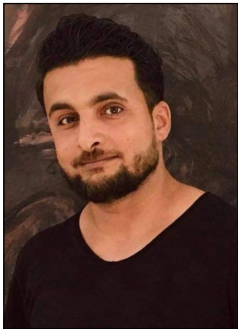


Hunger that defeats language

by Husam Maarouf,* Gaza



Husam Maarouf.
(Picture arablit.org)

(CH-S) *"Starving the civilian population in Gaza will neither bring Israel the desired 'complete victory' over Hamas, nor can it be justified by Jewish values or humanitarian law." This was stated by the Central Conference of American Rabbis on 27 July 2025.*

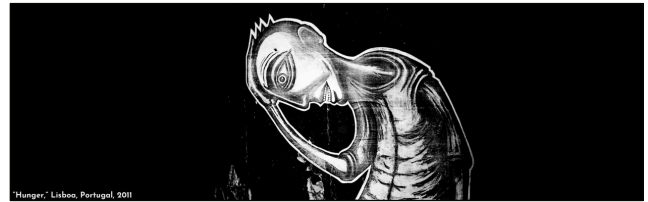
Since 2 March, UNRWA – as a humanitarian organisation of the UN – has not been allowed to bring aid supplies to Gaza despite the indescribable hardship there, even though 6,000 truckloads of aid supplies are waiting in UNRWA warehouses in Egypt and Jordan.

The well-known Jewish genocide researcher, Professor Omar Bartov, wrote in the *New York Times* on 15 July: *"I have come to the inevitable conclusion that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians. [...] The continued denial of this classification by states, international organisations and legal and academic experts will cause immeasurable damage not only to the people of Gaza and Israel, but also to the system of international law created after the horrors of the Holocaust, which is intended to prevent such atrocities from ever happening again. It is a threat to the foundations of the moral order on which we all depend."*

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Palestinian writer Husam Maarouf vividly describes how hunger affects his own life.

I never started writing as a writer. It was never my intention to define myself by a profession or a literary identity. I simply wrote because writing was the air I could breathe. It was a way to shape my day, to organize the overwhelming emotions inside me, to carve out a fleeting space of still-



ness amidst endless chaos. Writing wasn't a window to the world – it was a window onto myself. And when I gained language, it felt like I had finally found a friend on this brutal planet: one who listened without fleeing, who made the world feel momentarily escapable.

What I never expected was that one day this friend would fall silent. Not because I wanted to stop writing, but because I no longer could.

And the reason?

I am hungry.

Since the genocide began in Gaza, I've questioned everything. Every value that once shaped me has trembled. Even writing – that deep power I've always used to resist fear, displacement, and grief – began to feel fragile, subject to decay. War is a strange thing. It doesn't just destroy homes; it pulls the ground of certainty from beneath you, wipes away the tiny sense of security you once arranged in your room to comfort yourself.

But you know what does this more than war? Hunger.

I kept asking myself: does writing still matter? What's the point of piling up sentences when bodies are piled under rubble? What does it mean to write about beauty and love in a world that starves you and is indifferent to your pain?

Yet something inside me resisted this collapse. I wrote, even during the expulsion, even under the thunder of the bombs. I wrote about the children who disappeared, the shrouds we lacked for the dead, the houses that turned to dust. I wrote through fatigue, through grief, through fear.

But I never wrote through hunger. Until March 2025.

That's when hunger took up residence in my body. It stopped knocking at the door. It broke open my chest and sat inside me.

* Husam Maarouf is a poet from Gaza and the co-founder of *Gaza Publications*. He's published two poetry collections, *Death Smells Like Glass* and *The Barber Loyal To His Dead Clients* and the novel *Ram's Chisel*. You can support his fledgling publishing house [here](#).

Emptiness

The hunger I'm experiencing now is not what I imagined. It's not what you imagine, dear reader. It's not just an empty feeling in your stomach. It's a numbness that spreads from the gut to the brain. It blurs memories, weakens vision, and turns every thought into a deep excavation that the mind can't bear. Hunger steals the simplest human abilities: concentration, patience, sensation, the desire to say something. Thinking becomes a luxury. Words become weights that cannot be lifted.

The hunger I feel inside now, swallowing me whole, is an evacuation of comfort, of inner peace. It's a redefinition of the self, now on the verge of disappearing.

