Wild flowers of Palestine. Poison hemlock (Conium maculatum L). Library of Congress, G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection

Learning Arabic

Laura Kraftowitz

When I arrived, Sarari pulled me close to kiss me on both cheeks.

“Ahlan, ahlan, keefik?” she asked.

“Alhamdulillah,” I replied with one of the ten Arabic words I knew. “Wa inti?”

She responded in rapid fire until she saw my blank face and remembered to dumb it down.
“Batata, sakina.” She handed me and my colleague Joe potatoes and

knives, navigating our tiny vocabulary with practical economy. She threw two eggplants on the burning branches as we sat next to her, discarding slivers of potato skin into a plastic bowl, cutting the flesh into spears as she peeled three for every one of ours, then took the last from our hands. The eggplants seeped through blackened skin and smelled of smoke. We carried the potatoes to the kitchen, where Nahed was waiting beside a steaming pan of oil, her green eyes framed by a loose magenta hijab. She gave the spears a stir and they wilted and browned as she called for her kids to come in from the wheatfield.

It was easy and familial to be in this house run by women. Its veranda overlooked orange and fig trees, the living room floor lined with hand-painted tiles. Every morning, there was a gentle breeze moving blankets on a line. But there were other reminders: the bullet hole above the refrigerator, the empty bedroom that was too dangerous to sleep in because it faced the sniper tower. And Nahed's husband, Fuad, was never around: he spent nights at his sister's family's home to avoid the army's raids, their habit of snatching up men his age and imprisoning them without charge. His mother, Sarari, filled her son's absence.

After dinner, Joe leaned against the wall and played guitar with the twins, who took turns strumming in matching fire truck pajamas. Asma, the oldest, a skinny girl with freckles and a long ponytail, sat with me by the space heater, diagramming sentences in her English schoolbook. Arij ran around singing made-up songs, holding our faces with her tiny hands, hanging from our necks. Outside, there were a few staccato pops of gunfire, followed by several loud cracks too close for comfort. The loudest made Nahed run from the kitchen to make sure we were all near the ground, and when it was quiet again, Asma showed me the illustrated Arabic alphabet on her bedroom door and pointed down its rows like a schoolteacher. My tongue stumbled over the syllables.

"It was easy and familial to be in this house run by women. Its veranda overlooked orange and fig trees, the living room floor lined with hand-painted tiles. Every morning, there was a gentle breeze moving blankets on a line. But there were other reminders: the bullet hole above the refrigerator, the empty bedroom that was too dangerous to sleep in because it faced the sniper tower."

By then, I'd been officially trained over days of continuous meetings. I'd learned to say "consensus decision-making," "collective punishment," and "Fourth Geneva Convention;" how to stand on a balcony holding a bullhorn, announcing myself to the military as an "unarmed international." I'd stopped saying IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, and switched to IOF, the Israeli Occupying Forces. I'd been over the distinctions between rubber bullets, rubber-coated bullets, and live ammunition. From the South Africans, I'd learned of the "one-state solution," which applied the one person, one vote model to Israelis and Palestinians with the goal of tearing down the walls between them.

This training was a crash course that upended all I thought I'd known about Israel. As a Jewish American, I'd been raised not to think about it much, beyond some vague support for a liberal democracy that was supposed to be a safe haven for my people. Now I'd seen Israeli tank drivers throw sound grenades and tear gas canisters to provoke chaos at unarmed protests. I could hear the difference between the empty machine-gun bursts when sniper towers blanketed the sky, and the isolated double-snaps when they zeroed in. I knew a tank shell made a low, resounding boom, a land mine a high-pitched crack. I'd memorized the procedures for high-risk situations, the talking points for journalists. I knew it all in theory, if not in practice. But when the lights went out the next night, and Nahed dropped her spatula in oil and silently beckoned for us to look out the window at the panel of the Separation Wall that was opening like a giant mouth, I realized no training could brace me for the procession of bulldozers and tanks I saw grinding toward us single file.

