tent, one of the two only sofas that survived in a bombardment.

Al-Mawasi means a place directly in front of the sea, very hot at days while very cold at nights. It had had no way for a human being life. No hospitals. No markets. A very few homes. One school. One university. No drinkable water.

*In the war, it became the only safe place for all **Gazans** to go for. So, we, **Gazans**, Al-Jabareen nation, started living at it and building it from zero even with no available tools.*

Amid severe headache and dizziness, I was following Present with Purpose course with IBM Skills Network, the last course I may be able to study on edx scholarship which would end at 12:00pm after 2 months of hardworking.

I was resisting the camp noise and that severe internal one.

I was tapping my stomach with a scarf, so I would stop my rumbling stomach.

We had been being starved.

My whole body was alerted to many bombs, **and I was alerted to be one of the martyrs at one of those bombs.**

I was severely **BuRnInG** by the many messages I was receiving from my university tutors telling about the courses of that newly-started semester, the last semester for me.

Still, it was the closest hour to my heart at that period, much, much, much more than the hour I got the scholarship, which was the closest at its time.

“I feel I am the one who has been suffering, finally, you will relax, and I’ll too. Please, don’t study again at this time. **This war has been teaching us lessons no university in the world can teach.**”

This was what my sister, **Doa’a**, exactly told me when she came from outside to look for a drop of water at that unbearable hotness.

She was drinking one sip and saying one word, phrase or sentence in a way weighing the two difficult choices which to be done first: **Express her deep feelings or secure herself from thirst at that unprecedented weather.**

All my family shared the same thoughts.

All I still had to achieve was only one video and one quiz.

At the very poor network, which wasn’t regular nor speedy, using my sister’s, **Areej’s**, phone, I continued my journey and started opening the last video.

I was successful to make my trembling hands up for couple of minutes trying to get a signal, but soon I was feeling fatigued and not able to make them up for more than another couple of seconds.

The phone fell from my hands many times.

My eyes were heavy and **BuRnInG** me as I was carrying heavy loads upon them.

Still, one of them was on the hour and the other one was on the course materials racing the time to make the most before the scholarship ended, and burning to see it ended at the same time.

MUCH NOISE INSIDE MY HEAD.

I was watching that 5-minute video.

Watching some seconds, waiting for the video to load.

Observing the video and the signal.

The video played a minute in ten minutes.

Praying to end things quickly.

Trying to be patient.

BuRnInG both because I wanted to study the semester that I had been dreaming to study and I wanted to make the most of that scholarship; but all the circumstances still very bad.

Patience.

Trying to **hang on** the phone more, so it **wouldn't fall**.

Trying to **plant** the information more in my head while the video loading.

Trying to summarize the most important on my notebook.

Meanwhile, I was feeling completely **OUT** of sense.

I truly didn't know what I was doing nor if I had a real purpose, or if what I was doing was right or had **something good**.

All I knew was that after some minutes I would breath, respect myself and my conditions, and maybe allow myself to feel **WHAT I WAS SUPPOSED TO FEEL**.

At a moment, I felt a glimpse of focus lightened.

I felt very grateful.

I hurried to do what I was used to doing most times, if not always, to face the poor internet connection.

I scrolled down very quickly to read the whole video transcription, instead of waiting to watch it.

I read a line. Another one. Many others.

I couldn't understand.

I felt of a huge amount conglomerated inside my mind preventing me from receiving, understanding and doing any process.

The **only** mental process I was able to do perfectly was **my everyday thoughts. My dreams. My nightmares. My stolen life.**

“When will this tragedy end? Will it end? When will I start studying at my last semester? Will this difficult situation end so I can study it? **Upon news, it should have ended now.**

When will we go back for our homes? When our lives will return to its normality or even something similar? When will I be a martyr? Will I be a martyr or wounded, one day? Will I be a martyr of hunger as other people here? **I don't hope so, if I had to, I hope to have that by a rocket, not by hunger, to die with Dignity.**

Is what I am doing right to do? Is what all people around saying about education as an ended game true? When will I relax?...”

