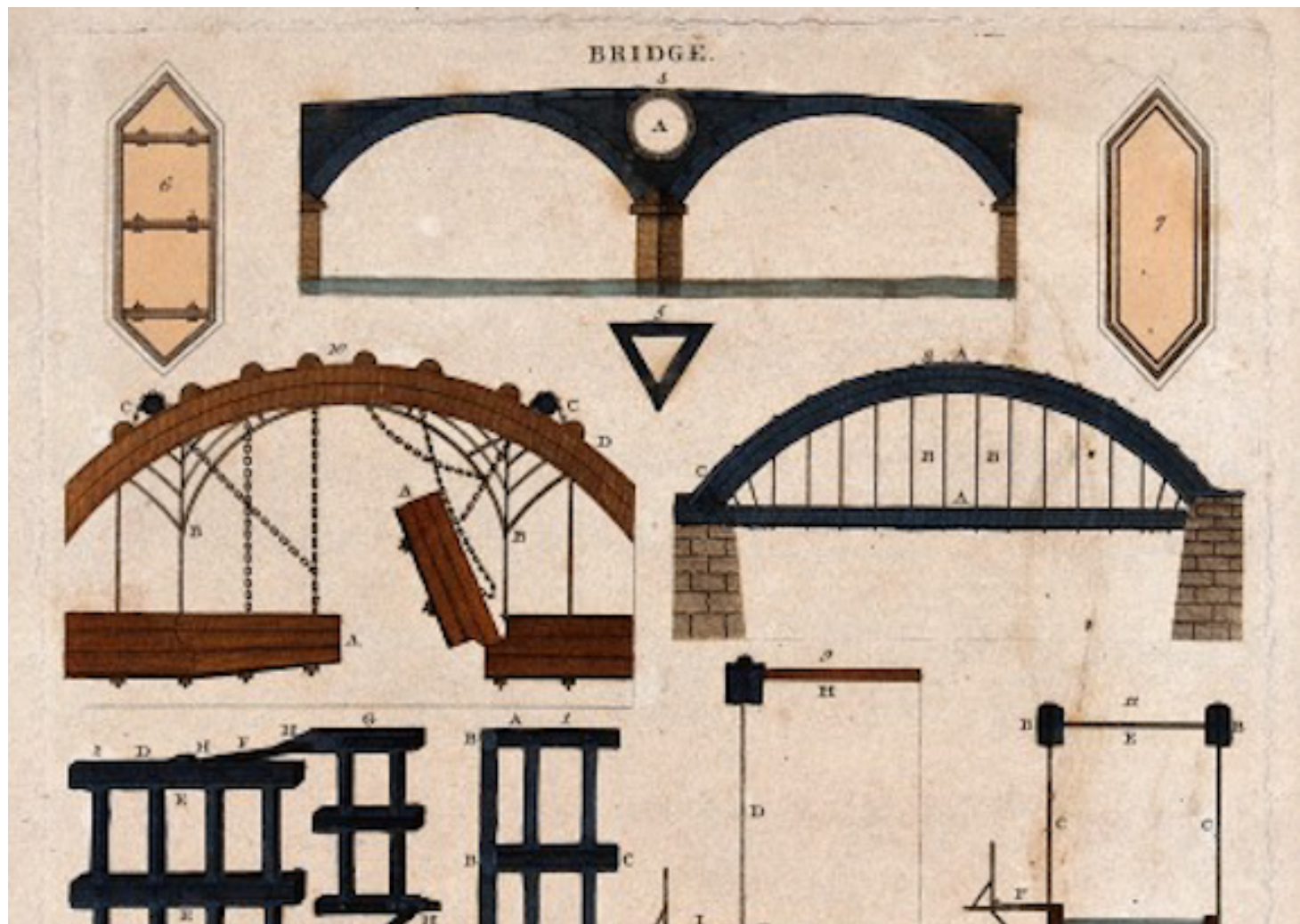


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The Bridge

In this excerpt from the long-awaited follow-up to his first memoir, I Saw Ramallah, Mourid Barghouti recalls the day his son, the Palestinian, saw Palestine.

By Mourid Barghouti



Photograph via Wellcome Images

The moment has come. Radwa says goodbye to us at Cairo Airport. She hugs Tamim. She hugs me.

The three of us hug one another, holding as still as the marble base of a clamorous fountain whose water tries to touch the sky before being reclaimed by the earth with the

violence of gravity.

We pause for a moment.

As though none of us wants to leave the place.

“Let me know how things are going, blow by blow.”