A few days ago, I told my editor that I had run out of ideas. No new proposals. I couldn't even thread a line through a needle, as my words once did.

Following her advice, I decided to write about it: my mental thinness, my fragility, my disintegration. My new impulse – my pain – was something I had never known before.

Now, I write a sentence and stop. Not to rethink it, but because I don't have the mental energy for another. Hunger slowly crushes you. It feels like dying alone in a desert that no foot has ever touched. I cannot sleep properly or sit still long enough to read. I feel I'm coming apart. And the writing that once held me together can no longer stop this slow disintegration.

Collective Hunger

You die alone in hunger. You break down spiritually. The presence of other hungry people offers no comfort: on the contrary, when hunger becomes collective, you know that every hand around you is cut off. No one can help.

How can I write about this?

In northern Gaza, where I live, not a single grain of wheat has arrived since March. The markets are empty. Whatever goods are left are sold at two hundred times the normal price – without shame. As if we were not human.

All we eat is lentils, rice, canned beans. None of it satisfies. Lentils, the only thing available, have become my enemy. Their taste now makes me sick. They give me no energy, no hope.

I survive on one meal a day. So does everyone in Gaza. A meal without protein, without calcium, without bread, without taste. A meal

stripped of nutrients and meaning. And yet, every day I have to perform exhausting tasks: carrying firewood, fetching water from far away, climbing five flights of stairs, searching for hours for a kilo of flour that costs twenty US dollars, or a can of sardines that weakens the spirit.

All this at the lowest energy level I've ever known.

Under such conditions, writing is no longer an act of resistance – it becomes an impossible act. My body cannot support me. My mind spins in dizziness. I try to start a text, but my head is as empty as the city's shelves. There's no idea, no drive, no inner voice pulling me forward. Nothing remains inside. Hunger has swept away the soil from which my words once grew.

The worst thing about hunger is that it alienates you from yourself. You lose empathy. You go numb. You shrink. You look at your life as if you're a stranger to it. You fear yourself and you fear for yourself. Food becomes an existential concept, a mythical phantom. You remember tastes you'd forgotten. Your favourites change. A can of tuna becomes the pinnacle of your dreams. And when you cook it with a piece of potato and some tahini, you celebrate as if you're eating the best meal in the world.

Dismantling the Self

This play isn't just a tragedy. It's a play about nakedness. When hunger leaves you with nothing but your fragile self, your weakened body, and your absent language. When you feel unseen by the world, unheard – and you're not even sure if anyone cares if you live or die.

Hunger in a genocide is more than physical deprivation. It is the dismantling of the self. A slow extinction of your will to live.

You begin to wonder:

What's the point of writing if I can't feel full?

What's the point of memory if I can't access it?

What's the point of living if every day is just a failed attempt to secure a meal that doesn't resemble food?

Today, when I sit down to write, I like I'm writing from outside my body. The words are not mine, but the remnants of someone I used to be.

I write because I need to do something to forget that I am starving.

Writing has become a time of exhaustion – one that requires a physical and emotional effort I cannot afford.

Hunger robs you of language, just as it robs you of sleep, of rest, of hope.

And worst of all:

The world is silent.

Completely silent.

As if the hunger that kills me cannot be heard, cannot be seen, means nothing to anyone.

I am a writer.

Or I was.

But now, I can no longer write.

I am hungry. And hunger is stronger than words. Stronger than memory. Stronger than cognition. Stronger than my need to document.

This is not a retreat from writing. It is a total paralysis.

I no longer have the tools to express myself.

I no longer have the body to sit.

I no longer have the mind to form a complete sentence.

I am afraid that I will die before I can write my own death.

I am afraid that my language will remain locked inside, never finding a way out.

I fear hunger more than death, for it takes you in slow, devouring waves until you become a dis-integrating shadow, unable even to scream.

Will anyone read this?

Will anyone believe that a writer could no longer write because he had nothing to eat?

Will anyone care that, in a corner of the world, people are starving so completely that their souls are silenced?

Perhaps not.

But I wrote this – despite everything.

To say that writing is possible.

Only if the body is allowed to survive.

Source: <https://arablit.org/2025/05/30/hunger-that-defeats-language/>, 30 May 2025