

A World on Fire

by Fatima Bhutto

On the afternoon of August 4th, 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate explodes in Beirut. Thousands of miles away, I watch video after video of the blast, my heart shuddering. The explosion was twenty times stronger than GBU-43/B, or as it's popularly known, Massive Ordnance Air Blast or MOAB, the mother of all bombs, a weapon only used once in history when the United States dropped it on Afghanistan. The MOAB is the largest non-nuclear weapon in the United States's arsenal. It has a blast yield of 11 tons. Beirut absorbed 2,750 tons. Pope Francis said that he was ashamed at MOAB's nickname. Mothers, the Pope said, give life and this only death. "Mother" can only go so far; there is no feminine word for a weapon nearly three times the MOAB's size and damage.

I send and receive messages to Beirut over the night. I grew up in next door Syria, spending my childhood in Damascus. Many of my friends and their families, exiled by a nearly decade-long war, had crossed the border for refuge. I visited Beirut for the first time when I was a child, too small to see very far out of the car window, but I remember even then the smell of the salt air and the shells and bullets that pockmarked every building. A Lebanese friend replies to my message with a voice note. In a slow, deliberate voice, he tells me he is ok, he and his family are safe. They narrowly avoided being at the office, steps away from the port. Before his recording ends, he apologises for not writing and speaking instead, "My hands are filled with rubble."

It is the saddest thing I have heard a man to hold in his hands.

All my friends' homes are destroyed. Another one loses a father. I send messages and even though my palms are empty, I record voice notes too and remind myself how much warmer our language must be now that we have lost, in this pandemic, so many things and so much touch. I think of the poet, Danez Smith: " 'Solidarity' is a word, a lot of people say it/I'm not sure what it means in the flesh/ I know I love and have cried for my friends."

I had planned to write an essay in response to PEN International's women's manifesto on the principle of non-violence. The manifesto calls, as its first call of action, for the end of "violence against women and girls in all of its forms, including legal, physical, sexual, psychological, verbal and digital," and asks that compensation be provided for victims of violence. I have watched the cold theatre of violence my whole life; I know that there is no compensation, no tangible or abstract recompense that can be offered to someone whose life has been fractured by the spectacular experience of surviving violence. None. This is why the divine offers us heaven, an otherworldly promise, because nothing on earth can be gifted to compensate for injustice. I return to the text and though so many forms of violence have been carefully considered, there is too much violence in this too much world of ours to articulate.

What do we call the horror that stretches across our present age like a canopy, a kind of shadow violence, the sort we are all guilty of: violence of the ignored, utterly avoidable variety. The casual violence of cruelty. The violence of poverty, denial, lack of care, of turning our attention away from slow burning fires that we ought to be duty bound to watch and hold in our eyes. We are not innocents here, but shadow men, looking the other way while havoc is wrought in our silence.

The Trump age may be accused of many things, but its defilement of language has been constant. It has deflated the sacred meaning of the word “resistance,” which can now be employed to denote one’s reading of a certain book or attending a protest, or simply disliking a politician or liking another one. In 2017, I heard a much-lauded writer speak of how her life had changed since “joining the resistance” and how she now understood what our sisters in Bosnia and Rwanda went through. But she was speaking of women’s marches and pink pussy hats, not surviving rape camps or organized ethnic cleansing. She spoke of no underground cells, no radical sabotage of the imagination, no subterranean brotherhood engaging in acts of good trouble. Resistance has been demoted to a performance of likes and dislikes, a situating of the self in the centre of the world. But to resist is not simply an act of refusal, of holding back against a drowning tide; it is to act totally with love in a world of sinister complicity.

