INTRODUCTION

Brink-man: Mourid Barghouti at Midnight

I've heard Mourid read his poetry many times since it began to appear in English. He reads without introduction or quip and the work is received in stunned silence. Audiences realise they're hearing work of lasting rarity on first encounter. Work that wrestles with the particular and universal in unique ways. The poems have an openness which encloses great depths, their lines draw landscapes in your palm, catch the skin with universal truths.

Barghouti is also the author of a classic memoir of exile, *I Saw Ramallah*, in which he describes writing itself as a displacement. As this doubly-displaced writer, he had published five collections of poetry by his mid-30s. The fifth, *Poems of the Pavement* published in 1980, marked an important shift.

"This is the real start of my voice," he once told me, before explaining the context with figurative argumentation. "So, okay: you occupy the autostrat with your poetry, your bombastic tone, but give me the pavement! Poems of the pavement? I am not in the mainstream – I *need* the pavement. You take the street – you've already taken it, it isn't mine. I'll be confined to this. I'm happy with this" – happy enough to produce six further poetry collections, a 700-page *Collected Works*, a memoir and the book-length poem 'Midnight', first published just after his sixtieth birthday in 2005.

The selection of shorter poems in this volume, like a further precious pocketful that exist in English, are highly distinctive and peculiarly consistent. I don't read Arabic and so once asked if I could judge his work from them. He told me: "They are representative of my experience since 1980.

This is typical of the way that I write; the form changes, but the economic language, the density of the poems, the importance of the trivial, small things, simple vocabulary, the slowness of perceptions. I don't give signals directly; this is characteristic. I'll give you an example: the poems translated here were written in 1978, published in 1980 and I'm reading them today – with my latest poems from 'Midnight'."

"I gather flowers on the brink of subsistence," wrote Walter Benjamin from Ibiza in 1933. It was the beginning of years he spent as a refugee which ended on the Spanish border in 1940, when he took his own life rather than be returned to occupied France. This image of gathering flowers on this particular kind of brink illustrates Mourid Barghouti and his work perfectly.

"From the summer of 1967, I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else," he has written. This stranger "lives essentially in that hidden, silent spot within himself. He is careful of his mystery" and no longer possesses a place. Barghouti's indirect, yet profoundly exact, poetry articulates this mysterious quiet. It's poetry from after the *nakba,* the 'catastrophe' of 1948 when the vast majority of Palestinians were driven from homes and land, and ancestral villages were erased.

"I live in a time, in the components of my psyche, in a sensitivity that is special to me" he continued; "the one whose will is broken lives in his own internal rhythm." These rhythms are the flowers recovered by the brink-man.

One of the first things Mourid Barghouti said to me about his work was that he uses very simple, everyday things in his

poems; a table, a chair.

"I write in concrete, physical language. The words translate easily," he said on the first of my many strolls with him. "My translators told me they are the same in each language. This is why it works." While this is true in itself, it's only part of the story.

At a later meeting, talking through cigarette smoke in a noisy hotel bar, he knocked on the table between us: "*This* is poetry. Language is *here* – in the street, in the mud, in the shop, in the kitchen, in the market, the discussions, in everyday life. And you can make poetry out of *this*."

Barghouti was born in 1944 in a village called Deir Ghassanah, near Ramallah on the West Bank of the river Jordan in Palestine. It's one of a cluster of villages called Bani Zaid, home to the prominent Barghouti clan. The Barghoutis are political figures, landowners and poets, as well as villagers. Despite the Barghoutis' perceived status, Mourid eagerly traces his name to the word for 'flea' in Arabic.

Mourid the Flea, the second of four brothers, moved with his family to Ramallah during his school years before enrolling in the University of Cairo in 1963. He is, he says, "four years older than the State of Israel" which, finally and fully, rendered him and most of his family stateless only in 1967, when it occupied parts of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. "Every Palestinian who was outside his village or place, for tourism, for education, for medication, for any reason, was considered as Not-Palestinian" and forbidden to return.

Since 1967, Mourid, *al-Barghouti*, has been forced from temporary homes in various countries. Stranded for many years in Budapest, he was finally allowed home to Cairo,

and his small family, in 1995, and home to Deir Ghassanah in 1996. Beyond that "for twenty years I was not able to go back to Jordan, for seventeen years I was not able to go back to Cairo and, after the Israelis invaded Lebanon in 1982, until 2004, I was not able to go back to Lebanon."

