On the Brink of Freedom

By Marvin Paguio

Furtive movements. Hushed whispers. Pitch black. An encompassing void of uncertainty and panic. These circumstances were all too familiar. Two years ago, she was passing this same route with similar emotions and query running through her head. Back then, she and her mother were careful, prepared, and vigilant. They did everything they could, but it did not matter. They were close, but it was not enough. It was not meant to be; their efforts withered in vain without proper luck and fortune. What ensued was imprisonment and ignominy as she and her mother were branded as traitors to the government. Two years later with a renewed conviction that a better life was still possible, her mother sought to challenge fate yet again. With a small bag of clothes clutched around her arm and an American address committed to memory, nine-year-old Thu-Ha Nguyen held her mother’s hand as they wandered through the Vietnam countryside. It was just a family visit, she was told. They were going to go back, she was told. Just play along, she was told.

She was standing off to the side of the room, observing as a multigenerational audience, from Vietnam War veterans to high school volunteers, trickled into the venue. She saw not only a mix of generations, but also an intersection of cultures. This was an event held in Westminster, CA, but the aura still affirmed the Vietnamese identity. Fluent Vietnamese, fluent English, and a broken hybrid of the two were exchanged as different peoples conglomerated. A large white sign at the entrance of the event displayed “I Love Little Saigon.” Both inside and outside the venue were the red-blue stripes and white stars wavering beside the red-stripes on the yellow canvas (pre-1975 South Vietnam Flag). Along the right wall, students assembled a visual depiction of “Vietnam,” affixing black-and-white images from the Vietnam War and colorful
pictures of Little Saigon. Thu-Ha Nguyen stood calm and collected amid this loud and busy environment. She was not pacing back-and-forth or worrying about what she was going to say. Why was there to be worry? This was not a made-up story; this was her memory, her experienced reality. A few minutes later, the emcees signaled the event to begin. The Vietnamese and American national anthems were played. Thu-Ha Nguyen heard her name introduced as a speaker, and I followed her.

Looking retrospectively, Thu-Ha admits being told many things but not understanding why they were happening at that time. She never knew her father or grandfather until the age 8. She did not know why her mother only visited her once a month. But she did understand and relish in her relationships with her grandmas and aunts. She recalls with nostalgia the mornings of waking up to her grandma’s cooking and eating breakfast as a family, noting that “even though we did not have that much, we still stick together.” Beyond the household, Thu-Ha recounts a “sea of red” and uniformed bodies pocketing every corner. She remembers waiting hours in line for rice, oil, and gasoline. The shortages were not uncommon—a struggle to survive. Furthermore, Thu-Ha recounts her education experience with an acrid disgust. Education revolved around monotonous recitations of “who the leader was” and “who the hero of the country was.” These small moments occurred in the past, but they would take on more meaning and power at a later time.

Behind the scenes, to the knowledge of her family in the past and to Thu-Ha a little later in life, the country was undergoing an ideological-political transformation. Thu-Ha was born in 1975, a year marked by the Fall of Saigon and the country’s submission to the communist forces. Access to the pre-1975 way of life was systematically eradicated by the new government. Like other military and political officers of the past government, Thu-Ha’s grandfather and father, a major in the former Vietnam military, were imprisoned and sent to the
labor camps for 8 years. She did not grow up with her father, even chuckling in the present that she called him “uncle” when she first met him. Her mother, a high school literature teacher, was sent to teach in the countryside after 1975. During her speech, Thu-Ha draws several parallels between her Vietnam and the current day North Korea. She shudders at the red posters, which took on meaning as the propaganda posters of the communist government. She denigrates the education system with fervent repulsion, concluding “it was all propaganda.” This constrictive communist environment is an all-too familiar memory of hers and present reality for others. Thu-Ha was manipulated to think a certain way, unable to attain complete self-awareness in the past.

As I reflected on this conditioning by the Vietnamese government, I did not find it hard to see how communism spreads like a fire. Communism becomes engrained in a hegemony where the new government becomes the heroic ideal. With propaganda ubiquitously promoted, how were Thu-Ha and her family able to formulate and cultivate their anti-communist beliefs?