Nahed yelled for the kids, turned off the stove and ran for the suitcases, shouting over her shoulder that we should go with them.

"Maybe we should," said Joe. He looked scared.

"Aren't we supposed to stay to protect the house?"

"I don't know." His voice was plaintive. "Usually, the family stays and we take their lead." The kids came in from the wheatfield and grabbed the contingency bags from their mother as Joe asked what I thought we should do and I looked at him like he was crazy. He was the one who was supposed to know what to do, he'd gotten here three months before I had. The gate closed and the family disappeared down the street. The only sound left was the lumbering squeak of tank treads moving nearer.

"I guess it's decided," said Joe, mostly to himself. "But it's okay, we're gonna be okay."

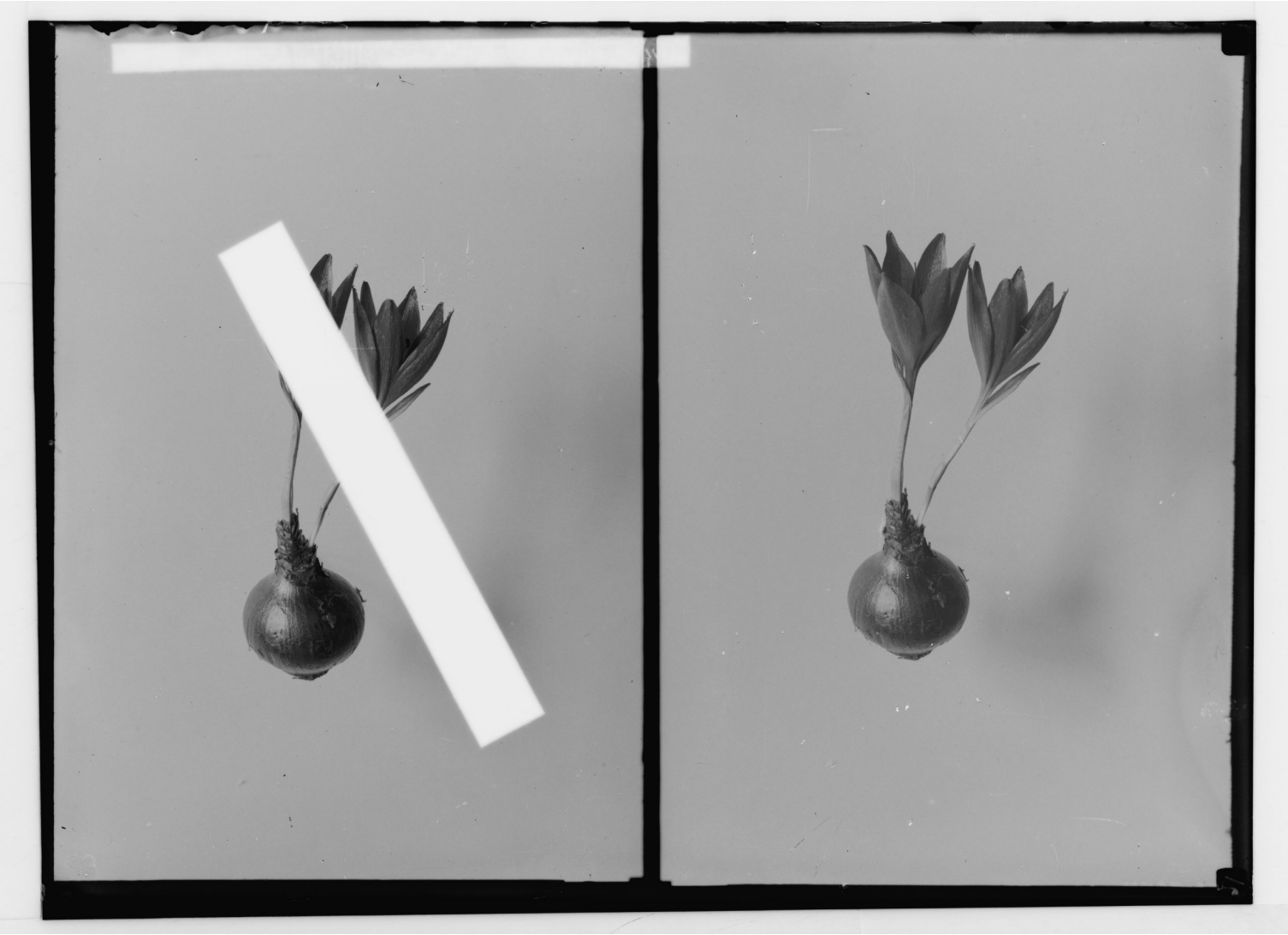
"What's that sound?" I knew what it was, just hoped I was wrong. It was a whipping sound.