Today, in 2008, Mourid Barghouti, the Palestinian, remains stateless. It's this knowledge that adds depth to the poem, in some ways his most accessible work, he's read everywhere I've heard him read. It's a poem written from the pavement and several degrees of exile, called 'Desire':

> His leather belt
> hangs on the wall,
> the pair of shoes he left behind has turned brittle,
> his white summer shirts
> still sleep on their shelf,
> his scattered papers
> tell her that he will be gone a long time
> but she is there still waiting
> and his leather belt
> is still hanging there
> and each time the day ends
> she reaches out to touch a naked waist
> and leans back against the wall.

In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize in 1987, J. M. Coetzee described the literature of South Africa in the apartheid years, including his own, as a "literature in bondage… unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them." It is an art "entrapped by finitudes", in terrible contrast to the unbound-

ed invention of a Don Quixote.

In *I Saw Ramallah,* Barghouti writes that "displacements are always multiple" meaning that, once uprooted, there is no return.

"Writing is a displacement, a displacement from the normal social contract. A displacement from the habitual, the pattern, and the ready form. A displacement from the common roads of love and the common roads of enmity. A displacement from the believing nature of the political party. A displacement from the idea of unconditional support. The poet strives to escape from the dominant, used language, to a language that speaks itself for the first time. He strives to escape from the chains of the tribe, from its approvals and its taboos. If he succeeds in escaping and becomes free, he becomes a stranger at the same time. It is as though the poet is a stranger in the same degree as he is free."

This is one reason why Coetzee's notion of a literature in bondage is a limited one. Others are evident in the sublimely brilliant writing of the first chapter, 'The Bridge' of Barghouti's memoir. He crosses the wooden bridge over the river Jordan in a multiple of guises: "A visitor? A refugee? A citizen? A guest? I do not know." It's a multiplication, a fracturing, a brilliantly angular, as well as creakily located crossing, return, arrival and approach "towards the land of the poem".

He continues; "People like direct poetry only in times of injustice, times of communal silence. Times when they are unable to speak or act. Poetry that whispers and suggests can only be felt by free men."

Mourid Barghouti's time is defined by a unique injustice, yet he writes poetry of near-silent suggestiveness with all the potency of a freedom to come.

'Midnight' is a poem about a man in a room with an open window through which visions, stories and memories pour in, refusing him any rest. It's not just any midnight either, but the very cusp of New Year. It's also not an English midnight. In Arabic, Mourid tells me, the word means 'half-night' – a mixture of day and night – a more pregnantly ambiguous notion than that of a pivot or starting point. Published in Arabic as the year 2004 turned to 2005, a little over half appeared in English a year later.

Rooms with windows like this recur in *I Saw Ramallah*. On his long awaited 'return' to Ramallah, Barghouti stays in the home of a family friend. His room has a window that opens onto the familiar sight of olive groves not seen for exactly thirty years and an alien Israeli settlement on top of the hill. An insistent rush of memories and questions deprive him of sleep on his last night there.

Mourid frequently resorts to metaphorical windows to describe his work and, more importantly, how he intends it to work.

"I don't ask you to feel this way or that way, or to direct the emotions of the reader. I just open a window" – he wafts his hand; "this is the scene. Look at it… okay, have a nice time, I leave you." His hand sits up pertly.

This manoeuvre of selective offering is crucial. It relates to an extraordinary precision in his poetry, the light touch of capturing things in a glance or snapshot. It also rehearses the singularity of his faith in the concrete. In his memoir Mourid writes that he only became a poet when he discovered how "faded all abstracts and absolutes were… when I discovered the justice and genius of the language of the camera, which presents its view in an amazing whisper,

however noisy this view was in fact or in history." He's describing the way that the Occupation was "changing us from children of Palestine to children of the idea of Palestine." Barghouti's is a poetry of refusal and resistance as well as of pregnant ambiguity.

In 'The Pillow', from *The Logic of Beings*, Barghouti takes an object that is easily ignored but intimately present in all our lives and gets it to talk. It tells us truths that only it can know about "the grandeur of unnoticed little things / … the loser's dignity, / the winner's loneliness / and the stupid coldness one feels / when a wish has been granted."

Mourid talked to me about the Iraqi poet, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, whose work he came across in a beloved bookstore in Ramallah as a boy. "I have loved poetry since I was very young but had never associated myself or found any of the poems in the school curriculum directly relevant to me. Then I came across this book and felt: 'this is a person with whom I can associate' – not only because of the form but because there was no literary diction in his poetry. He was a normal person trying to say something about this life in which we are living. And I started to imitate him in my first collection or two, which is natural."