Risking persecution and imprisonment, Thu-Ha and her family sought to preserve their democratic ideals of freedom and individuality amid the communist empire. Around midnight, she saw her uncle surreptitiously listening to the Voice of America radio, a media outlet broadcasting a world beyond her Vietnam. After his release from prison, Thu-Ha’s father escaped Vietnam by land to Cambodia and was imprisoned in Thailand; he was eventually released and sponsored to the US upon being approved by a former classmate in the US Quantico Marine Corps Base. Thu-Ha’s mother secretly organized a boat trip to escape the crippling system. Despite one failed attempt that left both Thu-Ha and her mother temporarily imprisoned, Thu-Ha’s mother remained steadfast. This was Thu-Ha’s reality, but she chorused in the pro-government recitations in school, masking her family’s rebellious tendencies for the sake of coveting her freedom, individuality, and humanity. Designated a “scout” by the school,
Thu-Ha was tasked with observing and reporting the actions and behavior of her family to her teachers. But, she did not listen. Thu-Ha internalized the rogue activities of her household and concocted a façade to save both her and her family’s lives; she never reported her family members. Thu-Ha describes herself as intelligent and playful, but with a rebellious bite. Though effective, Thu-Ha identifies this system of deceit as the part of Vietnam communism that she hated the most.

Now, however, was not the time to be disobedient or rebellious, her mother implored. Thu-Ha did as she was told and got into a small river boat. No questions asked.

Thu-Ha and her mother were among the wave of 1980s boat people covertly escaping Vietnam for a chance at a better life. Though Thailand officially disavowed Vietnamese refugees, the country was a “first asylum” nation where the refugees were allowed to temporarily stay. The Refugee Act of 1980 and the Orderly Departure Program were designed to aid Vietnamese emigration and entry into the US. With policies working for and against them, the boat people prioritized their concerns for safety and survival.

Nine-year-old Thu-Ha woke up to small conversations and the undulating motions of the small river boat. The sun in its warmth and light was beginning to rise over her. The blue sky and ocean reached until her eyes could see. These beautiful manifestations of possibility and hope contrasted with the gravity of their situation. Though reassured by her mother’s grasp, she felt strange and cramped in sharing the boat with 28 strangers, some old and many young. She saw the distress in her mother’s eyes as they learned that food ran out on the second day of sea. She heard the panic in the adults’ voices as they realized that the engine died. A previously humdrum rhythm was supplanted by an eerie silence—the boat’s fate was left to the wind. The next day, she saw a Thai boat approaching the small river boat. Bearing a knot in her stomach after many hours without food, she rejoiced as the Thai provided her group with much needed
food. Though nourished, she saw the dejection return to the adults’ eyes. They learned that the Thai boat could not save them from their small river boat. Thu-Ha and her people remained adrift, watching as the Thai boat disappeared into the horizon. They were acknowledged yet not accepted. Thu-Ha slowly pauses, recollecting her loss of direction and uncertainty—this was the cost of freedom. When would this end? Who would finally help them? As she saw the wiped tears and heard the worried voices of her fellow passengers, Thu-Ha felt her heart race and eyes glisten. She took a deep breath and felt her own tears materialize. The weight of this physically and emotionally arduous ordeal was finally getting to her.

A tiny bright yellow light speckled the light-bluish horizon a few days later. Thu-Ha’s eyes widened and heart danced as she crouched beside her mother to peer into the distance. She saw the light coming from a large boat, heading towards their direction. This literal light would prove to be their lumen of salvation—the hope and direction that the refugees much desired. Contrary to the Thai boat people, the larger-boat personnel embraced her boat people. Thu-Ha and her fellow travelers were clothed, showered, and given food upon being sheltered on the larger boat’s floating cargo. It was a new life—a new beginning. Thu-Ha remembers seeing the larger-boat personnel sink the small river boat in the ocean. She smiles, recounting the innocent joy of her 9-year-old-self thinking that “at this minute, we made it.”

A companion amid strangers. Her close friend on the floating cargo. A big brother to be remembered. Thu-Ha brightens as she reminisces her dear connection during the journey. He would play games with her so she would not be bored. He would look out for her, making sure she was okay. He travelled alone, but he did not want her to be lonely. Her nostalgic recollection shifts to one of somber, as she remembers discovering that her friend just disappeared one day. After days of search, Thu-Ha received closure that he fell off the floating cargo.
Thu-Ha and I were both silent for a minute. This was a heart-wrenching story of going so close to freedom, but “for some unfortunate reason being unable to complete the journey.” Despite being enraptured in the striking nuances of Thu-Ha’s rebellion and escape, I had to take a pause and realize that Thu-Ha’s story was a success story—the reason why she was able to live in the US and be in my interview. There were still countless untold stories of the less lucky who were unable to complete the journey. I realized that the Black Friday Commemoration event was not only a historical workshop and tribute to those who died, but a voice to spread the stories of those who were unable to.

