CHAPTER 14

Did We Survive Torture?

Mansoor Adayfi

In 2001, Mansoor Adayfi, originally from Yemen, was captured in Afghanistan and transferred to the custody of US forces in the country. He was rendered to Guantánamo (GTMO) soon after it opened in 2002, and he spent nearly fifteen years there without charge. In 2016, he was released to Serbia. In this final essay of the volume, Adayfi considers the difference between living through and surviving the experience of enforced disappearance, rendition, and torture. Speaking for himself as well as for other detainees who remain in Guantánamo or who have been repatriated, he explains that although he is alive, he is not sure he survived: parts of him are irreparably damaged, and, he writes, "I am still trying to escape."

Adayfi focuses on the role of writing and artistic production as a means of self-expression, self-preservation, and witnessing. And, although he focuses on the institutional and material constraints on artistic and literary self-expression in Guantánamo, it is clear that the act of writing this essay (which also includes transcribed excerpts from a recent video interview) is itself part of the process of reclaiming that right to witness. In terms of life

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writing—and, we might add, self-portraiture—Adayfi's essay is both personal and collective. Written in the shifting pronouns of both a non-native speaker and thoughtful authorship, his style aptly represents his own experiences, those that he witnessed directly, and the experiences of men whose continued imprisonment or mental collapse prohibits their own testimony. In detailing the extraordinary restraints on personal expression within Guantánamo—for instance, using tea bags for ink and painting while being shackled to the floor, he simultaneously attests to the challenges and the importance of self-expression in aesthetic modes to survival.

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Life is most beautiful, powerful and precious, wherever you are. I wanted to write about our torture at Guantánamo and even before we got there, but I found that would take a book. Instead I will give you a hint here without going into details. I saw and felt all kinds of pain. I lived it and still live with it. I spent years in those steel boxes, and what happened in those years can't be explained in these lines. Guantánamo affected us in every aspect of life. We carry scars in our souls, in our bodies, and in our lives. I lost teeth; I suffered a broken wrist, fingers, ankle, and damaged knees, but what is worse are the psychological, mental injuries. Mentally I am still there, and I am trying to escape.

We were in a place totally isolated from the rest of the world and from our families. Most of us were young, between sixteen and twenty-four years old. I had just turned nineteen when I arrived. We didn't know why we were held, why we were treated the way we were, why we were tortured, how long we were going to stay, or where we were to be sent. We spent years in isolation cells. Imagine being held in a stone box where all around you are strangers. You don't speak their language, and they don't speak yours. You can't communicate with anyone around you, and you don't know why you are there or what is going to happen.

To see people suffer around me, to watch them being abused and to have to stand by helpless and hopeless, sometimes was worse than my torture. Terrible moments happened almost every day. I remember the father of a child who kept crying, shouting out the name of his daughter, begging interrogators, guards, and camp staff to tell him about his child. Months and years passed, and there was no answer for him. Interrogators told him, "Cooperate with us if you want to see your

child." Many of those who had families in Afghanistan or Pakistan suffered most. Interrogators withheld letters from or to those detainees, and they were told nothing or told that their wives had been raped and killed along with their kids.

The many years we spent in isolation, with different systematic abuses, were meant to destroy us and actually badly damaged us. We could not understand what was going on, and we just reacted to whatever was thrown at us. The interrogations and interrogators used every possible method to break us, to separate our minds from our bodies. They didn't just torture us and leave us, no, it happened again and again. New guards and administration, new interrogators, would come every year or so and would start with us from square one. Years later, I watched *The Hunger Games, Part 2*, where the tributes have to fight to the death in an arena designed as a clock and at each hour the tribute would be attacked. That was our GTMO arena program. The rules of the camps changed all the time. Despite its Standard Operating Procedures, Guantánamo detention had no standards. "You have no rights," we would be told.

One detainee asked a camp commander for his rights, for human rights.

The answer was, "Here you have no rights."

The detainee then asked, "How about animal rights?"

"You are devils, and devils have no rights," came the reply.

At the beginning, we thought we would be in Guantánamo just for months. Then, when the first year passed, we said, next year. But many years passed. Some detainees lost their minds. The first one was an Afghan guy. He couldn't handle what was happening to him. He turned crazy, day and night, shouting, getting naked, eating his waste. He was treated with violence by the guards. "All of you will be the same, it's just a matter of time," the interrogators told us. They told us he had been given an injection that made him lose his mind. That was scary, and now we questioned and doubted everything—our food, water, anything given to us by guards.

I don't think we survived. I don't think that I survived. But we could stay alive. How did we manage to do that?

We all live on hope, no matter how or what or where. Hope is the most important survival skill. At Guantánamo, we had a special kind of hope—our faith, and we believed that everything is the hand of Allah. We became stronger in faith when the camp administration tried to steal the little hope we had. Everything suggested that we should be hopeless: knowing nothing, facing constant threats, seeing others go mad. But it was either die or try to survive, and each comes with a price.

From 2002 until 2010 we lived in isolation cells which I call stone boxes. Do you remember what I said at the beginning about life? "Life is most powerful, beautiful and precious." Life is all we get. Some detainees tried to fight back, but fight what and against whom? We felt powerless. Some detainees just ignored whatever happened, or they lived in a different world and struggled back and forth. All of us were fighting back, but it was not us, it was the life within us, that powerful, beautiful and precious life. Our life did all it possibly could to survive.