“Don’t worry. Tamim will enter, get the I.D. very quickly, God willing, and return to you and his university safe and sound.”

“Bye. Lots of greetings from me to Mama Umm Mounif.”

“We’ll call you as soon as we get to Amman.”

Once again we start the journey from Cairo to Amman and from there to the bridge.

Since my first crossing in 1996, after thirty years of exile, I have crossed many times, sometimes with ease and sometimes with difficulty. I’ve seen Israeli soldiers whose seriousness, which can rise to the level of scowls of superiority, never leaves them and others who practice their job with professionalism, as though they were customs inspectors and nothing more. In the eyes of some, I’ve seen a certain confusion and, very occasionally, I’ve seen one who smiles or shows some desire to be of help. There is no homogeneity to their features—Ethiopian, Brooklynite, Slavic, Yemeni. The common factor is that they’re all armed. Some are newly conscripted adolescents, male and female, and some of these seem bewildered by their daily contact with hundreds of the Arab ‘enemy.’ In all cases, though, the rifles are ready for use at any moment. Taken together, they constitute a nightmare for every Palestinian who crosses the bridge. It’s difficult to trust the smile of a person carrying weapons here.

Our problem with the Jew, here in this ‘Jewish state’ as they insist on calling it, is that all three or four generations of Palestinians have seen of him is his helmet. They’ve seen the Jew only in khaki, with his finger on the rifle’s trigger. They’ve seen him only as a sniper at a window, an officer in a tank, a conscript at a checkpoint, a guard clacking his metal heels past the doors to prison cells or along the long corridors that separate them, or a heavy hand in the interrogation rooms, where Israeli law allows the use of what they call ‘moderate physical force’(!) to extract confessions. Many western journalists who maintain a studied and malign blindness to the Occupation have asked me whether the Palestinian people are really ready to coexist with the Jews and I reply that we coexisted with them for hundreds of years in Palestine, the Arab countries, and Andalusia, and that it is Europe, which reproves us and holds us to account, that couldn’t coexist with them and sent millions of them mercilessly to the Holocaust. What is asked of us today,

however, and has been ever since their military occupation of our land, is to coexist with their tanks in our bedrooms! Show me one person in this world, I say to them, who can live with a tank in his bedroom.

The cliché has it that bridges are symbols of communication, connection, and coexistence. This bridge is a symbol of discrimination, distance, disunion, and the historic distinction between the frightener and the frightened, though sometimes it is hard to be sure who fears the other more. Have the meanings of 'bridge' found in the dictionary been so completely distorted that they are no longer useful for describing this bridge? The Israeli obsession with security makes this bridge a great gap, a chasm with teeth. Everything in Israel is determined by its obsession with security. It is a nation that sees itself as forever victorious, forever frightened, and forever in the right. It has been victorious, and frightened, for sixty years. Always, whether fighting or negotiating, it enjoys the support of the only superpower in today's world, as well as of all the European states. It also enjoys the secret collusion of twenty debased Arab regimes. It is a state that possesses more than two hundred nuclear warheads, has erected more than six hundred barriers and checkpoints, has built around us a wall 780 kilometers long, detains more than eleven thousand prisoners, controls all borders and crossing points leading to our country by land, sea, and air, and frames its laws with reference to a permanent philosophy that its victories do not change, a philosophy whose core is this mighty state's fear... of us.

Here is a truly frightening state. The Israeli military pilot climbs the skies over any Palestinian city and flies his intimidating F-16 or Apache with as much peace of mind as if he were piloting a Swissair or an Air France plane, and releases his cluster, fragmentation, and phosphorus bombs and aims his 'smart' rockets at any target he wishes. The city is fair game, an easy target spread out beneath him. The Palestinians do not have anti-aircraft weapons. The pilot has become a deadly sky and we a murdered earth. The pilot returns safe to his wife or girlfriend in Tel Aviv and talks to her of his 'victory' over the Palestinians! Despite this, Israel behaves like a state that is truly terrified and fills the world with cries that its existence is threatened. Could Orwell have imagined a more flagrant abuse of language than this?

I think this over and say to myself that it is our 'moderate' leaders, who fear victory and make no preparations for it, who give Israel the impression that it will never know anything but victory while we will never know anything but defeat. Those whom the West describes as 'moderate Arabs' are the type of politicians who prefer to spend their lives waiting for a smile from the Israeli Occupation's tank. They are out of luck because the tank never smiles. The tank, you wise and clever realists, doesn't know how to smile.