Thu-Ha concluded to her audience in the Black April Commemoration: “know your history.” However, I would like to expand this idea—know the people of your history. The present is perpetually informed by the memories of the past; the past is perpetually enlightened by the knowledge of the present. The Black April Commemoration Event revived the memory of the Vietnam diaspora after the 1975 fall of Saigon and allowed me to hear the lived empire experience of a boat person. I was opened to an alternate world beyond my reality. I was stirred and saddened as I vicariously experienced the communist empire—a vision of cruelty and oppression that mirrors injustice in the world today. Through oral histories and cultural events, people of all backgrounds are able to empathize with these stories of empire and see the resonance between the past and present. Above all, we must allow these powerful stories to survive time, empower listeners, and effect profound change. They cannot be forgotten.
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Rocks, mud, logs, and bamboo made up the collection of walls surrounded by the mountains of Zacatecas, Mexico. Some of them stood tall. Others had weathered away after nearly three decades of being uninhabited. A large *molcajete* sat in a storage area built into the far wall of the room. It was no longer used to prepare salsas. A single chair sat facing the open door as if it was inviting someone to rest. Outside, the sound of the river drifted up from the bottom of the hill. Its roaring waters were more of a sweet humming in May as it began to rise just before the rainy season. The footage was suddenly cut off before it returned to capture a long, roughly carved bowl holding rusted knives and tools. “I can’t believe it! They’re right where I left them!” The ground was uneven. The camera shook as Alicia tried to film every inch of what was left of her home.

One year later in Los Angeles, Alicia Perez leaned forward in her chair. We were watching the footage she filmed of her childhood home. It had been her first time back in twenty-six years. Her eyes were glued to the television screen, trying to record every pixel into her mind. She took half a second to glance at me out of the corner of her eye to make sure I was enjoying myself as much as she was. Alicia suddenly grabbed my arm. Her other hand shot up to point out the *sapote* tree in the background of the shot. She told me how she used to take naps in its branches whenever she found the time. A small smile formed on her face, no doubt recalling one of those naps in between hours of hard field work. She continued telling stories over her own excited voice on the television. Her words animated visuals of her memorialized past to join the moving pictures on the screen. Her usual calm voice was full of childlike wonder as she relived her youth.
The footage ended and the interview began. Alicia beamed as she recounted the long days when she “rose and set with the sun” to tend to the crops and livestock that fed her siblings. I had never thought anybody would be so overjoyed to remember the never-ending labor required to feed their family. “There was no electricity. We were born in the wild,” she laughed as she answered questions about her childhood. I asked Alicia about the failing Mexican economy and the devaluation of the peso in the 80s. She looked at me with a confused expression before saying, “I was not aware of that … we were mostly self-sufficient. We didn’t really need money.” At that moment, I realized that Alicia knew little beyond her family’s isolated ranch in the mountains before moving to the United States. Thinking about her home placed her back in that safe space, unaffected by the outside world. As the questions moved away from her old home her smile faded.

“When did your family first start thinking about leaving Mexico?”

“We didn’t think about leaving Mexico,” Alicia said almost defensively as if the thought of willingly leaving insulted her. She stopped to pull her camera away from the television and into her lap. She straightened her back before continuing. “We were being mistreated. Abused. We had to escape from my father and his people.”

Alicia was 18 when she and her family left their home in 1990 to live with her grandmother and aunts in the United States. They were being threatened. Attempts had already been made on their lives. Staying in Mexico was not an option, but crossing the border legally was and still is a long process. The 1980 amendment to American immigration law employed a 270,000 world-wide ceiling which cut the already limited number of visas available for high-migrant source countries. This increased the growing backlog of Mexican applicants and prolonged the immigration process. Family reunification, the first preference for immigrants, only applied to the nuclear families of American citizens. This was not the case for Alicia’s family.
The possible twenty years for her fourth-preference mother followed by another decade for the rest of her family to gain legal entry was far too long to wait in Alicia’s situation.

They decided to cross the border illegally.

