We Left, But You Remained

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It is time for me to write. But I have been thinking all along—in which language should I write? Arabic? French? Or English? I am not sure. In a country like ours, even the choice of language is not merely cultural—it is political too. Yet something deep inside whispered: "Write in your mother tongue—the language that resembles you, and resembles them." Perhaps language is the only thing still binding us together, though even that, I cannot say with certainty. So let us start here. Maybe, by the end of this piece, we will discover whether language truly unites us, or if something deeper does.

Now we can begin.

The Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990. The guns fell silent, tanks withdrew from the streets, and we were told that people had moved on from those fifteen years of bloodshed. At least, that is what they told us. But for us—the generation born after the war, the ones who never lived the kidnappings or the killings at checkpoints but always felt their shadow—the war never truly ended. It only changed form. It seeped into our language, into our fears, into the corners of our homes. We inherited wounds so deep that we never actually saw them bleed. Strange, is it not? They were kidnapped, yet we are the ones who got lost. They were wounded, yet we are the ones who bled. They survived, yet we are the ones who died. Do you see what I am describing? That is what it feels like to live without a real ending.

A real ending to war means tending to the psychological wounds, building a society capable of living in peace after years of violence and disorder. A real ending means accountability.

I was born years after the war was "over." I never had to flee from one shelter to another. I never had to say goodbye to my brother, fearing I would never see him again. I never had to rip apart my political party card and swallow it at a checkpoint. Yet, I grew up haunted by the echoes of these stories. I grew up hearing fragments of sentences that always began with "Back in the war..." spoken in half-broken voices. My parents, my relatives, my teachers, they all spoke the same way: as though the war was

something they lived through but never healed from. Every time they began talking about it, they quickly fell silent. And that silence was heavier than any shell or bomb.

They were telling us about the war—but not in the way we imagined. Imagine someone telling you a story: they tell you about the hero, about the villain, and about what happened in between. But suddenly, someone burns the last page. There is no ending, no answers to your questions. Just emptiness. Annoying, is it not? That is exactly how we, the post-war generation, feel. We live in the ruins of a story that was never written. Because after the Taif Agreement, "peace" was reduced to a single phrase: "Let bygones be bygones." Yet neither God forgave, nor the past truly passed.

It is a sad, painful story with no ending and no closure. And the authors? They are still here—living among us, writing a new history book—while we remain stuck on the burned page, searching for an ending that does not exist. What is worse, we lack a collective memory to grieve through together. Each sect has its own history book, each victim has their own villain, and there's never a shared ending. Our history is fragmented, sectarian, broken into pieces. What we longed for was a unified narrative, a shared truth to mourn or to heal from.

But instead, our very identity as Lebanese became like our history: fragmented, incoherent.

The problem is, there was never any acknowledgement. No naming of victims. No naming of perpetrators. Why was there not any transitional justice? Why no trials? How could it be that the very men who waged war simply shed their militia uniforms, put on suits, and became the "leaders" and rulers of the state? That is not reconciliation: that is public reward. Meanwhile, those who were lost remained just that—lost. Reduced to photos on living room walls, with mothers whose hearts broke and lives ended when their children's lives were cut short.

This is what happens without accountability: warlords are recycled as national heroes. How can a victim respect their killer when that killer now sits in power? How can trust be built with a system that never once apologized, and instead asked us to stay silent?

Let us talk more about the consequences of this lack of accountability, and how it left Lebanon trapped in a fragile peace—without unity, without reform.

Because there was no justice, the memory of the war became property of politicians. They resurface it whenever it suits them, and bury it whenever it threatens

them. What followed the war was not peace, it was merely a ceasefire. No reconciliation. No acknowledgment. No confrontation.

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Socially, we became even more divided. Every sect wrote its own version of history. Our homes stopped resembling those of our neighbors. We grew into a society living in a fragile, negative peace, empty of true reconciliation. We neither faced the past nor made peace with it. That is why fear of the other, distrust, and sectarian walls remain. Even our silence is no peace, it is a ticking time bomb. Sectarianism became the very backbone of the political system, when transitional justice should have been the foundation for building a civil state. Instead of bridging gaps, sectarian identities deepened. Lebanese politics was built on sectarian interests, not on national ones. And so, we lost the chance at a unified identity.

Economically, the lack of accountability deepened class divides. The post-war political system had no real mechanisms for rebuilding Lebanon's economy fairly. Instead of channeling resources into development, the majority of wealth flowed into the pockets of politicians. Clientelism became the norm, worsening poverty and unemployment. Public services deteriorated drastically, plagued by corruption and favoritism. Investment in infrastructure mattered less than preserving political patronage networks that kept the corrupt in power.

And for us—the youth—this absence of accountability created a void. As I said, we did not live the war directly, but we grew up in a country that never told us the truth. We heard no acknowledgment, we saw no justice. What does it mean when they say, "They are not us, and we are not them"? Who are they? Who are we? Just like that, we are divided? Most young people, instead of being raised with a sense of belonging to one nation, were raised on sectarian divisions and political rhetoric. How are we expected to believe in a state when its leaders are the

very same who destroyed it? How can we imagine a future when the past—the supposed past—remains unresolved? This bred an entire generation with no trust in the system, in its institutions, or in the future. We see Lebanon as a place incapable of giving us hope. For many, the dream is not change—it is migration. Because really, what can we change in a system that never held anyone accountable, never admitted guilt?

Sometimes, I get consumed by anger—by hatred—by something I can't even name. I find myself staring at them. The same faces. The same speeches. The same lies. The very same ones who spilled our blood and showed us hell through our parents' eyes are the ones ruling us today. They built their glory on our suffering and on the cries of our mothers. When I see them on TV, sitting comfortably in their chairs of power, my soul suffocates. How did they manage? How, after everything—corruption, theft, destruction—do they still hold authority, media presence, and even prestige? How did the faces that waged war become the faces of "stability"? Perhaps my anger is not only that they were not punished, but that they were rewarded.

We are the post-war generation—the children of silence. We have no narrative. We do not know the truth. All we know is that the war ended without ever ending. The guns went quiet, but their echoes never stopped screaming. They taught us that the past is a shame to be hidden, not a wound to be healed. We are ruled by the same faces that once fought, then reconciled, then divided the country among themselves. They became "statesmen" when they were the very ones who destroyed the state. They sat on seats of power that should have been platforms for justice.

We carry the weight of that past in our daily lives—in jobs that cannot sustain us, in fuel queues, in the collapse of our currency, in a sectarian system never tried or dismantled because it was cemented to last. Our identity is blurred—we do not know if we are citizens or followers. We see Lebanon as a dream, but only a postponed one. Like a case waiting for evidence of innocence, even though guilt has already been proven. We doubt, we rage, we cope, and then we fall silent again—because silence has become our habit.

The war ended. But you did not leave. I used to think that the unwritten ending would finally arrive with your departure. But you survived.

We left. You remained.