"An Apache." He got almost manic. "Grab the banner it's in the living room I'll carry the light and we'll go to the roof so they—"

"The roof?"

"It's safer if the army knows we're here."

"That's insane, no." However, I considered his logic. If we didn't make ourselves known, the army might assume the house was empty and drop a missile. If we left, they'd have visual confirmation it was empty and demolish it. And we couldn't walk back to the office with Apaches overhead. Joe's plan was the only plan.



Wild flowers of Palestine. Yellow amaryllis (Sternbergia Clusiana Gawl). Library of Congress, G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection

Wordlessly, we threw on our orange vests, got our gear and headed up the truncated staircase as the whipping grew louder, blowing my hair in my face and covering my arms in goosebumps, until I saw the black contours of the helicopter, barely discernible against the night.

It was breathtaking in the literal sense, standing on the roof surrounded by war machines. The city in blackness, the earth shaking below. Between me and the blinking red light of an attack helicopter was nothing but a wide open sky. It was not dissimilar from standing atop the cliff at Masada, looking out at folds of desert, considering how easy it would be to jump.

The helicopter's floodlight burst on, drowning out our emergency flare. I stood in the blare of the light, waving Sarari's white headscarf like a surrender flag as Joe held the bullhorn to his lips. "We are Americans! This is a family's home! Please do not shoot!"

The floodlight clicked off. The cockpit's red eye continued to blink. The helicopter crept forward as a loud blast shook the neighborhood. My body

went weak. I thought I might die any second, in the dark on the roof, and be found in the rubble of Nahed's home, like so many Gazans I'd seen in the news. Then I realized I was grabbing Joe and staggering downstairs, as the train of bulldozers and tanks arrived in the street and a bright flash lit the border. The street shuddered and the night went silent. From the veranda, I looked out at the neighborhood's darkened windows.

All the tanks started firing at once. I hit the ground, holding my hands over my ears as Joe buried his head in his lap, lifting it briefly to yell through the bullhorn, barely audible now, "We're Americans, a family lives here, please stop shooting!" He repeated himself, screaming over the staticky speaker. Just then, as a response, a tank fired a shell ten yards from the house, sending clouds of gravel and dirt in every direction, a warning to get out of their way.

Joe dashed inside without looking back as I scrambled to my feet. I found him crouched in the corner of the tiled living room, calling the press office and, following his lead, I sat near him and called the government officials whose numbers I'd saved in my phone during training.

The Israeli commander of the southern Gaza Strip didn't pick up. The Palestinian liaison to the Israeli commander declined to relay our coordinates, saying it was pointless because they weren't answering his calls either. Joe stood up now and paced back and forth, talking to a reporter. "At least two dozen tanks and five D9 military bulldozers," he was saying. "Four children and their mother and their grandmother," he said into the phone. "They fled when they saw the tanks." No longer drowning in fear and adrenaline, now he was riding it like a wave, passionately relaying what he'd witnessed and faced down. A storm chaser, I thought, watching him, trying to keep up and do my part.

The American embassy's night shift operator picked up my call. "Gaza is under travel advisory," he said perfunctorily. My Nokia was down to two bars. Our emergency light illuminated the fluorescent strips on Joe's vest as he stuck his thumb up and down. I shook my head and made a thumbs down.