When Alicia spoke about crossing the border, she whispered as if she was still scared of being caught over twenty-five years later. They crossed from Tijuana to San Diego by foot. She ran through hills and sewage and walked for hours under the darkness of the night. Alicia’s eyes looked far away when I asked what she had to leave behind.

“Everything,” she said as she regained her focus. Her hands tightened their grip on the camera in her lap. Fingers clung tight to the footage we were watching earlier. I was surprised to see such a clear expression of pain on her face. That was the closest I had ever come to seeing her cry. She sighed and her voice returned to her normal tone. She had arrived at her aunt’s house in Los Angeles with only a dirty change of clothes.

The spark from earlier today was gone when we started talking about the United States.

“Amerca was different,” Alicia told me. It took some prodding to get more information about her transition from rural Mexico to urban America. She looked me in the eye and said, “I had a simple life, but suddenly I had to learn how to live in a city with so many people and so little trees. Everything was different.”

Such a simple statement. Everything was different. It occurred to me that Alicia had to learn to navigate concrete streets instead of dirt trails and English instead of Spanish. She was introduced to luxuries powered by electricity and water from a tap instead of a river. For the first time in her life, she had to shop for food at a grocery store. She had to use money. Her signature jabs at American life were suddenly much more than jokes that made me laugh. They were moments when something about American culture still managed to surprise her. The sights, the smells, the sounds, the food, the clothes, the people - everything was different.
Even after settling down and living in the United States for years, Alicia was constantly reminded that California was not her Zacatecas mountains. She always spoke in Spanish to her children, but she found that speaking her native tongue was not welcome in some areas. Alicia shrunk into her seat as she mentioned a time in a South Pasadena grocery store when someone yelled at her for speaking in Spanish to her daughter. The language that was the only link to her past was frowned upon. “We’re in America,” she was told. “You should speak English!”

In Alicia’s eyes, America never showed her the beauty that she found in every blade of grass in Mexico. “I always viewed [America] as a divided place,” she said. A land full of hatred.

Alicia faced years of work discrimination. In the city, possible employers turned her away when they saw her brown skin. Like many other undocumented, she temporarily resorted to working in agriculture. In the strawberry fields of Santa Maria, Alicia was surrounded by her people. About three-fourths of those employed in the fields were migrant workers that came seasonally. Many others were immigrants that resided in the states and originated from rural areas in Mexico. I hoped to hear she felt at least mildly comfortable harvesting crops like she did for her first eighteen years of life, but it was nothing like her childhood ranch.

“I used to pick strawberries up north for little to nothing.” The corners of her lips were pulled down in an anguished expression. My heart sank when she described that portion of her life. The magic Alicia always associated with plants and nature was stripped away. Agriculture in Santa Maria was not the farming she knew and loved. She was not able to watch the fruit grow or reach the mouths of her family. Commercial fields were not something she worked by choice, but by necessity. There was no beauty in picking strawberries in America. It was worlds away from the sapotes and avocados of her Mexican home.
As the interview progressed, Alicia’s downcast eyes narrowed to offer a burning stare. Her slumped posture was replaced with rigid movements accompanied by a reddening face. She was becoming tired of speaking about this country. Alicia felt repeatedly attacked by the land that was supposed to have offered her a new home.

“I’m an immigrant, like many others, who has always made an honest living here. I went to school, I studied hard, I pay my taxes, and I give back to my community. I feel like now with the Trump administration we are targeted even more than before… it’s not going to stop.”

Alicia was reaching her limit. She had nothing positive to say about America beyond the opportunity of education and her current job as a preschool teacher. She had casually mentioned becoming a citizen as if it bored her. Alicia only talked about her children and her ex-husband in passing. She never described anything in United States as home. Alicia told me the hatred some Americans have for her people will never change. Nearing the end of the interview, she was more than upset. Her carefree personality from my usual visits was gone. I asked her my next question assuming I already knew her answer.

“Despite all that, have you ever felt a sense of belonging here?”

“Yeah, I do.” Her anger died down. “I do belong here.”

Alicia’s kind thoughts for America were gone just as quickly as they came when I asked about the future.

“I plan to retire from my teaching position and go back home. I want to go back to Mexico. I’ve had enough of the city.”
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The Refrigerator Magnet

By Arina Adourian

There never seems to be a quiet moment anymore. The stinging sounds of bullets volleying and roaming tanks are clear in the air. There is rubble in the streets, with piles of broken concrete crowded against the crumbling buildings they once belonged to. There is revolutionary graffiti painted in bright green and red letters on the pale walls, professing, “Freedom without a doubt” and “No religion is to be against one’s will.” There is the faint sound of voices shouting, “Allahu Akbar!” before the greater noise of an explosion haunts the empty alleyways of the deserted neighborhood. The thick and sandy dust picked up from the bomb floods the streets and coats the broken buildings.

