

## A Record of Painful Writing

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The functions of writing have never changed; rather, change has taken place in us. Writing still aims to excavate the very essence of humanity, and to draw near the darkest places in the human soul. It aims to approach the caverns of fear, not just to illuminate them, but to recreate them and to say what the human being is unable to express. In normal times, contemplation of this forms fertile matter for writing. But of course, during war and revolution, everything is different, the questions are different. Living is therefore more like dying in that it gives confers new meanings on things, meanings you had never considered before. Let us imagine a man with fixed habits. He gets up every morning and goes to the coffee house, drinks his coffee, then goes to work. In normal times these simple actions constitute part of this man's happiness. Although he is growing old in the same unchanging location, he feels nevertheless that the world is as it should be. In war, the same man will be an altogether different being. No one would believe, while others are losing their lives, that merely leaving this place on account of the war will make him such a different person. When writing painstakingly examines this man's loss of happiness, it confronts us once more with ourselves. It tells us that war is not just the destruction of cities and the murder of people, but the loss of countless small actions which made us happy. In my belief, writing can assess the size of a human being's loss, but in times of war it seems powerless. Like everything, writing becomes nothing more than a witness no one wants to listen to. Even the idea of death itself is turned from a hypothesis whose delay is a promise of life, into a tangible fact you can reach out and grasp. To be precise, death loses its awe, and this throws writing into confusion and effectively makes it useless.

You can imagine the scene. More than a hundred people die every day, and they are not old people who have lived out a full lifespan; they are young men and women, boys and girls, children who are a few years old or recently born. Imagine this happening in Syria every day for the last five years, and you may imagine the questions of a writer like me living in this great, desolate ruin.

I am often filled with remorse for being a writer. The question has never left me: what can writing offer someone in need of medicine, or a slice of bread? Quite simply, writing cannot save someone from an inevitable death; it cannot even give them hope in these critical moments. I often feel powerless, and I wish to be braver in order to bring loaves of bread to the starving in Ghouta, which is only a few kilometres from my house and which has withstood a choking siege for three years. If I was braver, I could break through the security barriers and bring medicine to a child who has just starved to death merely for existing in this forgotten corner of the world.

In the last five years, I have seen starvation with my own eyes and many funerals have passed before me. Syrians have died all manner of deaths; they have been burned, bombed, drowned and starved, and the world hasn't done a thing for them. It left them to their fate, and writing won't offer them anything now; the dead don't care if you talk about them afterwards. Yes, in wars priorities change. In this way, everything gains new meaning, including writing.

I know that writing comes from bleakness, not from warmth. Writing principally means a good text, capable of enduring, which can boldly wage its battle with history; it is not a collection of rousing slogans. But this text, which requires times of bleakness, re-examines itself, again and again, in times of warmth.

In the early days of the revolution, I was deluded enough to think that writers could cry out and point to the innocent victims, and this furious cry would inevitably reach those distant shores where people enjoy peace of mind and have no shortage of reasons to go on living. Equally, I was convinced that writing was a revolutionary action that would inevitably leave its mark on the souls of those it encountered. But every moment of powerlessness has turned me back to the fundamental truths I never stopped doubting, both before and after the revolution. This is the greatest gift which writing has given me, and which remains with me even now. But in wars and revolutions, doubt draws aside to clear the way for the plain truth which needs no elaboration. Deep down, new questions are generated within me.

Perhaps they are naïve, but it is necessary to raise them. Do the victims' bodies need elaborate explanations? I believe the dead need nothing but silence in their final farewell.

These words may be pessimistic, but they are true. We must not forget them while we praise writing and writers. I do not need to be informed of writing's importance in illuminating truth and exposing tyranny – I have already explored this in my texts and I have never spent a single day in silence – but feeling powerless has made me more fragile, even while I know that in many years' time our writing will be doubly important. It will be a record of the truth, and vengeance for the blood spilled. Writing of any kind has no value unless it stands up for the victims and causes their murderer sleepless nights. The writing being generated today will achieve this.

I will still experience many moments of regret and desperation, and I will suffer from bouts of overwhelming rage. But I will not forget the supreme action which must be respected at all costs: that is, not to betray the blood of the victims. I will still be incapable of explaining the turmoil and confusion which has turned me into a wanderer with every reason to curse the world. At times I believed death was the only solution for the tormenting insomnia which I experienced nightly, and in those moments I even lost my faith in writing. But afterwards, that wonderful light returned which has flooded me for many years, and which still does: meaning the light, the enchantment, of writing. For the first time in my life I felt that it is writing which has saved me from the inevitable death hovering over me for five years; it gave me the passion I needed to carry on living and resisting. Yes, perhaps writing has not helped a child teetering on the brink, but it has terrified its murderer by ensuring that the truth will not die. Justice will become the first and last concern of writing, as it was through the ages. By the same token, because writing always has and always will fulfil this same purpose, you will see humanity's victory over its darkest and most wretched moments.

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Translated from the Arabic by Leri Price