Some years later, I will enter Ramallah in an ambulance though neither injured nor

suffering a medical emergency. On the bridge and at the numerous checkpoints, I will see numerous faces, situations, oddities, and tragedies. This time, though, my feelings are more complex and mixed. My anxiety is as painful as if I were being beaten over and over without a chance to hit back. 'Painful' is the right word. Has anxiety ever made you feel pain? The anxiety is all the more painful because I have to conceal it, have to pretend the opposite and appear supremely confident and at ease, for now, this specific time, I shall be crossing the bridge with Tamim.

This is his day.

A day he and we—Radwa and I—have been waiting for since I applied for an entry permit for him two years ago. Now his entry permit is in my pocket. I would have liked us to enter some time in summer so that he wouldn't be forced to leave his studies at the university, where he's in his fourth, crucial, graduation year, but it's beyond our control. It's always beyond our control. Otherwise, what would be the meaning of the Occupation?

Radwa showed no sign of the agitation that ought to accompany her farewell to her only child before a journey such as this. Or did she, I wonder, conceal her agitation precisely because he was setting off to repossess the personal, tangible Palestine that she had raised him to be aware belonged to him, as he to it, with all that that implies?

This wasn't what moved me when she hugged him with exceptional warmth at Cairo Airport. What moved me was her silent care not to appear the party 'sacrificing' its peace of mind for the sake of a step before which inconvenience must seem trivial and for which difficulties must be borne.

On the plane heading for Amman I think about Radwa.

I read my first poems to her on the steps of the Cairo University library when we were not yet twenty. We took part together in literary gatherings without it occurring to us that a personal interest had developed, or was developing, between us. We were students and limited our conversation to 'professional' matters such as our studies and never went beyond these into any intimate topic. She would tell me, "You will become a poet," and I would reply, "And what if I fail at that?" I'd tell her, "You will become a great novelist" and she'd give the same answer and we'd laugh. This 'fraternal' language and collegial spirit continued between us until the four years of study were over and I went to work in Kuwait. I used to write regular letters about my new life in Kuwait to her and to Amina Sabri and Amira Fahmi, our best friends throughout our studies, with whom we'd made something like a small family. I realized, however, that my letters to Radwa contained nothing of my news or the events of my life and concerned themselves only with my unspoken feelings about that life.

When I saw her on my first visit to Cairo during the summer holidays, we found ourselves talking like a mother and a father, and sometimes like a grandmother and a grandfather. We talked like a family of two that had been together for ages.

It was out of the question to talk about ‘steps’ we ought to be taking.

It was as though we’d walked all the steps already and got to here.

Talking of our future relationship had become a part of our past relationship, whose precise moment of beginning we never tried to establish. We never engaged in flirting or courtship or questions or arrangements or promises. When I left Cairo and returned to resume my work in Kuwait, I found that I was writing to her as a husband and she was writing to me as a wife.

I often questioned the wisdom of this marriage when I had no land to bear me and no clear plan for our geographical, economic, or social future. Her family naturally stood against it and they were right not to allow their only daughter to marry a non-Egyptian youth whose future was tied to that of the Palestinian issue, which nations and generations had failed to resolve. I didn’t blame them for an instant. But she too never thought for one instant of abandoning her decision. This is how I learned courage and clarity of will, from a girl two years younger than I who knew what she wanted and went after it with her eyes open—consciously, calmly, passionately.

Tamim thinks I’m taking a short nap but I hear the flight attendant inviting the passengers to fasten their seat belts in preparation for the descent to the Amman airport.

We spend three days with my mother in Amman. She couldn’t let us leave before she’d cooked Tamim his favorite dishes, such as *musakhan* and chicken with thyme, and listened to him playing the *oud* and singing her his satirical songs in Egyptian dialect poking fun at the teachers at his secondary school in Cairo. And I couldn’t leave her before I’d talked to her about everything that was on my mind and we’d caught up and told one another all about what had and hadn’t happened since our last meeting.

This time my friend Damin takes us in his car to the bridge at 8 a.m. The time passes without our noticing because he never stops making us laugh with his constantly updated store of jokes and stories.

We present our papers. The Jordanian officer stamps them without delay. We get into a car after paying eighty dollars to the facilitating company and set off immediately instead of waiting for the bus, which doesn’t move until it has filled its forty-plus seats—a process that takes an hour at the least. I will do anything in my power to save time. I’ve told

myself that the Israelis can delay us as long as they like when we get to the Israeli side, that's not under my control, but I don't want us to wait on both sides of the border; one is enough.

I want Tamim to enter Palestine before sunset so that he can see it in daylight, and I don't want any surprises.

His papers are all in order now. His entry permit is still fresh, with all the seals, stamps, and signatures in Hebrew. Yes, in Hebrew, or else what would be the meaning of the Occupation?