Al-Sayyab is credited with being the first of the modernists in Arabic poetry, writing throughout a short life which ended in 1964 when he was 38 .

Barghouti's first collection, *The Deluge and the Recreation*, was published in Beirut in 1972, as he and his wife Radwa Ashour (now novelist and Professor of Literature) were on

their way to settle in Cairo after a short period in Kuwait with Mourid's uncle. In the early 1970s, as a poet and radio journalist in a milieu of artists and intellectuals, he became increasingly engaged. With the Arab world in disarray, President Sadat stamped on dissent in Egypt while moving towards a unilateral 'peace' with Israel. Mourid, and many others, could never accept his attitude to a blatantly unjust *status quo*. No doubt he said as much on Radio Palestine. No doubt this, and paranoid notions about opposition, led to the first closure of the Voice of Palestine in 1975.

He and his colleagues settled in Beirut, then a city of dissidents and 'rogue poets' in the midst of civil war, and re-established the radio station. For several crucial months they remained hemmed into a downtown area under constant bombardment before being invited back to Cairo by Sadat. On 17 November 1977, with his son Tamim only five months old, he was arrested and deported. Sadat was about to give a speech in Jerusalem which recognised Israel's newly-established 'facts on the ground'. This gesture of 'peace' brought a longed-for embrace from America and jettisoned the Palestinians to Menachem Begin's 'Iron Fist' policy of ongoing Occupation. Mourid was deported to the only Arab country that would take Palestinians without a visa: Iraq. He escaped to Beirut but found himself so isolated there that he had to accept an exile in Budapest.

It's from these years, places and experiences that his real voice, the dissident 'pavement' voice, emerges. The titles of [as yet] untranslated collections tell their own story. After the grandiose 'opener', *The Deluge and the Recreation*, came *A Palestinian Under the Sun* in 1974, the title of which refers to a famous novel by Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer,

friend and inspiration who was assassinated in Beirut in 1972. In 1977 came *A Song to Armed Poverty*, and a year later *Earth Reveals Its Secrets*, a more characteristic expression. By 1980, when *Poems of the Pavement* appeared in Beirut, Mourid was long gone, distanced by several degrees of exile in Budapest.

"I've seen war when it is… silly," he laughs and continues slowly and thoughtfully. "I saw causes being manipulated… I saw rhetoric substituting for language and communication… I saw false heroism…. I saw the bodyguard become as important as the person he guards. I wrote a poem called 'The Bodyguards' describing them as kings – it was smuggled all over the place."

It is Mourid's distaste for hollow heroics, along with the songs and poems to endless 'victories' of this period, that forged his unique voice, founded as it is on a refusal to simplify anything, founded upon an elemental dissidence – temperamental and aesthetic – and informed by his sense that, in all of this, "the step toward my country" never arrives.

This is what he means when he describes himself as being positioned against, or at an angle to, the mainstream, the autostrat, filled with "the stars of the street". In marked contrast, Barghouti seeks a poetic language that "defies the fake and flamboyant. I am trying to *defy* the conventional language by which this unconventional world is described."

Silence.

> Silence said:
> truth needs no eloquence.
> After the death of the horseman,
> the homeward-bound horse

says everything
without saying anything.

"When I went to Budapest it took me seven years to produce a book, because I could not become reconciled to the move."

This book is called *Endless Estrangement* and nothing from it is translated.

After this in 1992 or 1993 came *Rannat al Ebrah* – "*ebrah* means 'needle', *rannat* means 'ringing': 'the ringing of the needle'. My poetry had reached a point that is almost silence, by which I mean I had reached an economy inside the poem, using the minimum of what we might call linguistic 'weapons'. Closer to silence, it's *Rannat al Ebrah*."

Frequently I hear Mourid asked to repeat how he ended up where and when, and in particular how he found his way to Budapest. In his memoir he wrote: "I hate a fraudulent yearning…" and he could not be more honourably precise about his own exile, in relation to others, minimising its specialness, constantly guarding against exception, refusing presumptuous pleading.

So he abbreviates responses, skipping parts to get the answer out. It is as if, in their sympathy, no-one realises that it's a map scorched with pain, as if they have not pondered the absence of advertisement. Yet the world has barely noticed the facts of this uniquely chronic dispossession, so he has to respond; it is a duty to tell. Each time, the rate of compression is slightly different. Often I hear interruptions for more detail. It remains a confusing story.