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COVID-19 has been democratic in its infection, unchecked, moving freely and rapidly across continents. But that’s where the democracy of this pandemic ends. This is a plague brought by the rich, whose dominion is a borderless world of private jets, Davos, and Austrian ski slopes. The wealthy may be the only other species besides the virus who live undeterred and unrestricted by borders. India, where as of August, the virus is growing at the fastest rate in the world, is but one demonstration of this: *The Guardian* reported that the virus entered the country not through its crowded, congested metropolises or impoverished rural areas but was carried into India by the top 2 percent of the population, those rich enough to travel abroad. In the port city of

Mumbai, a twin city to my own hometown, Karachi, 50 percent of people living in slums have been infected. Only 16 percent of Mumbai's non-slum dwellers, on the other hand, have fallen ill. Over 9 million people, or forty-one percent of Mumbai's population, lives in cramped slums, but the title for largest slum in Asia comes from across the border. Orangi Town in Karachi is the largest, Dharavi in Mumbai is the second biggest. In this way, we have been failing our people long before COVID-19 gave us new and bountiful opportunities to do so.

There is a group more invisible, more violated, than women: the world's poor. Though within this bracket, women's suffering is manifold. The ten countries most vulnerable to climate change, countries that suffer disproportionately higher impacts of our environmental destruction, are not the countries most responsible for polluting the earth. Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Haiti, the Philippines, Thailand, Domenica, and Puerto Rico are not industrial giants but poor nations with struggling populations who will bear the brunt of climate change. A recent study found that the wealthiest ten percent of the world are responsible for up to 40 percent of global environmental damage. The poorest ten percent of our planet can be held responsible for less than 5 percent.

In these countries, where men work for pennies a day, if they lock down, they and their families die. What name is there for this violence? Bangladeshis drowning in floods, Indian migrant workers dying on forced marches home, walking 100 kilometres on foot, Pakistani farmers starving because swarms of locusts, arriving like a pink cloud of haze, have laid waste to their crops: what do you call these everyday ravages? What do you call it when the richest countries in the world are responsible for the largest carbon dioxide emissions, year after year, decade after

decade, but the consequences of their pollution are paid for by the world's poor? By the people who emit the *least* waste in the world?

Acknowledging their responsibility in literally having set the world on fire, in 2009 wealthy, industrialized—and largely western—countries pledged to raise an annual \$100 billion for climate change vulnerable states up until this year, 2020. The less said about promises, the better. They are broken. Men don't keep promises and one doesn't need to understand why. Promises are made every hour of the day because they are easy, they are broken because we fear no enforcement of our word and bond. They are broken because we are careless. The world's richest nations have failed every single year to live up to their word.

It's not laziness, but criminal, to feign ignorance of the havoc we have wrought on the world. We have encroached, invaded and occupied so much land, scorched so much earth, erased the wild and free habitats of so many animals. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Eric Yong writes that "coronaviruses were formally a niche family, of mainly veterinary importance." In his thorough, terrifying article, Yong notes that "wild animals harbour an estimated 40,000 unknown viruses, a quarter of which could potentially jump into humans." We have placed ourselves at the mercy of these risky odds knowingly, on purpose. We have bulldozed wild animal's natural habitats, we have razed their forests, sending them fleeing into smaller and smaller refuges, we have built condos and office buildings and shopping malls and countless other cement monstrosities over land that once sustained rich and thriving ecosystems.

We are the virus and we are the plague. President Trump called the coronavirus the "kung flu" and blamed it on the Chinese, setting off attacks on people of Asian descent and origin. The Indian health ministry pointed its own bloody finger at an Islamic seminary. In response, Muslims were beaten and lynched and a spate

of videos were spread urging Muslims not to wear masks. One disinformation video even promised Muslims that hugging and shaking hands would cure them of the coronavirus. In Pakistan, the families of sick patients attacked doctors with sticks. In Brazil, after first dismissing the seriousness of the virus and then contracting it himself, President Jair Bolsonaro was cavalier as Brazil rapidly became deluged with infections. On the day that Brazil recorded its highest number of daily cases, Bolsonaro was asked what he would say to the families of COVID-19 patients. "Death is everyone's destiny," he shrugged.

When the accounting of this period comes, because it must, it will be a trial to sift through all the fatalities and separate which of the deaths could have been avoided but were hastened by utter lack of care.

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Isolated from the world, feeling our personal lockdowns acutely, we find solace in calling friends and transitioning from real life to a virtual existence online. On lonely days, how many of us found it hard to see our fortune?