How detainees managed to shift their minds out of that hell was different from person to person. In 2010, we were given access to classes, computers, art, sports, TV, and books. We were moved to a communal camp. Some started taking classes in art, in English, in computers because they were interested, and some just to keep busy. But still we were nowhere, still in prison, still in fear of what would happen, still in fear of the unknown, but that fear was silent.

Some detainees started to paint about their lives, feelings, and emotions, about their hopes and fears. Things they couldn't possibly put in words, they put in shapes and colors. Their behavior changed, and they were more relaxed with painting.

But art and writing in Guantánamo had a difficult history. We imagine that artists sit in a room, drinking coffee, or listening to music, that they are sitting somewhere that has a very nice view. In Guantánamo, it was different. I remember in the early days, some detainees used to steal pens from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), some detainees got pens from the guards, and they wrote on toilet paper. Remember we were limited in everything. We had ten sheets of toilet paper a day. Detainees used to draw, to write, or to try to learn English on that toilet paper. We had inspection every single day, and people would take the tissue and try to hand it over to other detainees during inspection. If a guard caught you with a pen or that toilet paper, it would be confiscated and we would be punished.

Some detainees were smarter. At that time, we had "ready meals" that included a small bag of tea. Detainees used the tea as an ink. They would mix it with a little water and then fold the tea bag to use as a pen to write or draw on their toilet paper. People would also write or draw on the walls with a plastic spoon or a small stone from the rec yard. Each individual detainee had his own language and his own way to express his feelings.

Even after 2010, we had limited time for class. We were not allowed to have the supplies outside the classroom. In the class, detainees were shackled to the ground, guards watching, cameras everywhere. The instructor would

provide detainees with the materials they needed. You had to concentrate because there were detainees around you, speaking different languages, some practicing English, some who just came for conversation. It was very difficult to hold onto the emotions for a painting, especially to do a longer work. You were only allowed to have at most two hours or ninety minutes a week, and it could take weeks or months to finish one painting. Detainees would work on a small part of a drawing, then pause and look at it for a few days before going back to it. It wasn't as though they were sitting and looking out upon a beautiful view.

Some detainees managed to smuggle to their cells some of the materials for drawing. And they got caught. It was an unspoken war between the administration and detainees. What was the problem with letting detainees have those materials? The administration would say it's a security issue. But there is no security issue.

I remember one detainee from Pakistan who was a very good painter. He used to ask for materials, but no one would give them to him. He would tell the guards, "You know what, I don't want food. Please take the food away. Please, I don't want clothing or medicine. Just bring me my colors and art supplies. I need to paint. This is my escape gate from this hell." When they refused to give him materials, he turned to some spices that came from his family through the Red Cross. He mixed them together and made his own colors. I saw in his cell the paintings he made with these spices—ginger, coriander, chili.

I asked him, "How do you manage?"

He said, "Spices. Don't worry, we improvise."

Art or writing wasn't easy to do there, but we did it. We got forty-five minutes in art class, there weren't many materials, and most of the time detainees' belongings were confiscated. But still, we made a lot of art and works out of cardboard and other materials we could find. Detainees made decorations, cabinets, tables, shelves, ships, planes, and other things. Some detainees covered their cells with beautiful paintings. I would go there and look at the paintings, and looking at the paintings would take me on a lovely journey out of GTMO.

In 2013, four of us wrote a book in Guantánamo, an illustrated feasibility report in English and Arabic called "Yemen Milk and Honey Farm." We studied how to create a business that would grow and sell milk and honey, what equipment we needed, how much money we needed to get started. We even designed a website. We drew detailed illustrations. We figured out how to bind the pages together into a book. It took many

months. When it was finished, we had a party in our cell block to celebrate. While I was there, I also worked on another book, not just about me or about other detainees, but about everyone there as human beings. I wrote about everyone and everything: detainees, guards, camp staff, ICRC, lawyers, animals, the sea, the buildings. I wrote about how the detainees live their lives there. There were forty-eight nationalities among the detainees when I was there: different countries, languages, traditions, cultures, customs. I wrote about how we detainees lived together, how we communicated, how we reacted. I wrote about life between the detainees and guards: how the two groups communicated and how they understood each other. It was sad. Imagine: most detainees don't speak the language of the guards. The guards only speak English, but some detainees speak only Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, French, Persian. When there is no communication, there are a lot of misunderstandings and problems. I tried not to put the reader in one track and one perspective, but instead to tell many small stories. When I was writing the book, I would let the guards, other detainees, camp staff, doctors, psychologists, officers, ICRC, lawyers, younger people, older people read what I was writing. I would ask them, "What do you think?" And I would study their reactions. I tried not to tell just my story, but to tell a more complete story about life inside. I want readers to live the moments in Guantánamo and to piece together the story for themselves.

Guantánamo wasn't just about torture and abuse. There was something bigger and beautiful there. It was life. There was life, love, good moments, bad moments, sad moments, happy moments. Everything was there, including hope. Some guards and camp staff even tried to help some detainees who were suffering. One guard would bring candy or chocolate for a young detainee, saying "Hi, you are going to be OK. I have brothers just like you." Some detainees made gifts for guards. Guantánamo wasn't just about detainees or guards. It was about us as humans regardless of our backgrounds. All simply was because of life and the beauty of life.

I don't know if I'm a writer, but I like to write. Sometimes I can't sleep and I feel a powerful urge to write. I think we are all painters, painting our lives. I hope that I can make a very good painting. It will have a small spot that is Guantánamo, but I think that will make it more interesting.