After all the peace agreements, the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the propagation, with Israel's consent, of Palestinian flags in its sky and offices, and the talk everywhere of Palestinian independence, no one, whatever his nationality and whatever his origin, can pass through any crossing point into or out of Palestine, by land, sea, or air, without an Israeli entry permit, Israeli stamps, an Israeli security search, and the checking of his or her name against an Israeli blacklist. Interrogation, being sent back to where one came from, arrest and imprisonment in an Israeli jail are all real possibilities. Neither the president of the Authority nor its ministers, officers, judges, security forces, or the members of its 'parliament' are exempt. If the database in the Israeli computer at the crossing point or barrier doesn't like you, no permits, stamps, or visas from before will help you.

Later, Israel will arrest eight Palestinian ministers and twenty-eight elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, including 'Aziz al-Duwaik, the speaker of parliament, just because they are members of Hamas. Israel's response to condemnations of this crime is a single sentence, one that has been reused dozens of times, after each abrogation of international law and norms: "No one has immunity here."

Right. No one has immunity here.

Israel is committed to nothing to which Israel does not see fit to commit itself—another bitter fruit of the stupid negotiation with Israel in Oslo to which we sent negotiators whose sole talent lay in being talentless. Their ignorance wasn't the problem, though. The problem was that what took place between them and the Israeli delegation wasn't so much a negotiation as a series of approvals of proposals presented by a team of Israel's shrewdest politicians and lawyers with highly specialized skills in everything needed to make us fall into their visible and invisible traps. On my first visit to Ramallah I said, speaking of our people's attitude to the accords, that they were waiting for the fulfillment of their leaders' promises. Nothing has been fulfilled. There is a huge explosion coming—I don't know where and I don't know when, but the explosion, or explosions, are coming for

sure.

At the last Jordanian police post, the officer makes us get out of the car so that he can check our papers and oversee our boarding of the first bus. This bus is unavoidable because entry by car is forbidden to everyone except senior officials of the Palestinian Authority.

I notice someone trying to get an elderly lady out of her wheelchair and onto the bus. This is extremely difficult given her great weight and the high steps to the door of the bus, which is not equipped with a ramp for people with special needs. The paleness of her face makes it clear that she's returning from medical treatment, accompanied by a young man, who welcomes our help in getting her onto the bus and pays no attention to a rude traveler behind us who's annoyed at having to wait.

The bus is full now and the engine is running, but it's waiting for Israeli permission to cross the bridge. In summer, the buses line up in large numbers and wait for the signal, bus by bus. It's just bad luck if you're in one of the ones at the back.

We are on the threshold of Palestine.

We are at the lowest point below sea level on the planet. Sweat oozes with sticky insistence. Clothes stick annoyingly to bodies. The air here is fried. Daytime in this black hole is a collective curse on all those like us who have to wait, as though the entrance to Palestine were through Hell. There is no way to get there without passing through this harsh spot, lashed by this air and this nature that shows mercy to none.

I tell myself, some homelands are like that: getting into them is hard, getting out of them is hard, and staying in them is hard. And this is the only homeland you have.

The traveler to Palestine does not cross its threshold in order to enter: he dwells at that threshold for a period that is not determined by him and waits for the instructions of the masters of the house, who determine everything.

I look at the passengers.

My gaze falls on Mr. Namiq al-Tijani and I feel an evil premonition.

I do not like to see this Namiq.

The sight of him reminds me of mollusks and mucosities, especially if he smiles or laughs, when his broad gums show and set my nerves on edge.

I say to Tamim in a low voice, "Do you see that person?"

“What about him?”

“He’s a very strange creature. Try to observe him. He’s the type I can’t stand. He’s the most representative ‘illustrative example’ of the generation that is being raised by the Palestinian Authority and I come across him wherever I go. He’s a person of symbolic dimensions!”

Tamim doesn’t appear interested in my talk of Namiq and is not curious to find out more. He just says, “Forget about him.”

I follow his advice and ignore “the Namiq,” looking at the other passengers. Palestinian mothers and grandmothers. Peasants with sunny faces and shaven chins, their cheeks bringing to mind the gleam of new swords. Sick people, old people, young people from university, children, merchants, contractors, civil servants from the Authority, expatriates. They prefer not to talk to people they don’t know, to avoid problems and in deference to the sense of wariness that haunts people who feel that they’re under observation by an obscure power at both ends of the bridge.