**MANY CONTINUING QUESTIONING THOUGHTS
WITH NO ANSWER.**

I took a breath, moved my head left and right as I was cleaning it from tiring thoughts.

I started re-reading just the first line.

The words started echoing in my mind without much efforts, and I was making my efforts to understand.

Think Quietly.

Finally, I could understand.

Reading more.

Working.

Focusing.

Line by line.

I ended the video.

Then, the quiz.

With every question, I was very astonished that I could solve.

I hurried to get my certificate.

Along my trials, I was convincing myself that it's ok if I couldn't get it because the internet was too bad.

At 12:00pm , the moment **that I had been waiting and counting days for came.**

I didn't wait a second more to see anything at the platform.

I closed the phone by hitting the upper right button even without closing the apps.

I threw it quietly on the next sofa, closed my **BuRnInG** fatigued eyes, and relaxed my body by lying without controlling myself with anything.

I didn't need any, any more thing from that tiring, demanding, and health-consuming life.

At that moment I felt a new deep meaning for **FREEDOM!**

It was freedom of everything.

No control.

Nothing still seemed important to me.

Anesthesia.

No one thought in my head, no one feeling in my heart.

Even the new semester felt as nothing.

“Don’t think of learning till you see it’s needed. Do what is needed at this phase. Just sit, console yourself and your family and help passing this phase. Don’t put more pressure on you and them while you are studying. Education now is a burden with no **benefit**.”

These were the dominant thoughts.

Silence.

But, “Do you forget your dream to **graduate**? Will you stop or pause at this last step?”

My heart started beating very quickly, and my body felt very hot.

Severe noise inside my head.

Something inside my head suddenly **insisted on me**, “Why are you lying as nothing important happened? Why don’t you stop your overthinking even for a little time? Stand up, feel energetic and celebrate. You have done something very great and delightful.”

I was still sitting, the words were still echoing in my head, and I was trying to understand.

“I? Something great and delightful? What does this **mean? Really?**”

I remembered when I had been burning to just have a piece of information to study approximately a year and a half ago, and now I studied on a wonderful platform.

So, “it’s supposed to be an achievement. Shall I be happy? Why not?
How can I do this?”

I closed my eyes trying to go out of the exhaustion and looking for something helping me to try happiness feeling.

The image of my **grandmother** before the war, sitting under our **olive tree** shadow and teaching me some of her lessons suddenly lightened inside my head.

She told me, "YOU, YOURSELF, WHO CREATE THE HAPPINESS. DON'T WAIT FOR IT TO COME BECAUSE THE LIFE MAY NEVER GIFT IT TO YOU UNLESS YOU CREATE IT."

In a minute, I was successful to try the feeling of happiness.

I wasn't successful to feel happy because of the achievements I did, but because after 2 months of special kind of fatigue, I'll take a **RELAXATION** from:

Looking for a place to sit at

Sometimes, I prioritised less noisy place, other times I prioritised less worse internet signal, other times I prioritised less hot or less cold weather, other times I prioritised the way of sitting.

From my shared mattress, to my father's one, to the sofa at my sister's tent, to one of the only two plastic chairs, to the entrance of the tent, to the oven place.

Starving along TRYING to study journey

Prioritising the time at which I should eat a piece of something or drink a cup of tea, which I had to drink without sugar when the market was empty from everything.

Feeling ashamed that my family around was trying to afford every thing I wanted while they absolutely couldn't

Much money I was taking from my family for internet cards and charging while we were facing financial issues, which was making me feeling **burning** money.

In opened yards, with some sheets couldn't stop voices from passing, they all were trying not to talk or even express their sadness, so I could focus.

Conflicts, (internal noises)

FIGHTING MYSELF DAILY because of:

1. Feeling sinking in a completely different boat from my family's and the whole strip's boat.

Feeling very uncomfortable when I left every suffer and went to study.

2. Feeling ashamed towards my sister, **Areej**, who gave me her personal phone, pretending she didn't want it. While in fact, she highly needed it especially for a flashlight at nights when she had a baby and there was no electricity.