It took many hours over some days before I asked about

Budapest directly, forcing him to revisit real desolation. It is in Budapest, though, that a newly-refined voice develops, consolidates and, though close to silence, is practised and heard. I asked if he'd been sent directly there, which led him to explain, with faltering reluctance, the story of deportation to Baghdad and being returned to Beirut.

"*Then* there was a real problem. I was on the left of my leadership, radically against the Arab regimes when Arafat's policy was to be on good terms with all the Arab regimes." He slowly describes the consequences of this isolation, trying, as ever, to explain fully, to prepare me rather than engage my sympathy – knowing how bizarre it must sound decades later. It is a bald restatement of the refugee's senseless estate. Eventually, Mourid describes meeting an old friend in the street who, seeing his desperation, suggests the sanctuary of a modest posting in Budapest.

"With the negligence of my situation, I welcomed the idea. I was fed up with being in the same place as the entire Palestinian leadership, the whole lot of them. Wherever they were, I got away. When they went to Tunis after the invasion – when Sharon entered Lebanon – I refused to enter Tunis!"

This is the only moment when his voice strikes a false note, one tinged with bravado.

Again there is a long pause.

"I don't know. I'm a critical person, my vision is a critical vision – towards everything. It's difficult for me to be told how to think, what to do, who to help. I can't work to that. I'm really an independent person. This is an observation, not …".

He tails off again, the memory clearly unpleasant. In fact

he seems actually disturbed by revisiting it. This is particularly striking to me, a witness to his extraordinary implacability elsewhere, to his allergy to expressions of sympathy or alarm at new injustices. It's a story of destitution, a complete abandonment, an unromantic solitude. I recall a line in his memoir: "the wish to count the faults of the victim has woken in me once again… we too have our faults."

This is the "story of accepting Budapest" where he was to become a member of the Bureau of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and where he worked as a kind of cultural attaché with PLO representatives. It was 1977-1978, ten years after the apparently endlessly repeating defeat of 1967.

I was the one who changed the subject.

Mourid was forced to spend a decade and a half in Budapest, "leaping through the ages toward particulars: / the address of a house, a roof… / a friend's knock at the door". Finally, in 1996, he stood "on the dust of this land" on the far side of the bridge, able to write "my country carries me." As he crosses, assaulted by memories of those funerals he could not attend, those friends murdered in exile, of large and small memories, his head full of song, the scene is

"as prosaic as a bill of reckoning.
The wooden planks creak beneath my feet."

He's carrying a manuscript which is to become *The Logic of Beings* – poems from this and another collection called *A Mad Night* are scattered through *I Saw Ramallah*. *The Logic of Beings* was published from Amman, where his mother lives and where he met with Radwa and Tamim during the summers of his peculiar exile. He describes the poems in

Logic as haikus, in which he tries to make inanimate objects speak. It's an extension of the creaking wood underneath the chorus of resistance songs, it's the dust of reality that life propels him towards. It's something else too: the most singular quality of this Palestinian poet.

"I once said that a poet should have some hot water and liquid soap and a sponge to wash words like we do greasy dishes. So I would like every abstract noun to be broken down into what it means in concrete terms in the real world. The freshness of a word does not come from its being poetic, it comes from being *precise*. We have to be *precise*. Creative writing is a critical process."

This dirty, dusty, applied work of intervention, engagement and poetry-making labour has a clear inspiration. In contrast with the men – "Arab leaders, tribal 'kings', rhetorical revolutionaries, 'victorious' freedom fighters, 'poets of the revolution', the proclaimers of Arab 'Unity'", he celebrates the constancy and sheer day-to-day industry of the women – "our mothers". Women, mothers, like his own mother Sakina – heroine of the memoir – who stayed, continued, created and sustained life: "a revolution realised every day, without fuss and without theorising."

Mourid describes to me an untranslated poem, also called 'Rannat al Ebrah', in which he uses "the real needle, as the women are embroidering the Palestinian peasant's dress. Every Palestinian women wears a dress that is embroidered, here and in the arms, right to the bottom. It's all embroidered, it's very expensive, but – I mean – they *do* it.

So in order to praise the role of women in the successive *intifadas*, I just wrote about this dress. How, under the very soft light of a traditional lamp, step by step, night after night,

women are *doing* something, something which is finished beautifully. And in the poem, I said that I would be led by this needle and the direction it chooses towards beauty."

He pauses to relish the thought, his head buried in the memory.