I ask myself what has happened to these exhausted, slowly moving grandmothers over the years since my youthful memories of them, when they would walk 10 kilometers on foot to reach the springs outside their villages and return carrying their water jugs on their heads, their backs straight. At harvest season, they would pick the olives with their menfolk, quarreling to keep their places in front of the oil press, and receive the guests who came by for a chat in the evening in the courtyards of their houses, where the lemons, mandarins, and pots of basil reflected brilliantly off the windows. That’s how I remember my grandmother Umm ‘Ata and all the other grandmothers of Deir Ghassanah. I think about the women passengers on the bus, sketching pasts and futures for them as I fancy. Which of them, I wonder, is grandmother to a prisoner or a martyr or a fugitive in the mountains and caves? Which of them is a widow waiting in vain month after month for the National Authority to pay her the support money for her son who is imprisoned in the Ofer, Negev, Nafha, or Ashkelon prisons? Or for the pension for her husband, who sleeps beneath the earth while the radio stations dedicate patriotic songs to his memory and the bearers of the keys to the treasury forget him? What makes her face the misery and annoyances of the bridge and travel to Amman and al-Zarqa and Irbid, to struggle with her baskets and suitcases, with the mistreatment and the vexation of waiting? Is it to meet her second son, who wasn’t killed and wasn’t arrested, who is coming from his job in the Gulf or from his university in Damascus or London or Canada or the U.S. and who cannot enter Palestine, so that she has to travel in order to see him for one or two days? The Palestinian woman, like any other woman in this world, works, gets things done and brings about change, and I don’t know where all these duties of hers come from or how

they have piled up on top of her or how she carries them out so well. With death, imprisonment, or exile taking off so many of their sons and male relatives, it is these women who fill the markets, the demonstrations, the workshops making embroidery, olive-wood carvings, arabesque work, mother of pearl, and necklaces, and who quarrel with the headmaster about their grandchildren's schoolwork, and it is they who listen to Nawal El Saadawi explaining her implacable feminist revolution on the television without understanding a word she says. I look at them and think of my mother in Amman beseeching God that Tamim's entry into Ramallah be easy. I think of Radwa in Cairo holding her anxiety inside her only to carry it away with her, deliberately hidden and obscured, which makes it all the clearer to me.

Am I using this trance to escape the anxiety I feel about Tamim's entry? There would be nothing strange about that, given how cunningly the mind can work. Am I shifting the focus of my anxiety so I can bear it? Am I changing the direction of my thoughts to drive out my worries? The trick costs the soul nothing but surrender to this stream of consciousness.

From time to time I look at Tamim.

Tamim doesn't move his eyes from the window of the bus, through which he gazes at what he can see as though engraving the scenes on his memory.

"Baba, you were daydreaming," Tamim says to me as the bus starts moving. It sets off to cross the river in the direction of Palestine. A few minutes pass. We're close to the bridge now. "Now you'll see the bridge," I say to Tamim.

I've hardly finished this short sentence before we've crossed the bridge and put it behind us without Tamim noticing.

He turns to me in surprise—"Where's the bridge?"—and laughs out loud when I say to him, "It's a bridge shorter than a sentence."

I ask him to check our papers for the third or fourth time.

I look for the permit once again to be sure we haven't lost it and that the seals, stamps, signatures, and dates during which he is permitted to enter are correct.

This is the piece of paper that will allow Tamim the Palestinian to see Palestine.

Later, Tamim will say in an interview with London's *Al-Hayat* newspaper that everything he saw after crossing the bridge he was seeing for the first time, so it was difficult for him to put a name to his feelings about it: "It was as though you'd put a microwave into the

hands of a pre-Islamic poet like Imru' al-Qays.”

Indeed, from this moment in his life onward, everything that 21-year-old Tamim sees he will be seeing for the first time.

It will be the closing of one circle of life and the opening of another.

The Palestine of schoolbooks, stories, newspaper headlines, and CNN images will come to an end and the tangible Palestine will be born in his senses.

And I shall see how he sees everything.

I shall see, in a few days, how he receives his Palestinian identity card.

Will it be like the moment of his birth, on the banks of the Nile, twenty-one years ago?

Will it be like the moment when we chose his name?

Will he see a difference between it and the card they hung on his chest on the Malev aircraft when he traveled alone at the age of five and which the Hungarian flight attendant told him was his ‘identity,’ which they’d hung on his chest so that he wouldn’t get lost?

A few minutes separate us from our encounter with the officers of Israel. A few minutes separate us from the faceless hyena of probabilities.

“You stand in the line. I’ll keep my distance in the hall. I’ll watch you until I’m sure you’ve got through safely and they haven’t taken you for interrogation. I’ll wait till then to present my papers.”

