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The Art Form:

Visions of Turmoil in Media

Cover photo by Petra Reid

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Months' Introduction

I started this month writing with the goal of bringing humanity back into newspaper headlines. Every day, we are bombarded with breaking news—new conflicts arising, situations developing, victim numbers rising. From every corner of the world, from places we hear about repeatedly to places completely new to us. And in all this wreckage, there is barely a mention of the dreams lost, futures destroyed, and lives burned.

This month is a plea to see the humanity in others—to recognize people just like us, thrown into situations they never deserved to be in. Their art is a way for them to communicate the full depth of their experience. Not just in words, but in feelings and memories, in a way that portrays their lives.

My goal is not to bring you down, make you feel bad, or inspire pity. My goal is to make sure you know: these are people. They have lives, families, goals, and dreams. No matter what side of a conflict they find themselves on, none of it erases their humanity or their desire to create.

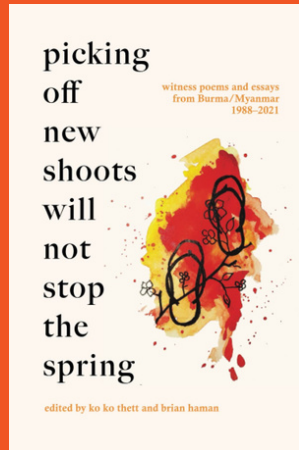
We focused on three regions of the world, each with vastly different circumstances. Some are active conflicts—urgent, explosive, and impossible to ignore. Others are long-term injustices, slowly eroding lives in the background, unseen by most. The ways in which these artists express their reality also vary. It may be poetry, raw with emotion; a novel that reflects reality through fiction; or a documentary that shows us the moments behind the headlines, from the perspective of those living through them. Then, there are visual artists, putting their world onto a canvas, capturing a single moment in time.

If nothing else comes out of this, simply knowing about these people is enough. Because that is what their creation is all about—ensuring that no one forgets them, the people they were, are, and will be, despite a world that tries to erase them.

Pavla Faltová

PICKING OF NEW SHOOTS WILL NOT STOP THE SPRING

edited by Ko Ko Thett and Brian Haman



Come night
insecurity arrives on its toes
with a pair of peeping eyes
through bamboo mesh walls.

Opening of *Residual lives* by Mi Chain Wai (2021)

Picking Off New Shoots Will Not Stop the Spring is a poignant and powerful collection of poems and essays that chronicles the ongoing struggle for freedom and democracy in Myanmar (formerly Burma).

The book spans over three decades, beginning with the pro-democracy uprising of 1988, and continuing through to the more recent struggles during the military coup of 2021. The conflict, both political and humanitarian, has been marked by widespread oppression, violence, and the silencing of dissent by the military junta, which has wielded power with brutal force. The essays and poems in this collection reflect the resilience and pain of a nation caught in the throes of political turmoil.

Myanmar's history of military dictatorship, civil unrest, and human rights abuses is deeply embedded in its recent past, with the 2021 coup serving as a tragic and stark reminder of the cycle of repression. *Picking Off New Shoots Will Not Stop the Spring* acts as both a response and a reaction to this persistent oppression, offering a space for voices that resist the violence and demand change.

This collection embodies the spirit of protest and the desire for a future of justice and peace, demonstrating that even in the face of overwhelming darkness, hope and resistance persist—like new shoots pushing through the soil.

The conflict in Myanmar is one of complexity and deep-rooted historical struggles. From British colonial rule to decades of military dictatorship, Myanmar has been embroiled in an ongoing fight for political and cultural autonomy. The 1988 pro-democracy protests, the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Aung San Suu Kyi, and the 2011-2015 opening up of the country to reforms all seemed to suggest a hopeful path toward democracy.

However, the 2021 military coup dashed those hopes, leading to the violent suppression of peaceful protests and the resurgence of military control over the nation.



Source: Reuters, 2021

Source: AP, 2021



The essays provide context and insight into the political climate of Myanmar, detailing the experiences of individuals caught in the crossfire of a brutal military regime. The authors, often speaking from the perspective of victims or survivors, offer personal accounts of their encounters with injustice, as well as their hopes for a future where their voices will no longer be silenced.