Kashmir has been in darkness for over a year. On midnight of August 4th, another sorrowful August 4th, the phone lines and internet connections in Kashmir were cut, putting seven million people – the majority of whom are Muslims – under a communications siege. A curfew accompanied the digital blackout which continues largely unchanged till today. Two days after cutting the tongues of the valley, the right-wing government of Narendra Modi stripped Kashmir of its autonomy, arrested thousands of people, politicians and civilians alike, and brought life in the hunted region to a standstill. Schools were shut, hospitals no longer able to order medicine

or equipment, and an entire population was removed from the world and each other. Overnight, Modi's government did what 72 years of agitation, militancy, protests, diplomacy, lobbying, and political campaigning couldn't: he forced the eyes of the world to behold Kashmir and its people. To date, Modi's government has imposed the longest ever internet blackout by a democratic country. The internet has been off for so long, returning in only spurts and trial runs, that Kashmiri Whatsapp accounts have been automatically deleted from lack of use.

'Comrades, give us a new form of art – an art that pulls the Republic by its hair out of the mud,' Vladimir Mayakovsky, that brave Soviet poet, wrote. I don't speak of Kashmir as a Pakistani; I speak as someone whose eyes can no longer remain closed and who, thanks to the transparent cruelty of the state, has been forced to watch. I speak of Kashmir as someone who believes certain rights to be inviolable: the right to speak freely, to communicate, to read, to think, to learn, to receive care, to err, to protest, to love. I speak as someone who has never been denied even a fraction of those inviolable rights. I speak as Mayakovsky did, to comrades near and far with art far braver than my own. I speak as someone who loves language and wonders whether barbarism can be so easily cloaked under polite names. We must be grateful that the lies of our age are so obvious. This is a generous gift all those violent, false prophets have given us: they are bad storytellers.

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Before thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate lit the city of Beirut ablaze, the Lebanese lira had already lost 80 percent of its value. Banks were allowing only the lowest withdrawals possible, there was electricity for just a few hours a day and children were hungry. According to the United Nations, by the end of April this year,

over half the country was struggling to put basic foodstuffs on their tables. By June, food inflation had hit 200 percent. In July, a 61-year-old man killed himself in Hamra, near a Dunkin Donuts. Next to his body was a copy of his unblemished judicial record and a note: "I'm not a heretic," it said, quoting from a Ziad Rahbani song, "but hunger is heresy."

I am at a loss for what we can call hunger and hopelessness except violence. I don't know enough words to know what we call it when 300,000 people become homeless overnight. I don't know if these are stories for me to tell, but they pain me. Our ability to constantly absorb pain and carry on living can only be described as a kind of sorcery. Recently, I heard the writer and activist V speak to a small gathering online. Be dangerous in the face of this, she said, referring to our strange, turbulent times. When the world is spinning backwards, what is the most radical thing you can do? You can go all the way, V said, go all the way in this.

We are fragile, imperfect beings. But we are so fortunate, extraordinarily rich in luck and magic. Whatever our damage, we can struggle not to be shadow men and women in the face of quiet, constant, inexhaustible violence. "If they come for me in the morning, they will come for you at night," Angela Davis said.

Beirut, Beyouth, Bayrut, Beyrut, Birut, Berot, Berytus, Beratos. When will we meet again on the Levantine coast? Who will remain, who among us will survive long enough, to stand on the soil of this ancient port city for a reunion in better times? When men hold babies they touch their faces lightly, with their open palms and their fingers splayed wide, the way you touch a delicate, breakable thing. I wonder if men must become fathers to know such grace. I know they don't have it before. One day, I see a man in the park lying in the grass, his baby is stretched across his chest and they are laughing. The father lifts his head and smiles brightly at his child and the

child, eyes wide, tilts his small head as far as it will go and howls with delight. I watch them, touched that such joy exists in the world. That it can exist even as cities explode and populations sicken and fires rage. The man looks luminous. When he sits up from the grass, as he and his family pack up their things, I see his face for a moment before he returns his mask. He is not handsome, not at all. But he is beautiful, he is happy. If Frank O'Hara was right and in "times of crisis we must all decide again and again whom to love," then the answer can only be a pulse, a beating throb: everyone everyone everyone.

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