Will he be subjected to that experience and its unknown outcomes on his first visit? Will he handle it properly? Will he get agitated and confused?

“If they call you for interrogation, only answer what you’re asked. Remember it’s your right to refuse to talk about politics. I’ll be waiting for you in this hall no matter how late it gets. If they send you back, we’ll go back together. After going through their control desk, you’ll come out right into the baggage claim area. Take your bag. Leave the building immediately. Don’t wait for me inside the building. Wait for me in the street.”

He listens to me with the smile of a man whose family worries over him as though he were a child. I think to myself that Tamim is as anxious about me as I am about him, perhaps more so.

Such is the crossing point into Palestine.

The crossing point is the place where everyone is afraid for everyone else, a place of ambiguities that wear down the nerves. Here decisions are made that no one explains to you and procedures whose nature and extent you do not know are applied to you by human beings against whose authority there is no appeal. Here crouches a well-muscled, sharp-eyed wolf, a wolf that may leap at you with open jaws or pass you by to savage your neighbor in the line, when you barely have time to rejoice in your own escape before grieving that he has pounced on another. And you can't be sure he won't pounce on you until you're safely out of the place.

The crossing point nullifies the fatherhood of fathers, the motherhood of mothers, the friendship of friends, and the love of lovers. Here it is difficult to practice tenderness. Here the possibility of solidarity and rescue are negated. Here I can neither help my son nor protect him as a father.

Dictatorship, like the Occupation, nullifies fatherhood, motherhood, friendship, and love. I ask myself how many times do I have to feel powerless to protect the ones I love.

Now, as I return Palestine to Tamim, and Tamim to Palestine, I feel I'm surrendering him to the jailer.

Tamim's turn in the line gets one step closer. I watch him from a distance. I am now fearful, tranquil, disturbed, accepting, furious, joyful, sad, impotent, capable, apprehensive, annoyed, optimistic, pessimistic, calm, and agitated, as thoughts mix and combine in my imagination.

Every time the world throws me into the cage called 'waiting,' I know where to escape to.

I take my imagination, or let it take me, far from the cage.

My eyes are on Tamim as, step by step, he approaches the moment that will bring, or destroy, joy. I enter a maelstrom of fears and doubts.

I listen to my internal questions, which no one but I can hear. Stupid questions and wise questions follow one another as in a waking nightmare, or like the ghosts of questions. I follow after them; loud and low, wise and stupid, useful and trivial, contradictory, clear, and murky, they fluctuate between the serious and the absurd, as though a huge box of photos, new and old, had dropped from my hands, the photos falling in confusion on top of one another and turning into a jumble of projecting edges, colors, and sizes till they are no more than a blur of light and dark spots and ill-defined shadows. The questions run inside me, or I run behind them, between consciousness and unconsciousness, like one

slowly emerging from anesthesia to find faces he doesn't recognize, or sinking into a stupor as the anesthetic starts to work inside his body. When will the waiting end, so that I can slip from between the jaws of this trap? Why am I certain life doesn't hold a single pure moment, and that each instant is like an alloy of moments that have fused together till they look, to the deluded and the naive, like something pure and independent, though they are neither? Why is there always a thread of fear in the cloth of tranquility? Why does one enter a battle not because one is evil but because one is afraid? Why do I neglect a person when I am the one most concerned about him? Isn't it true that sometimes I show great patience for no better reason than that my patience has run out? Why do questions remain questions no matter how often men answer them?

I'm sure in my mind that Tamim will get in or we wouldn't have come here today.

I'm anxious about his getting in or I wouldn't have gone into the trance that just came over me.

Does our getting in deserve all this anxiety?

Doesn't my anxiety appear silly and embarrassing when compared to the chronic torments of my people? What does it matter whether we get in or are refused or arrested or even die here? Isn't the Palestinian surrounded by death? Aren't the torments he suffers at the borders and in the airports of the Arab dictatorships repeated and routinized to the point of banality? Can this trivial anxiety of mine be compared with the demolition of a house over the heads of those inside it in Jenin or Gaza? So what am I complaining about here? I want to make permanent history out of a passing trance. No one hears of us unless we're being bombarded by F-16 missiles or are under the rubble of houses. We suffer a resounding and collective torment and let our screams out on the world's screens. We aren't just corpses and we didn't choose to be so. I want to deal with my unimportant feelings that the world will never hear. I want to put on record my right to passing anxieties, simple sorrows, small desires, and feelings that flare up briefly in the heart and then disappear. I don't say my anxiety is justified and I won't apologize for it. It's my anxiety and that's all. I describe it as it is. I don't want anything from anyone. I don't pray for help or seek assistance or sympathy. All I want is to probe what is inside me so that I can know it, and listen for the voice of my soul and hear it. I want to write the history of things no one else will ever write for me. I want to carve the least of my feelings with a chisel on a stone next to the highway. I realize that I'm talking nonsense now, but it's been a brief fit, one that's lasted only as long as it has taken me to smoke this cigarette.