3. Overthinking of how edx was **stealing** my time when I truly didn't know if I was right to think so or not.

4. Overthinking of the next day.

Sinking in thoughts. My current life. My future. Everything felt impossible.

5. Feeling of the must to study hard to return the favour for whom gifted the scholarship to me while the circumstances were all against this.

6. **Overdreaming** to have a semi-human-suitable-life so I could study well as edx platform offers courses to highly qualified atmospheres.

External noises

Noise of tents around me while studying.

Some were baking on the only one oven in the camp which was beside our tent and my sisters' tents.

All the gathering mothers were talking to each others about their suffering with the cut of food.

Some children were following their mothers crying for the same purpose, food.

Some families talks in the tents were listened as the only barrier between us was sheets.

Some elders were opening their radio to its loudest voice.

Putting many alarms at different hours to get up amid cold nights to check and look for a poor internet signal, if found

Being awake amid unprecedented, unbearable coldness while we had left all Winter clothes and most blankets at home when evacuated.

Difficulties and many problems in charging

Looking for the coins that the charging spots only accepted.

The long time I was waiting for my turn to charge as many people were charging on the same device.

Fear on the phone all along the time it's charging or waiting to be charged.

Many phones were damaged as a result of charging on solar devices as I had to do, or as a result of the very hot weather in the tent where I had to charge.

Waiting from morning till evening, most times, to have the phone charged :)

Dreaming to feel sad about everything we were going through

Finally, I WILL NOT CURB MY FEELINGS because of NOT HAVING TIME.

I WILL GIVE THE LUXURY TO MYSELF TO ACT NATURALLY AS THE ATMOSPHERE REQUIRES.

It occurred to me to go and share that moment with my family.

They shared me types of personal suffering, so I should share them happiness.

“Once I reached, my Dad said with his smiley voice, “Welcome **Marah!** Congrats. Congrats. Finally, mash’Allah.”

My mum, all my sisters, brothers and brothers in law then
congratulated.

Till now, the *happy, proud congratulating* voices still echoing inside my head.”

(Vibes of celebration. Make them that it’s a story not just narration.** still needs editing)**

This was a note I left while I was editing this piece.

Meanwhile, I shared the piece as a draft with some **doctoral researchers**, colleagues of my editor for this piece in **Brief Encounters, George Clutterbuck**, and their professor, **Sara Crangle**.

They were clever to realise that writing the story is **as important as** the story I shared with them.

They kindly suggested to keep this note in the last version and write more details about the process of writing.

For ME, writing every WORD in every story has a STORY.

It's not about writing, it's about TRYING to write.

All of my experiences during the war are already written by **BLOOD** and **DIFFICULTIES** inside my head, but they need to be written by **pen!**

I am happy to take whoever is reading this story in my journey.

To the limited space I have here, I will write about some aspects to write this piece.

The place where I am writing this piece:

I am still at a tent at Al-Mawasi with my family.

Living at 70 squared metres, I and more than 10 members.

No space outside other than where we walk to go out.

In the tent, we eat, talk, plan, cry, teach, daily have many guests, and do everything we want.

At this place, we feel at an hour of the Summer weather and at the next hour of the Winter weather.

We have to adapt.

Here I am almost daily sick.

Always cold, headache or both.

As emergencies occupy a big part of my life, I have been trying to find a way to keep going with the least losses.

The least worst routine I have been trying to have

At the morning of everyday, I get up, trying to do even a little of what I want before the whole camp gets up.

No voices except these coming from neighbours.

I try to exploit every moment but the cold I get from nights must take its time.

In 2 hours, all get up.

The time of activity begins.

Our “quiet tent,” as it’s known in the camp, has:

A lecturer calling his students and colleagues,

A teacher teaching her students,

Students trying to listen their lectures,

Siblings teaching each others,

All working under depression, disability, but hope,

A mother calling her son or daughter to help her doing something,

A mother thinking of the hardest mission, the humble meal for that day,

A small sister crying to have her friends playing with her at the same tent,

Radio voice,

Phone video voices,

A- one- year- old - niece coming everyday as entertainment for us and her :).