It happened within a blink of an eye. Life in Syria wasn’t always like this. There weren’t guns, bombs, or the constant feeling of fear. There used to be a rich culture of arts, history, and science created as a product of the diversity of the Syrian people. How could this secular and moderate country turn into a battleground of death and suffering? How could war ravage Syria to the ground?

My family’s story doesn’t begin in Syria. Instead, it is rooted four hundred miles away in historic Armenia. Those who survived the Armenian Genocide in 1915 were driven out to Deir ez-Zor, a little village in the heart of the Syrian desert in a death march, killing over 150,000 people. Some managed to survive by the kindness of Bedouins or Arab villagers in Northern Syria. One of those survivors was my paternal great-grandfather, Levon. It has been nearly a century since Levon marched through the desert and escaped to Aleppo by the skin of his teeth, and while most of his descendants have left the country, a few remain. Namely, my aunt and godmother Nora.
Nora never imagined that the country she had been born and lived in for her entire life could have changed so much. Life was comfortable in Syria, with a sound economy, religious freedom, and a calming sense of safety. The memory of the genocide remained in the past and Syria granted Armenians a new life away from Turkish persecution. Even though her family members left for the West, there was no urgent reason for her to leave. With her husband and children, friends, and property in Syria, it made sense to stay. But in the wake of the destructive civil war, Nora is feeling the repercussions of that decision.

Before we began the interview, Nora asked me if our Skype call would be overheard or intercepted. I assured her that the chances for that to happen were very unlikely, but I do not blame her for her immediate prudence. Distrust of the government and other organizations coupled with severe cautiousness of one's well being have become ordinary traits in the hearts of Syrians. The innocent protect themselves as if they were guilty and are in constant threat of being harmed by violent forces. The disruptive war has created a harsh reality that has in turn changed the mindsets of all Syrians.

Nora watched the Syrian economy crash before her eyes, driving both poverty and unemployment rates over 50%. The three years of war have created a divided country dictated by politics and alliances. Regions controlled by the government are functioning well and have not suffered many food shortages and power outages. However, it is a different story in contested and rebel-controlled areas. It is in these places, like the disputed cities of Homs and Aleppo, that the war is most strongly felt.

As a person who lives in Homs, Nora naturally began with the financial hardships of those living in her city and slowly sighed, “Whoever had money had run out of it and whoever had gold had sold it all. The majority of Armenians owned their own businesses, and those
failed once the war started. No one has much money to buy and no one has much to sell. The private sector is completely dead."

Since the monetary funds of the public have dried up, the Syrian Civil War, like all other wars, has become largely concerned with economics and the country’s many resources, with the most prominent being petroleum. In early 2014, Islamist extremist groups like ISIS and the Nusra Front took control of most Syrian oil resources and are now using the profits to spread their influence among the Syrian people. “Before, only twenty percent of Syrians opposed al-Assad and the government. But once money started playing a larger part in the war, the entire situation changed. The outsiders started giving money to people who opposed Bashar and those people started sheltering the foreign fighters in their homes. Saudi Arabia is giving millions for this with the thought that Syria’s gas and other resources will become theirs.”

When I asked her why civilians are being swayed so easily, she gave me a look of dejection and quietly explained, “Of course people are going to be bought and sold by rich extremists when money starts exchanging hands. Both the government and the opposition pay their supporters, month by month. People who are in the middle, people who don’t support or work for the regime or the jihadists, are left without support to fend for themselves.” She sighed once again and remained quiet for a moment, retracing the warped reality of her country silently in her mind.

The entire dynamic of the war is centered around the monetary state of the general public, with both the government and the opposition basing their strategies to not only attract popular support but to launch attacks as well. “The neighborhoods that don’t embrace the terrorists are protected by the government. Those that do embrace the opposition and shelter them in their homes become the ones targeted and destroyed.”
But the entire situation isn’t clean cut and defined; it is instead dominated by chaos, confusion, and chance. Nora paused for a moment when I asked her about the thousands of casualties of the war and took a deep breath to keep her composure, but nonetheless her voice rose as the words rolled off her tongue, exclaiming, “People get killed no matter where they are. A lot of those who died were sitting in their homes when they were killed. Bullets come in from the windows and rockets crash in from the ceiling. The jihadists make propane tank rockets and bombs that explode into shards. Their main objective is to kill as many people as possible. It’s a matter of luck, honestly. Our cousin’s fiancee was waiting for him on the balcony when a bullet hit her in the head. She died right there as she was waiting to see him come home from work.”