"So give me orders, you are the guide, you are the signal…"

This is the revolution of the everyday, an enduring hand-made resistance which sounds exactly like his notion of the work involved in poetry. It's the same applied effort and it disallows abstract, rhetorical calls, easily turned phrases or crude nomination.

Mourid has a voice carved from stone. Deep, definite, it moves forward with sparing certainty. It is the perfect voice for his poems, albeit one partly formed by chain smoking. It also suits his handsome dignity, his survivor's durability and purposive calm as well as his lewd chuckle, occasional blunt language, and obvious enjoyment of laughter. He uses it to inveigh against lazy adjectives and everyday imagery which – he laughs heartily – "fall into your cup of coffee" like flies.

Form, however, is crucial to him: "Form is not chains because the freedom of a writer – as I see it – is his or her freedom to choose their own chains. They create chains of their making and they abide by them, but they do not obey borrowed chains."

Barghouti's chosen formal restrictions, together with this refusal to drink the fly-strewn coffee, link to idealist notions of a work of art being an "isolated, self-contained work" – to quote a young Walter Benjamin. This is also what is conjured up by the brink-man's flowers; they represent this kind of recovery of difficult precision from an impoverishment in our requirements of language. It is both a rescuing of the

difficult and the difficulty of such a rescue.

These are the responses to Coetzee's problem and Barghouti exceeds it in two ways. In some ways the choice of chains is the most radical in Mourid's case, a simple refusal of the prison-writing that Coetzee fears. Then, there's a perfect example of what I mean, on a small scale, in a poem which exemplifies Barghouti's refusal to nominate, to wave banners, to confine the particular within its particularity. It's the longish poem 'A Night Unlike Others' [see p. 196] published in 2002, but written, I suspect, in late 2000 or early 2001.

Poetry, Giorgio Agamben argues, is defined by "the possibility of enjambement… the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit. […] Enjambement reveals a mismatch, a disconnection… such that poetry lives, only in their inner disagreement." Poetry's open-endedness – "this sublime hesitation between meaning and sound" – is its core. Anything else is prose.

'A Night Like Others' is poetry of this kind. Knowing more, adding explicatory prose, only reveals the precision of its work as poetry. So, what 'more' can we know from the poem as it presents itself to us? We know more from knowing its date, more if we focus on the two flags, though every nation has a frontier and every one has been, or is, contested. We know more if we take up, with care, the words school-bag, bullet holes and shelling. We know something by the word Mohammed, though it's important to understand exactly what. However, despite being the most declamatory of Barghouti's poems in translation, there is no accusation or nomination, nothing that must be withdrawn under certain circumstances, no contentiousness nor, even here,

any stage directions. Its author guarantees no tears for his poem.

Yet this is a poem written in the wake of the deliberate shooting of Mohammed al-Durra, who cowered in terror with his father under Israeli attack, an attack captured on film that went global in September 2000. Statistically common as an event, this was, in fact, a rare recording of the gratuitous killing of a child by Israeli Defence Forces. A war crime right in front of all our faces. Then Israel re-invaded illegally occupied territories as the second *intifada* took off. Mohammed al-Durra became an icon of injustice, a symbol, an idea, wrapped in flourishes of rhetoric – the kind that Mourid refuses.

I asked him about it, knowing that there had been a memorial edition of an occasional publication in Cairo, renamed *Durra*, to which writers – including Mourid – contributed. Something touched him about my question, perhaps the fact that I asked it, or that my overdue son was born just after it happened. The point, quickly established, was that yes, it was Mohammed al-Durra in one sense, but in another "Mohammed is not a name, even!"

There are many Mohammeds, I suggest.

"Yes."

He then described his participation in a kind of memorial tour of north African capitals with the father of this particular Mohammed, whose long face we all saw yanked into animal terror. There were posters everywhere, he said everyone was saying this, chanting that. "Okay, I went on the tour, but I never read this poem!"

He said this with pride, proud of a characteristic, principled clarity.

So we have a poem about a grotesque crime, which was a trigger for the slide back into hell for Palestinians: a historically significant moment. The poem does not name, nor does it blame. Even agreeing to a memorial tour in support of the family, the poem that does not name is not read! This, in a heightened way, exemplifies Mourid Barghouti's work.

Here he has chosen his chains, even if the walls of the prison remain misty.

The truth, or a truth: this event is self-contained and incontestable.

The particular here, unnamed, has graduated to the universal.

If this is literature in bondage, the bindings are our little humanity, the prison our planetary bauble.