All voices aren't loud, but we are living at tent, with no walls.

Voices must pass and prevent me from brainstorming my thoughts.

Still, I keep working.

After experiences, I totally know that I wouldn't be able to write the ideas that I want in this atmosphere.

But to feel that I tried to exploit my time is very important.

To practice working amid noise because THIS is my life is much more important.

At noon, we all gather at the 2×3 squared metres space, looking for the least hot weather, but with strong sunlight hurting the eyes.

It's the time for talking and comforting each others from what we have been coming through.

No voices preventer, so, whether busy or free, I have to share the family every, every moment at this session.

Some of our everyday talks:

The date of May 19, 2025, when we last time sat at our home and had the LAST relaxing life

At that time, we evacuated the Fifth time from our home with no return! (Leave a broken heart here. I don't have it in my phone :)

I hope I had known that I would not see it or live at it again!
 If so, I would have held everything from it in my hands and ran,
even the stones and the air!

The cut of salaries from the very beginning of the war

The loss of essentials, place to settle at, gas, furniture, food, clothes, electricity, clean water weather for washing or drinking, medicine and everything.

Severe social INEQUALITY

All around us are farmers, living the best life at this exceptional stage of life, completely contrast to **us**.

Our current everyday quote is,

“These days are as difficult as the starvation days, but the only difference is:

AT THE STARVATION, ALMOST ALL THE STRIP HAD NOTHING, BUT NOW A VERY FEW PEOPLE HAVE EVERY, EVERY THING, WHILE THE OTHERS HAVE NOTHING.”

And our sufferings have no end, so our topics have no end.

It's the first time to see all my family has the same level of ability.

Whether at 50s or 1s.

At evening, similar thing happens.

Whether busy or free, we all must welcome the guests whom anyone in the family has.

The time that I can work at:

All the time I am thinking of my writing process.

“How to write. When to charge? Where to charge? Shall I keep writing? Is it my right destination? How can I focus? At which place?”

All the day I am **trying** to work in the tent.

But the only time I can perfectly work is 2 hours at morning and other 2 to 4 hours at night.

When I try to work outside, beside our door, to try another atmosphere or to have a breath, I try to enter the writing mood and dive deeply in what I am going to write.

Many voices running from the camp.

I close my eyes, put my hands on my ears, so I wouldn't be disturbed very much by these voices.

I try to remember what happened at the juncture I want to write about.

Brainstorming

Meanwhile, **MANY THOUGHTS COMING TO CUT MY THOUGHTS.**

NIGHTMARES

Trying to cope and think of the topic.

Finally, sinking in thoughts.

Suddenly, someone comes.

They want to visit, call someone, or ask a question

Whatever they want, I have to welcome them.

Then, all my thoughts cut.

I become confused.

Again, I start from the very beginning, but the creativity lessens.

And this scene repeated many times at an hour ;)

If a topic should take a day, it takes a **week**.

The phone that I am using:

As the war had stolen **my phone** from the very beginning of it, I have been using mum's phone.

It's old and with a few features.

It's not easy to be handled with.

The only two things I can do with it, **writing** and **watching offline**.

I even do these two things **very carefully**, so I would not lose charging very quickly.

I put the phone on the maximum power saving mode, with a fully black background and just the very few needed apps.

On this mode, the chat controlled to be opened maximally 10 seconds, so I try to keep my finger touching it while I am digging in my thoughts **that I want to write about**.

Amid these very dark nights, although the complete electricity cutoff, I don't use the flashlight whether for writing, watching or other purposes.

This is not healthy for my fatigued eyes, **but** less demanding **to save charging for the most needed purpose, writing, and sometimes, watching a saved video**.

Word app couldn't be opened there to write on, so I use Samsung notes app instead.

I write on it daily, and at the end of every day I deliver the new updated version for another phone of my sisters', so I wouldn't lose what I have edited.

