

Memoir

A Line Crossed¹

Mariam Chamseddine

I sat on the sun-warmed steps of our house in Shaqra, running my fingers through my cat Shams's fur as my bird, Musho, sang nearby. The afternoon smelled of olives and thyme, the scent of my Jnoub, my homeland. Amid the calm, an Israeli drone buzzed above my head like an annoying bee that wouldn't leave me alone. It had been this way for a while since the start of the war in South Lebanon on October 8. Tensions had been rising, and my family and I were on edge, fearing that any day, our lives would be turned upside down. But I held on to my faith, believing my land would remain safe and protected.

My mother called me for lunch, and we gathered at the table in our garden – my mother, father, brother, and I, and of course, Shams. This was my favorite place at home.

"The situation is starting to deteriorate. Maybe we should leave," my father said.
"Never. I'm staying in my home. This is our land, and we will remain here," my mother replied, her voice firm.

Our village lay near the Lebanese border, the only thing separating us from the occupied land of Palestine being a thin line on a map. Despite the wars and tensions that had scarred our land, the people of Shaqra and the South held tight to their hometowns, their roots deeper than the trees.

The next morning, I woke up to Musho's humming, but also something else. The neighbor's screams echoed through the village.

"Leave now! They issued a warning. They're going to start bombing Shaqra!"

The sound of honking cars, people screaming, and children crying filled the air. The phone rang. I picked it up, but I could barely make out the automated message, its words blending together.

"Evacuate your house. The Israeli Defense Army is..."

I dropped the phone. My breath caught in my throat. I froze. Thoughts spiraled in my head. I need to tell my parents. *We need to leave. My family. My house. My cat. My bird.*

I forced myself to move and ran toward them, shouting words of panic I couldn't remember. All I knew was that we were trying to pack our whole lives into a bag. *But how do you carry your whole house on your shoulders and leave?* I snapped back to reality and ran toward Shams and Musho.

"Zeina, quick, we have to leave!" my father shouted.

But I can't leave them. I can never.

"Zeina! Your brother, I can't find him!" my mother screamed.

My hands shook as I gasped for breath. I ran to my brother's room and found him curled under the bed, crying. The sound of an airstrike in the distance. People screaming. *There was no more time.*

I pulled my brother from under the bed and ran toward the car. I turned back to grab Musho and Shams, but my mother seized my hand and pushed me inside. One last look at my house. Shams sat on the stairs, his confused orange eyes watching, as if saying, *"goodbye, don't be gone too long."*

My father drove at full speed. The image of my house grew smaller and smaller, until an airstrike hit it. And then, there was nothing. Just rubble. Our whole lives collapsed before our eyes.

I don't remember what happened next. My mind went blank. I was still alive, but my soul had died back there, in my house.

We spent 17 hours in the car that day, trapped in traffic as all the residents of the South fled their homes, displaced once again because an evil entity was committing massacres against men, women, children, animals, historical sites, and every stone in our land.

My heart was heavy. *What about my friends from my village and other villages in the South?* My phone was flooded with messages and calls, but I couldn't bring myself to answer. My parents desperately searched for a place to stay. After countless attempts, a friend of theirs secured a small house in Tripoli.

When we arrived, we entered a small room, probably a storage space. There were four mattresses, a small bathroom, a kitchen sink, a tiny stove, and a refrigerator. *This was where we would stay.*

Figure 1. Illustration by Nahla El-Amine

Figure 2. Illustration by Nahla El-Amine



The days passed, each one bringing more devastating news. I lost friends to this cruel war, and it felt like I had nothing left to cling to. Like everyone else, I tried to accept my fate and blend into a city where I felt like a foreigner. Despite being Lebanese, I was a stranger here.

My Jnoubi accent slipped while I was talking to people, and the fact that we barely brought any clothes made it obvious that we were displaced. Some people were kind, others gave us strange and hostile looks. I looked at the people around me, these people, who live in the same country as I, but have a different identity. A border might be just a line on a map, thin, invisible, meaningless to those who never lived near it. But for us, it was the difference between staying and running, between belonging and being erased.

I was torn apart, and I no longer knew who I was. Autumn arrived, but the falling leaves looked different from the ones I saw every year. The house that was so dear to me, the view from my window, the autumn wind, the first thunderstorm, all new.

I wandered the streets of this unfamiliar city, reaching for a fragment of the me I once knew. It was all left behind, in the place that used to be me. I was my house, my room, my clothes, the books beside my bed, the trees outside my window. I was my neighbor across the street. The pharmacy around the corner. Its owners are now nameless ghosts. Were they dead or alive? If all of this was lost, what remained of me?

I woke up in the middle of the night from terrifying nightmares, but real life was worse. The images of Musho and Shams, my friends, my people, **lying dead under the rubble**, haunted me every day. They remained in the heart of my torn land, wrapped in blankets of resilience.

"We will return soon. It will all be over," my father tried to comfort me.

But to what would we return?

There was no home left. The guilt of leaving my pets behind, of abandoning my land, of sitting helplessly while my people suffered, ate me alive until there was nothing left.

News of a truce came, and on November 27, 2024, the war supposedly ended.

On the second day, we headed back to our village. My stomach twisted in fear. What would be waiting for us?

We arrived in Shaqra after driving past collapsed villages and ghost towns. I barely recognized my home. The houses were gone. More than just stone, years and years of memories, sadness and joy, reduced to dust.

The smell of rotting bodies, both animal and human, filled the air. But it wasn't just bodies that had bled. It was souls, too.

A cloudy, gray sky hung over my town. The cold air carried dust, smoke, and sorrow.

I walked through the streets where my friends and I had spent our childhood. But the carpet-bombing had erased it all.

Figure 3. Al Janoub, Lebanon. November 27, 2024



*I have run out of words, for they have lost their power.
The brutality prevails. The bleeding doesn't stop.
I belong nowhere, abandoned by feeling.
And suddenly, I understood.
The border isn't just a place.
It's the space between who you were
and who you can never be again.*

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ENDNOTE

1. My story explores the theme of boundaries, not just the ones on a map, but the ones inside the character. The war forced her to cross a physical border, leaving behind her home, her past, and the life she knew. But she also had to face invisible borders, the ones between who she was before and who she is now. Losing a home wasn't just about losing a place; it was about losing a part of yourself. This war and displacement made Zeina, the protagonist, realize that some boundaries, once crossed, change you forever. Some things, once lost, can never truly be regained. This story is inspired by what many of the Lebanese families went through during the war.