I'd read the travel advisory, of course, an orange banner on the embassy website: *Reconsider travel. The US government is unable to provide emergency services*. I'd come anyway. With the American embassy, my goal wasn't to extract protection I knew wouldn't be offered, but a talking point for the press. Citizens from other countries could expect slightly more, but with the Americans there was only an indifferent No and a glimmer of disdain.

Wild flowers of Palestine. Field of blue lupines. Library of Congress, G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection

The emergency light flickered off. Joe crouched to shape a piece of foil into a small boat, adding twine, a pinch of wax, olive oil. The wick crackled, the flame threw shadows across the hand-painted tiles, tan and olive and turquoise brushstrokes of flowers and trees and sky. “You hungry?” Outside, a thunderous crack shook the floor. “I saw lentils. I can make soup.”

“Maybe a little later.” It was coming from the west, or maybe the east, Joe was better at knowing, or at least saying he knew. My phone rang as though in response to the explosion, but it was the prodding voice of a reporter from Chicago, requesting information I wouldn’t have till morning. How many casualties, how many houses down, and if it’s so unsafe, why don’t you leave? It wasn’t an unkind question. More than anything, he sounded concerned, and I imagined him bored in the safety of a climate-controlled newsroom with gray carpet. It was only my second interview. Joe was on the phone again rattling off statistics, his ponytail backlit by the deadly glitter in the sky.

Listening to the rhythmic sounds of metal hitting cement, I summoned words for the Chicago reporter, shook them out from somewhere empty as the family’s dresser drawers. I should tell him there’s a wheatfield where a four-year-old girl with ringlets and dimples sings to herself while her brothers hide in stalks playing Soldiers and Moqawama. I should tell him her parents celebrated their wedding on the rooftop dancing with family and friends. I should tell him her father built the house with money he earned in Tel Aviv cooking for tourists on the beach. That it was my job to stay because I came from the place that built the bulldozers that would one day shatter their home, that their lives were being destroyed in my name and the names of my Jewish ancestors, so I’d come to sit with them in their doomed house and dread the inevitable.

But I didn’t say any of that. I repeated a few bullet points and choked on

my words. Soon after, my phone battery died. Then Joe's battery died, too, and we went to the kitchen to cook lemony lentils and eat soup out of the pot until we were full, as the sound of cinder blocks breaking grew softer, like hands that dropped what they carried. The windows slowly brightened. Dawn was coming with the clarity of numbers and names. The family's house had been spared, and they would be back soon.

We collapsed onto the children's mattresses and when I woke, the kitchen was tidied as though nothing had happened. Joe was on the veranda. Asma and the boys were hanging from the orange tree limbs, plucking the ripest fruits. Nahed and Sarari were clucking over our culinary attempts, teasing me that Joe was the better cook and I'd better learn if I ever wanted to get married.

Arij pulled me over to play in a crater from another invasion that had torn a hole in the wall taller than she was. Through it, I could see a fresh six-foot crater scarring the ground. She grabbed fistfuls of damp sand, and I watched it drop through her fingers. She climbed on my lap and tapped my cheeks with her sandy fingers, laughing. She pointed at the disfigured land. Debaba, she said, tank, using words Asma had taught me. Jiraffa, bulldozer. Shajara, tree. She opened her hand and passed a fist across her palm. Khallas, finished. She looked briefly serious, then laughed and crawled off my lap.

When the army razed the wheatfield a week later, enough stalks still grew for harvest. In the mornings, Asma picked oranges for us. Patiently, she taught me Arabic in rough sentences, and I rediscovered the sound of my voice.

Fall / Winter 2024

Laura Kraftowitz

Laura Kraftowitz is the cofounder of City of Asylum/Detroit and an organizer with Jewish Voices for Peace. Her writing appears in the *Kenyon Review*, *Protean*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and elsewhere.

The G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection

The G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection in the Library of Congress is a rich source of historical images of the Middle East. The majority of the images depict Palestine (present day Israel and the West Bank) from 1898 to 1946.