Sending my work to another phone isn't easy.

Finding a charged phone to send my work to isn't easy nor secure.

To copy and paste words isn't easy.

It requires **patience** more than anything else.

This phone is about to be damaged, the screen is being burned gradually.

I pray everyday not to be burned before I get a new one.

It is the **leader** of all my **writing journey**.

This phone loses charging easily and suddenly.

When the phone suddenly closed between my hands,

I start making connections between the ideas inside my head that I still want to write about, so I wouldn't forget them.

I write the headings on a paper **because** I totally don't trust my memory.

I start looking for the least demanding way to charge at that day.

I start looking for each option my family and I get for that day.

EACH ONE FEELS MORE DIFFICULT THAN THE OTHER.

MUCH CONFUSION because I completely know that the phone would not be between my hands for many hours, from 4 to 9 hours, so I would have it charged.

Sometimes I charge it at our neighbours solar device,

Other times I go to a coffee,

Other times I give it to my siblings to charge it in their ways to some missions.

Sometimes I get it fully charged, other times i get it 30% or less ;)

Every time I am worried about the phone and the charger all along the time the phone charging **because I know that I may have it not charged, damaged or lost, or the charger damaged or lost.**

All the time I am worried about **MY TIME.**

OVERTHINKING APPROACHES.

I think of what I can do in my day to exploit my time when even this old phone is not available.

"Shall I write everything on a paper and re-write what I would have written on the phone when it comes?"

This would not work. I have tried it."

"What about preparing for IELTS?"

"What about thinking of the scenes of the story you are writing till you have the phone?"

"You are always busy and worried about your time with no benefit."

"Is what I am doing good, **or at least** the least worst?"

"What is the good thing to do? **How can I be a productive to be able to consume?"**

"Shall I teach at the tent?"

"There is no space for you, how can you find for students?"

"I WILL KEEP DOING WHAT I AM DOING, WRITING. MAYBE THIS WOULD HAVE BENEFIT TIME AHEAD."

Similar scripts

Similar results

Same loss

More depression

SURVIVING CONFLICT

A very strong, big moan.

I lose passion daily, **but I find HOPE at every moment.**

I am sure that good fates are coming.

Finally, on Saturday, May 16, 2026, 4: 34 am, sitting on my borrowed mattress, holding mum's phone and working in a completely black and quiet atmosphere except those bombs voices came suddenly but strongly, am **presenting** my story to every **human being** around the world.

To my loved **Gazans, Palestinians**: I wish them **the best life!**

I will keep using my voice to let Gaza's voices reach.

Longing to say and listen, **“Palestine is free from the river to the sea!”**

Thanks to my university, **Al-Aqsa university** and the head of the English language department, **Dr. Ahmed Junina** for being a part of gifting me this space to talk.

Thanks to **Brief Encounters** for sharing my work.

Special thanks to my editor in this journal, **George Clutterbuck**, for so kindly and patiently accompanying me through writing and completing this piece.

To my family, **Dr. Khader Al-Astal family**, I owe you!

To **mum**, the hidden hero, and to **dad**, my first teacher.

To **all my sisters** and **brothers**.

To my **grandmother**, the most affectionate.

Thank you all, and thanks to every one was a part of writing this piece, even small.

Words can't completely express any, any of my experiences..

But.. better than none..

I will not stop, even if this would take years.

Wish, one day, I will be **able** to **write** and **publish** MY FULL STORY.

Good Luck,

Marah Khader Al-Astal

Biography

Marah Khader Al-Astal is a 23-year-old writer from Gaza, Palestine. She started writing stories during the crazy war on Gaza at the end of 2023. Everything she writes reflects her life in Gaza. Marah published 'Last Step Towards My Bachelor's Degree' as a participant in the first cohort of the Resilient Voices creative writing project (2025-2026), of which she continues to be a member. Marah writes because she has to, not just because she loves to. Writing isn't a choice for her; it's her way to survive. Marah will keep writing until not only her voice, but Gaza's voice reaches the whole world.