I think about lighting another.

Suddenly I stop.

There he is. I see him now. I see Tamim. I see his right hand waving his papers at me over everyone's head. Then I see his face. His face at this moment is one big smile that would bring joy to any who sees it.

Tamim has got through. They haven't stopped him. They haven't interrogated him. They haven't sent him back to where he came from.

Tamim has got through.

The doctor insisted that the birth be natural no matter how long the wait. It was a cruel night in that small hospital on the bank of the Nile in June 1977. He didn't listen to our pleas for him to intervene, even if it meant a caesarean. The actual labor began at 3 p.m. but he went upstairs to sleep and left Radwa to suffer until just before dawn. The hospital was also his house, one floor of which he'd set aside for his living quarters, and he went up there to sleep. Radwa, who never complains, would scream with pain and then tell us, "I'm sorry," but before she could finish, the next cycle of pain would attack and her eyes would plead with the nurse, to no effect. I would take her hand and wipe the sweat off her cheeks and forehead with a handkerchief.

"I'm putting you to so much trouble. I'm sorry."

I looked at the faces of those with me in the room. What I saw there wasn't reassuring. The hours passed. The doctor didn't come. When he finally came, it was around six in the morning. He came, went in, and locked the door behind him.

We kept our eyes on a small, unlit, electric bulb over the door, a bulb that was covered with dust even though the hospital was new. I had been told it would light up red for a boy and green for a girl. As far as I was concerned, its light would be a signal that Radwa's long agony was over. When the red light came on, the nurse came out with the good news: "Congratulations, it's a lovely boy."

I push my way through the crowds in the passport hall toward him, my arms outstretched to meet his, which are opened as wide as they can go, holding his papers. I suddenly realize that he's almost as tall as I am. We hug. I pat his back. He pats mine. We spin around twice, three times, maybe four. Maybe we don't spin around at all and I just imagine it. Tamim has got through.

Now it's my turn.

I move to join one of the short lines to present my papers to the Israeli officer. Yes, Israeli. Otherwise, what would be the meaning of the Occupation?

Tamim refuses to enter the baggage claim area despite my firm instructions (when did children ever obey firm instructions? If it weren't for disobedience no child would ever grow up) and despite the fact that we have actually caught sight of his own suitcase on the conveyor belt in the neighboring hall. A moment later, mine appears too and he still can't be persuaded to go.

Tamim insists on waiting next to me to see what happens. I stop urging him and move slowly with the line. I say to myself, He too wants to be reassured.

I present my papers and wait.

He stands near me outside the line.

And he waits.

Four or five years later, on a recent visit, a teenage Israeli police woman will confiscate the documents that I always present when on the bridge (my Palestinian I.D., Israeli permit, and Jordanian passport), give me a small piece of paper with a few lines in Hebrew, and tell me in broken Arabic, "Wait there till you hear your name."

I wait about half an hour. I wait and it seems as though the time will never pass. We say 'time is precious' but I don't believe it. We often waste time of our own free will. In fact, we long for holidays and weekends and go out of our way to create opportunities to be lazy whenever we can, becoming experts at wasting time playing cards, watching television, and drifting from café to café. It isn't really the squandering of time that upsets people. What upsets them most, in my opinion, is having to wait to waste it.

One of the Occupation's crimes is to compel people to wait. To wait at crossing points, borders, and checkpoints. To wait while permissions and permits are issued. To wait for the hours of opening and closing and of the curfew and its lifting. To wait for the hellish interrogation to end. To wait for the prison sentence to end. To wait for the electricity to come back on and for the water to come back on. To wait for all the dates and extensions to dates set for negotiation by the mysterious power that holds the Authority in its grip through the permanent concealing of its intentions. In addition and before all, to be forced to spend their lives waiting, year after year and generation after generation, for the Occupation itself to disappear.

I am still waiting for them to call my name.

They do not call it.

However, a fat soldier comes up to me and leads me quietly to the interrogation room.

A long row of seats in a narrow corridor.

Cameras sited conspicuously at the corners of the corridor and on the ceiling.