She recounted the woman’s death with a tone of resignation instead of sadness in her voice, highlighting the commonplace of accidental deaths suffered by everyday Syrians. This is the bitter reality of the Syrian Civil War: an incalculable amount of innocent civilians are being killed, tortured, and victimized while two belligerent sides battle for power, money, and pride.

I gently asked her if she wanted to share any of her personal encounters with the war. She nodded quietly and gave me a faint smile, signaling her compliance despite her instinctual hesitation to share stories of a disturbing nature. She started in a quiet voice as she recounted, “I was making dinner in the kitchen one day. There were lots of noises outside; guns, bombs, yells. I walked over to the fridge to get something and I walked back to the oven. A split second later, a bullet comes through the window and hits the refrigerator door.”

She stopped for a moment and shook her head as if in disbelief, and continued with a stronger timbre in her words. “The plastic watermelon magnet stopped the bullet, and it fell to the ground. If I had been standing there that second, I might’ve not survived. Maybe it was luck or maybe it was coincidence, but it pains me to think that my children could have lost their mother.”
There was another pause in her thoughts as she reprocessed the likely possible situation. “What would they have done then? How could they survive? This is happening to everyone. People lose their mothers, fathers, siblings, and children every day. One rogue bullet can destroy a family. And as a result, the war is destroying our country and our future.”

I remember darting my gaze from her eyes, not willing to imagine such suffering for my family members. But the unimaginable has become the living truth for 22 million Syrians, with each one of them having to deal with this uncertainty and constant threat of death. Nowhere in the country are the people living in peace; they are all suffering in the midst of ceaseless attacks.

She laughed as she told me, “You should see how I walk in the street when I need to leave the house,” but her lightheartedness was short-lived as she recounted the reason for the urgency in her steps. “I walk very fast because I’m scared of the bombs and the attacks. It was never like this before the war. Anyone could stay out until one o’clock in the morning. There was no danger, everything was safe. Now, everyone is home by five o’clock. The streets empty immediately because everyone is terrified of being attacked. Just recently, fifty people died because of two car bombings in our city, Homs. In another, someone was crucified alive by the opposition. There isn’t a safe place in the entire country.”

The only thought that ran into my mind was the welfare of my own cousins, progressive young adults living in a deteriorating country. What future do they have to look forward to? How will they manage to survive? I soon realized that millions of young people like my cousins are needlessly suffering from the inhumane and rash actions committed by the masters of war. The war will persist in their memories for decades to come, carrying the burden of a war they had never wished for.
“The children are scared as well. Schools are open, but kids go in fear every day. Not all children go to school anymore, though. The jihadists recruit ten year olds and teach them how to shoot and how to kill. They say, ‘See these people, they’re not like us. We have to kill them.’ That’s the absolute worst part of this entire situation. They bring the brutality of war to the youth, our next generation. They are ruining the present as well as the future of the country with their war.”

Indeed, the future of Syria remains unclear and undecided, as both belligerents face a bitter stalemate with no end in sight. The only thing that is guaranteed is that the country has a long journey until it recovers from its Civil War. With its infrastructure destroyed, international sanctions imposed against it, and inflation running rampantly, it will take the country over three decades for its economy to return to its post-war state. But it will take an even longer time for the country’s people, the innocent victims of a needless war, to heal from their losses and to make sense of the horrors that they lived through.

The most profound thing that Nora told me during our interview was, “You should hear the noises outside, Arina. They go on for the entire day. It’s as if the noises turned into music.”

At what point do the cold and heartless atrocities of war become synonymous with the manifestation of human artistry, emotion, and expression? When did the sounds of explosions, machine guns, and helicopters replace the power of the human voice?

The war will only end when the Syrian people regain their voices and music is heard in the streets instead of the echoes of violence. And when the day finally comes that the innocent can speak freely without fear or hesitation, the world should be ready to listen to them. Their stories, like my aunt Nora’s and the many like hers, are worth being told.
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