The poetry, on the other hand, captures the raw emotional weight of life under a regime that seeks to control every aspect of existence. Through metaphor, imagery, and symbolism, the poets convey a sense of longing, frustration, and hope that cannot be easily extinguished. The rhythm of these poems echoes the heartbeat of a nation fighting to stay alive, even as it endures hardship and loss.

I found *Picking Off New Shoots Will Not Stop the Spring* to be a deeply resonant and thought-provoking piece. From the title alone, it became clear that this book speaks to the inevitability of change, growth, and renewal, even in the face of resistance. The metaphor of trying to pick off new shoots, only to be reminded that spring will come regardless, feels like a powerful reflection on human struggle against the forces of nature and time.

"As humans, we are born with rights that nobody - not the government, not even your family can take away from you"

Nandar, Nightmare you can't wake up from

I love this collection because it provides such a profound, raw, and intimate look into the history and struggles of Burma/Myanmar. The poems and essays capture not just the political and social realities of the country, but also the deep emotions, dreams, and resilience of the people. What stands out most to me is how the authors manage to blend personal stories with the larger, turbulent political landscape, making the work feel both universal and deeply personal.

Spring, seized,
turned into swallows.

Swallows, caged,
turned into clamours.

Clamours, silenced,
turned into scenery.

Scenery, covered up,
turned into eyes.

Eyes, forced shut,
turned into dreams.

Nga Ba, Spring

The connection to nature was also particularly moving for me. Nature's cycles—spring, renewal, and new life—are something I've always felt a deep connection to, and this book brought that connection to the forefront. It reminded me that no matter how harsh the winter might feel, spring will always come, bringing with it new beginnings and possibilities.

It's a book that stays with you long after you've read it, sparking deeper thoughts on justice, human rights, and the power of storytelling to keep history alive. It reminds me of the importance of listening to voices that often go unheard and finding ways to support those who are fighting for a better future.

Sources:

Et col., *Picking off new shoots will not stop the spring*, Ethos Books, 2022

Neville Lai, "*Picking Off New Shoots Will Not Stop the Spring*", edited by Ko Ko Thett and Brian Haman, Asian Review of Books, 2022

Borna Tkalčević



Aung Myat Htay, 2019



Sai Shang Kham, 2021



Sandar Khaing, 2020

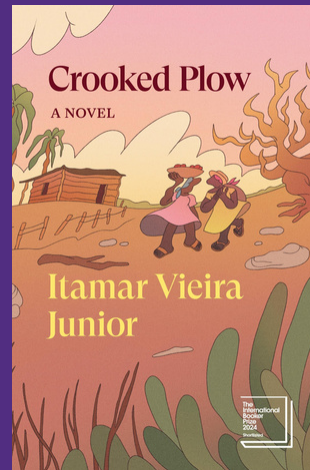


Ko Ko Gyi, 2016



CROOKED PLOW

Itamar Vieira Junior



“When I opened the suitcase and took out the knife, wrapped in a grimy old rag tied with a knot and covered in dark stains, I was just seven years old.”

Opening of *Crooked plow* by Itamar Vieira Junior, 2024

Crooked plow is a novel by Itamar Vieira Junior, originally released in Brazil in 2019 under portuguese title “Torto Arado”. Its English translation came out in 2024 and shortly after was nominated for several international prizes including the International Booker Prize 2024.

Covering the lives of three generations of the “Chapéu Grande” family, Vieira tells of the hardship of tenant farming, the persistent effects of racism and colonialism, and the meaninglessness of “freedom” when a people have nowhere to go. Through the story of their lives the author brings attention to the history of Brazil’s Quilombola population.

Quilombola communities in Brazil are groups descended from Afro-Brazilian slaves who escaped captivity and formed independent settlements called quilombos. These communities emerged as early as the 16th century, during Portuguese colonization, as a form of resistance to slavery.