I sit down among the others who are already there—seven or eight persons of different ages, none of whom appears in the least worried and who wait in a wonderfully relaxed way, as though their presence here was completely natural and completely normal; as though they were waiting for a train that was about to arrive.

In front of us, closed doors.

We wait.

At first I feel miserable, but after a while I start laughing to myself at a funny story of Abu Sharif al-Sous's about waiting. In the old days, before Oslo and before the Authority, Israel used to grant one-month visit permits to people of the Bank living outside. Sharif Abu al-Sous came from Kuwait to Amman intending to go to the bridge the next day. He went to the Café Centrale in Amman and ordered himself a glass of tea. After waiting for a while, he called to the waiter and said with a laugh, "I asked for a glass of tea. Do me a favor and bring it before the permit runs out!"

I ask the one closest to me, "What happens inside?"

"The usual questions. Dumb questions. Don't worry about it."

After an hour and a half of waiting, I'm summoned to one of the rooms, where I find two people, one of whom, it turns out, will treat me pleasantly while the other treats me like an oaf—the traditional good cop/bad cop division of roles.

"Where are you going?"

"To Ramallah."

"Are you a member of the National Council?"

"An observer."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I take part in the discussions but don't vote."

"Are you Fatah?"

"I'm independent."

“That’s exactly what it says here.”

“If you already know, why are you asking me?”

“You’re here to answer questions, not ask them. It says too that you’re a poet. Did you meet with writers from Israel outside? Did you meet with any Israelis outside?”

“I don’t remember.”

“What do you think of Abu Mazen?”

“I am on premises belonging to the security forces and do not wish to discuss politics.”

“We just want to talk to an educated person like you, no more, no less. That’s all there is to it.”

“This is a border post, not a seminar room. You have my papers. If there’s a problem with them, you can apply your procedures.”

The silent colleague intervenes.

“Tea or coffee?”

I decline with a wave of my hand but he gets up, goes to another room, returns after two minutes, places a cup of tea in front of me, and leaves again. His colleague resumes his questions.

“Why don’t you want to talk to me about politics?”

“Because of the lack of equality.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re the stronger party. You have the power to allow me to enter, prevent me from entering, send me back to Amman, or send me to a prison in Israel and I have nothing, so what’s the point in talking?”

“I can see you’re angry even though things are looking good now. Arafat has appointed Abu Mazen prime minister, which means there’s a chance of peace. What do you think of Abu Mazen?”

“Neither Abu Mazen nor anyone else will achieve anything because you’ll never give him anything.”

“How come?”

“Sometimes it seems to me you won’t be happy till we appoint a Zionist as leader of the Palestinian people.”

He smiles, then frowns.

“Who are you going to rely on in your obstinacy? If we expel you all to Egypt or Jordan, do you think Mubarak or Abdullah will care?”

The second interrogator re-enters.

“Where have you got to?”

“We’ve got to the threat of Transfer,” I answer.

He gives a smirk so I go on with what I was saying: “Your colleague is threatening to throw the Palestinians into the sea.”

“Transfer, my friend? The sea? The desert? Take me with you if they throw you out. It’d be better than going on the way we are now.”

He looks at the glass of tea, notices that it remains untouched, but makes no comment. Then he surprises me by saying, “Anyway, you can go.”

“That’s it?”

“Goodbye.”

Years after this interrogation session, the same thing will take place twice more. Since then, they’ve stopped calling me in, though I don’t know how long this will last.

This time we don’t have to wait long.

They don’t take long to stamp my papers and I’m not called in for interrogation.

I’ve never needed good luck so much as I do today, having Tamim with me. I say to myself this is such good luck I can hardly believe it. It’s difficult for a Palestinian to believe that he’s having luck. It’s my easiest entry to Palestine since I gained the right to do so two years earlier and has remained so for ten years. As to what may come later, who can be sure?

I leave the line, take Tamim’s hand, and we enter the baggage claim area together happily, then exit onto the street. I hug him and he hugs me in a new embrace on soil he’s standing

on for the first time since Radwa gave birth to him twenty-one years ago.

Tamim's in Palestine.

Excerpt from the forthcoming book *[I Was Born There, I Was Born Here](#)*. Copyright © 2012 by Mourid Barghouti. Published by permission of Bloomsbury PLC.

Mourid Barghouti

Mourid Barghouti was born 1944 in Deir Ghassanah near Ramallah. He received the Palestine Award for Poetry in 2000, three years after his collected works were published in one volume. In 1966, he left Palestine to return to university in Cairo; it was thirty years before he was allowed to return home. *[I Saw Ramallah](#)*, his account of that homecoming, was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature.

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