Paul Celan wrote despite an internal injunction against poetry after the *shoah* [the catastrophe of the European Jewish genocide]. His poems broke down the language of a world that had become unrepresentable. Inverted images of the world become the only means of rendering such a state of being. He once wrote of "Spring, when birds fly up to meet their tree", a line whose levity, economy and self-containment tells us everything. It's a line I'd often thought that Mourid Barghouti might have written and, in 'Midnight', he has.

'Midnight' was written between January 2002 and July 2004 as a cumulative series of segments and angular portraits of a man whose prison walls talk. The poem is the product of a world gone mad, thrown headlong into a nightmare of mythological barbarity. Nothing is as it should be, or even

as it appears, any more. For Palestinians, the early 1990 agreements in Oslo offered limited hopes but contained explicit commitments to them. By the millennium, settlements on the occupied 'West Bank' had flourished, every promise was broken and their own leadership fatally compromised. Used to chronic injustice, and having survived acute injustices, Palestinians were now thrown into another round of both contiguously, crimes against humanity of an unimaginable order.

Against all of this, Mourid insists upon an instinctive capacity for joy, but the poem makes for bleak and distressing reading. Mourid may have chosen the chains, but at times you feel the man is trapped forever in a uniquely relentless hell. Certainly this is poetry of human extremity, the world's madness concentrated in the Palestinians existential torment, further gathered into the ferocious gusts of unending nocturnal distress. A day like no other in human history, just another day in an endless night. Mourid told me that "the disappointment is endless now. No promises – promises of independence, freedom, movement, autonomy, way of life, sovereignty – they are all destroyed."

In 'Midnight', the narrator asks: "Why is it that whenever I see a man who has been murdered / I mistake him for a person lost in thought?" We see "embroidered dresses / stooping over gravestones." Here Mourid writes of "hills that follow each other like rhymes / hills that you shield, instead of being shielded by them." Here the difficult, necessary flowers come from airborne trees. The world is upside down, inside out, indifferent to a barely-conceivable injustice, the endlessly repeated attempts to separate a land from its people.

If this is a literature of finitudes, of bondage, or of 'prison-

writing', then I embrace it along with Coetzee, Celan, Benjamin – and Kafka too, of course. These poets of thwarted humanity, who invent against all odds, equal – for me, surpass – the freewheeling invention of Cervantes because they represent the rarest, most vital pulses of our experience.

In fact, as I've argued, Barghouti's poetry exceeds these bonds in small, subtle, significant ways. Its judgements – personal, artistic, political, ethical – involve an extraordinary aesthetic precision. It's all there in the work, a work of unimpeachable creative responsibility and ethical clarity. Of course, it is a writing 'against', but it's also writing as play, writing as human definition. This taut and often tortured writing emerges from the deepest realms of our humanity. It is a writing from many angles, directions and drives, and delivers great depth.

In 'Midnight', Mourid Barghouti paints us the end of the world. But there is a profound shift here too. He writes; "I will not send a spaceship / to discover life on planet Mars. / I will try to discover life here / on this earth." He draws the poem to a close with a "message of doubt" for "the victorious":

> Enemies,
> victory has become your daily routine
> like your morning toast.
> Why, then, this hysteria?
> Why do I not see you dancing?
> How much victory do you need to be victorious?

Every time I read those lines, I recall Mourid talking of the hope he has encountered on the 'West Bank', the lessons learnt from 1948, 1967, 1987 and 2000: "It's really amazing, little acts of resistance. They demolish the house, and they

cut down the trees and people stay where they are, in the rubble! But in their place, a temporary house is raised, the neighbours bring some help and family life is resumed in some way or another."

It would be wrong to describe 'Midnight' as a poem of hope. It is not, not even hope against hope. Mourid gives his narrator, whose life is one of obituaries and checkpoints, the properly Shakespearian lines "Age: zero. / Life: tomorrow / and tomorrow and tomorrow!"

However, I see in this endlessly denied and deferred existence potential for new life. Amidst desolation in the shadows of stolen hills, there is a refusal of defeat and a resistance to closure constitutive of poetry. 'Midnight' is also a message of doubt to the victorious, something with revolutionary – by which I mean real life, actual and historical – potency. Mourid Barghouti's poetry is a writing against all conceivable odds: brinkmanship of the highest aesthetic order.

Guy Mannes-Abbott, London 2008

Part I
MIDNIGHT

مُنْتَصَفُ اللَّيْلْ