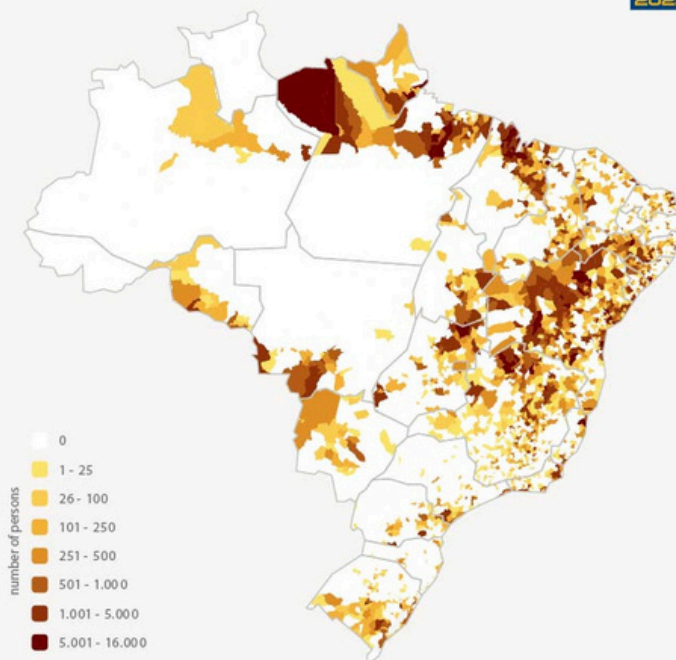
After slavery was abolished in 1888, many quilombos persisted, maintaining African cultural traditions, subsistence farming, and collective land ownership. However, they faced marginalization and land disputes.

After abolition, the Brazilian state did nothing to integrate former slaves into society. No land redistribution or reparations were granted, leaving many to depend on former enslavers or migrate to cities. Many quilombos that had existed during slavery were pushed further into marginal lands (swamps, mountains, forests) as elites expanded plantations and cattle ranches.

Some quilombolas became tenant farmers (moradores or agregados)—allowed to live on and farm small plots of land in exchange for labor or a share of crops (a system resembling debt peonage).

As agriculture modernized, landowners (often backed by the state) seized quilombola lands for commercial farming, logging, or government projects. Many quilombolas were tricked into giving up land through fraudulent deeds or forced out by violence. Some communities survived by hiding their identity, pretending to be "landless peasants" rather than descendants of quilombos to avoid persecution.

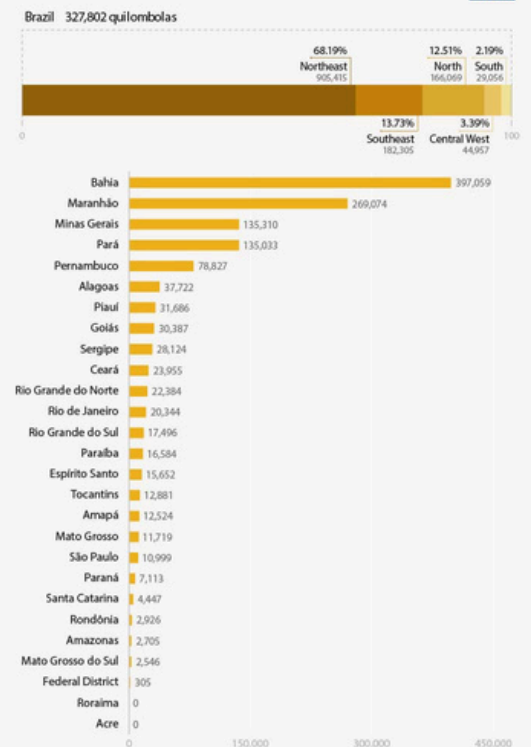
Quilombolas in Brazil - 2022
By municipality



Source: Censo Demográfico 2022: Quilombolas - Primeiros Resultados do Universo



Quilombola population in Brazil
By Major Regions and Federation Units



Source: Censo Demográfico 2022: Quilombolas - Primeiros Resultados do Universo



Under the military dictatorship (1964–1985), agribusiness expansion and state projects displaced quilombos, while underground labor unions and the Black Movement began organizing resistance. Socialist and communist groups, like the Peasant Leagues, supported rural workers.

The transition to democracy saw quilombolas ally with leftist unions, the Workers' Party, and Black activists to secure Constitutional Article 68, which recognized their land rights. Yet, even today, many communities face violent land conflicts—particularly in Bahia, state the novel takes place, where agribusiness, tourism, and military expansion threaten their territories.

With the ongoing struggle of quilombos, more than 130 years since abolition of slavery, the story of *Crooked plow* is relevant despite its setting in the mid-20th century. This is a story of perseverance, family love, and the spiritual and community supports that keep a people going against incredible odds. Novel blends social and mystical realism — encantados (spirit beings) interfere in the physical realm and have very real effects.

“My voice was a crooked plow, deformed, penetrating the soil, only to leave it infertile, ravaged, destroyed.”

As *Crooked Plow* opens, two sisters have discovered a beautiful ivory-handled knife under their grandmother's bed, and entranced by its shining silver blade, first one and then the other girl puts the knife into her mouth, and one of them loses her tongue. The accident sets the sisters on different paths, but with limited options available (and especially for girls) in their community, it will also bind them together. And in the background, is the unending toil and precarious predicament of their community of tenant farmers.

““We can't keep living like this. We have a right to our own land. We're the descendants of those original escaped slave communities, the quilombos. We're quilombolas.” This dream of freedom kept growing inside of us, affecting everything we did. As the years passed, the dream would create conflicts between parents and children.”

Sources:

Itamar Viera Junior, *Crooked plow*, Verso Books, 2024

Santos, Jucelia Bispo, *History of the Quilombola Community of Olaria [Irará/Bahia] and the Struggle for Land in Contemporary Times*, Revista de ciencias humanas, 2010

Pavla Faltová



Sebastiana, 2023



Larissa De Souza, 2022



Jaider Esbell, 2019



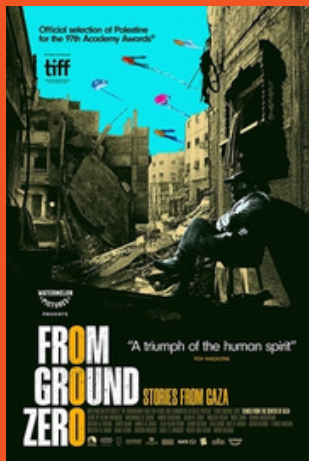
Lena da Bahia, 1994



Rosana Paulino, 1997

FROM GROUND ZERO

Aws Al-Banna
Ahmed Al-Danf
Basil Al-Maqousi
Mustafa Al-Nabih
Muhammad Alshareef
Ala Ayob
Bashar Al Balbisi
Alaa Damo
Awad Hana
Ahmad Hassunah
Mustafa Kallab
Satoum Kareem
Mahdi Karera
Rabab Khamees
Khamees Masharawi
Wissam Moussa
Tamer Najm
Abu Hasna Nidaa
Damo Nidal
Mahmoud Reema
Etimad Weshah
Islam Al Zrieai



"My little brother is 1 year old. He can only say, Daddy. And make the sound of an ambulance."

Soft Skin, directed by Khamees Masharawi, 2024



"From Ground Zero" is an anthology of 22 shorts by Palestinian directors living in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip. It shows you what it's like to live day-to-day on the ground through a genocide as a military is targeting civilian buildings; killing noncombatants, including children; and forcing survivors to scramble for basics like food and water.

Most of these shorts, which last between three and six minutes each, can be described as documentaries, although some of them are also fictions and others span the gap between the two. Still others rely on animation and puppeteering as low-cost and whimsical means of telling stories about the plight of Gazans.

There is common environment, assumed, but always shocking. The hum of drones overhead is incessant. There are piles of rubble everywhere where once were active neighborhoods. Bodies are being trapped under fresh piles of rubble and there are harrowing tales told of escaping, or not escaping, the rubble.

Everywhere there are vast clusters of tents housing people forced into homelessness, bereft of large families most of whose members have been killed in Israel's relentless bombing - 70,000 tons of bombs on Gaza Strip since October 7th, more than those dropped during World War II on Dresden, Hamburg, and London combined. But these films show the effects, they do not provide history or statistics.

From Ground Zero stands out within the documentary genre for its dual role in capturing life in Gaza and asserting the importance of art in moments of crisis. The filmmakers use their craft to document the lived realities of those caught in a continuous state of war, blending art and memory with the purpose of survival.

While the film provides a sobering account of destruction, it simultaneously highlights the resilience of those who use creativity to maintain a sense of identity and continuity. With minimal resources and often under dire circumstances, the filmmakers prove that storytelling is as essential as physical survival.

Stills from *"From Ground Zero"*



For me the few stand out films would be in **"Hell's Haven" by Karim Satoum**, about a man who wakes up in the crowded tent camp, again where they all live, in a body bag. (It is zipped up, and white.) He doesn't know how this happened. By the end of the film he has requested that he be allowed to use a body bag now, while he is alive. It will be more use to him now. He has nothing else to sleep in.

In **"School Day" by Ahmed Al Danaf**, a young boy gets up among the tents where the survivors all live, dresses nicely, packs notebooks and texts in a book bag, shoulders it, and marches off. He walks briskly all across the camp to where his school used to be, before it was bombed out of existence. He sits in front of his teacher - whose grave stands marked by a piece of cardboard.

In **"Jad and Natalie" by Aws Al Banna**, a documentary, the speaker, Aws, a theater actor, tells us his life has ended because of the death of Nour, his wife to be. He describes how they were to get married soon, and they had already chosen the names of their firstborn son and daughter, Jan and Natalie.

From Ground Zero does not seek to provide answers or resolutions to the conflict it depicts. Instead, it focuses on illustrating the human stories within this geopolitical battle, emphasizing the enduring spirit of the Gazan people. As a significant achievement, the anthology demands recognition, reaffirming the essential role of storytelling.



Stills from "From Ground Zero"

Sources:
Dir. Rashid Masharawi, *From Ground Zero*, Watermelon Pictures, 2024

Fassin, Didier, *Moral Abdication*, Verso Books, 2024

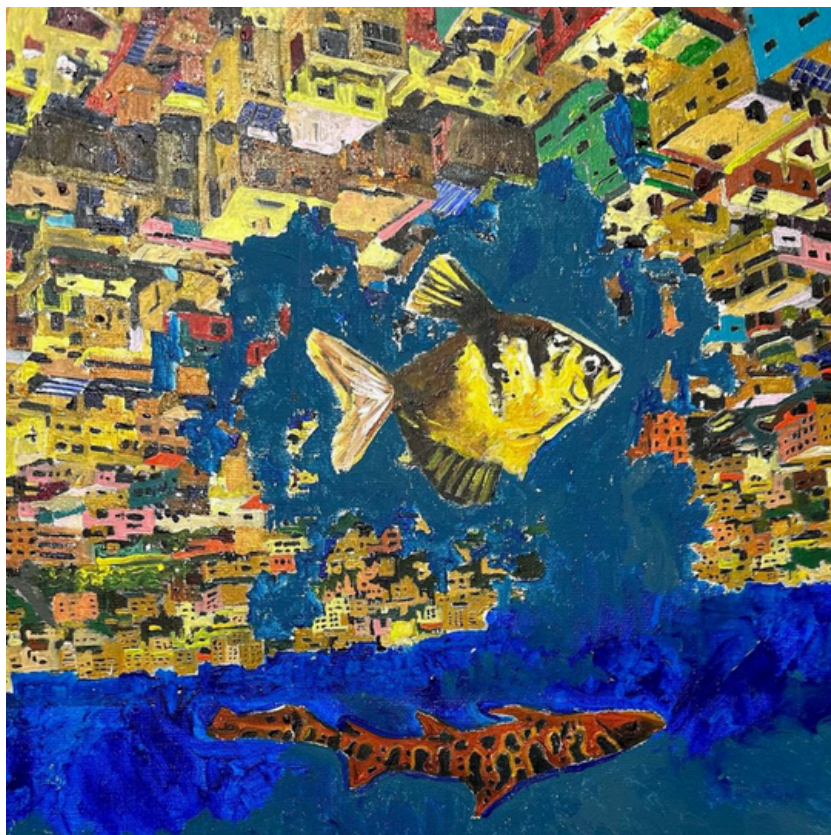


Pavla Faltová

Malak Mattar, 2020



Hazeem Harb, 2023



Alaa Albaba, 2017



Laila Al Shawa, *The Walls of Gaza II*, 1994

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