1

THE BRIDGE

It is very hot on the bridge. A drop of sweat slides from my forehead down to the frame of my spectacles, then the lens. A mist envelops what I see, what I expect, what I remember. The view here shimmers with scenes that span a lifetime; a lifetime spent trying to get here. Here I am, crossing the Jordan River. I hear the creak of the wood under my feet. On my left shoulder a small bag. I walk westward in a normal manner—or rather, a manner that appears normal. Behind me the world, ahead of me my world.

The last thing I remember of this bridge is that I crossed it on my way from Ramallah to Amman thirty years ago. From Amman I went to Cairo and back to college. I was in my fourth and final year at Cairo University.

The morning of June 5, 1967: the Latin exam. Only a few left to go: Latin, then two days later 'the Novel,' then 'Drama.' And then I would have kept my promise to Mounif and fulfilled my mother's wish to see one of her sons a college graduate. The previous exams—History of European Civilization, Poetry, Literary Criticism, and

Translation—had gone by with no surprises. Nearly there. After the results come out I shall go back to Amman, and from there—across this same bridge—to Ramallah, where I learn from my parents' letters that they have started to decorate our apartment in al-Liftawi's building in preparation for my return with the Certificate.

It is very hot in the examination hall. A drop of sweat slides down my brow to the frame of my spectacles. It stops, then slides down the lens, and from there to the Latin words in the exam paper: altus, alta, altum—but what is this noise outside? Explosions? Are these the maneuvers of the Egyptian Army? The talk in the last few days has all been of war. Is it war? I wipe my spectacles with a tissue, check through my answers, and leave my seat. I hand my paper to the monitor. A flake of yellow paint from the ceiling falls onto the exam papers on the table between us. He looks up at the ceiling in disgust and I walk out.

I walk down the steps of the Faculty of Arts. Madame Aisha—our middle-aged colleague who enrolled in the university after her husband's death—is sitting in her car under the campus palm trees. She calls out to me in her French accent and disturbed manner: "Mourid! Mourid! War has broken out. We've brought down twenty-three planes!"

I lean into the car, holding onto the door. Ahmad Sa'id is ecstatic on the car radio. The patriotic anthems ring loud. A group of students collect around us. Comments fly around, assured and doubtful. I tighten my right fist on the bottle of Pelican ink that is always with me in the exams. Until this day I do not know why with my arm I drew a wide arc in the air and, aiming at the trunk of that palm tree, hurled the bottle of ink with all my strength so in that midnight-blue collision it burst into fragments of glass that settled on the lawn.

And from here, from Voice of the Arabs radio station, Ahmad Sa'id tells me that Ramallah is no longer mine and that I will not return to it. The city has fallen.

The examinations are suspended for weeks. The examinations resume. I graduate. I am awarded a BA from the Department of English Language and Literature, and I fail to find a wall on which to hang my certificate.

Those who happened to be outside the homeland when war broke out try in every possible way to get a reunion permit. They try through their relatives in Palestine and through the Red Cross. Some—like my brother Majid—dare to take the risk of smuggling themselves in.

Israel allows in hundreds of elderly people and forbids hundreds of thousands of young people to return. And the world finds a name for us. They called us *naziheen*, the displaced ones.

Displacement is like death. One thinks it happens only to other people. From the summer of '67 I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else.

The stranger is the person who renews his Residence Permit. He fills out forms and buys the stamps for them. He has to constantly come up with evidence and proofs. He is the one who is always asked: "And where are you from, brother?" Or he is asked: "Are summers hot in your country?" He does not care for the details that concern the people of the country where he finds himself or for their 'domestic' policy. But he is the first to feel its consequences. He may not rejoice in what makes them happy but he is always afraid when they are afraid. He is always the 'infiltrating element' in demonstrations, even if he never left his house that day. He is the one whose relationship with places is distorted, he gets attached to them and repulsed by them at the same time. He is the one who can-

not tell his story in a continuous narrative and lives hours in every moment. Every moment for him has its passing immortality. His memory resists ordering. He lives essentially in that hidden, silent spot within himself. He is careful of his mystery and dislikes those who probe into it. He lives the details of another life that does not interest those around him, and when he speaks he screens those details rather than declare them. He loves the ringing of the telephone, yet fears it. The stranger is told by kind people: "You are in your second home here and among your kin." He is despised for being a stranger, or sympathized with for being a stranger. The second is harder to bear than the first.

At noon on that Monday I was struck by displacement.

Was I mature enough to realize that there were strangers like me living in their own capitals? Their countries unoccupied by foreign forces? Did Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi look into the future and write—in his distant past—our current estrangement in the second half of the twentieth century? Is this second half longer than the first? I do not know.

But I do know that the stranger can never go back to what he was. Even if he returns. It is over. A person gets 'displacement' as he gets asthma, and there is no cure for either. And a poet is worse off, because poetry itself is an estrangement. Where does asthma come into it? Is it the coughing fit I had while waiting those long hours on the Jordanian bank before the 'other side' (as they are called by the Palestinian police) would permit my feet to touch this boundary between two times?

I had arrived from Amman to this Jordanian side of the bridge. My brother 'Alaa drove me. His wife, Elham, and my mother were with us. We left our house in Shmaysani at nine-fifteen in the morning and got here before ten. This was the farthest point they were allowed to reach. I said goodbye, and they turned back to Amman.

I sat in a waiting-room set up exactly at the end of the bridge. I asked the Jordanian officer about the next step.

"You wait here till we receive a signal from them, then you cross the bridge."

I waited a while in the room before I realized it was going to be a long wait. I went to the door and stood looking at the river.

I was not surprised by its narrowness: the Jordan was always a very thin river. This is how we knew it in childhood. The surprise was that after these long years it had become a river without water. Almost without water. Nature had colluded with Israel in stealing its water. It used to have a voice, now it was a silent river, a river like a parked car.

The other bank displays itself clearly to the eye. And the eye sees what it sees. Friends who had crossed the river after a long absence told me they had wept here.

I did not weep.

That slight numbness did not rise from my chest to my eyes. No one was with me to tell me what my face looked like during those hours of waiting.

I look at the body of the bridge. Will I really cross it? Will there be some last-minute problem? Will they send me back? Will they invent a procedural error? Shall I actually walk on that other bank, on those hills displaying themselves in front of me?

There is no topological difference between this Jordanian land I stand on and that Palestinian land on the other side of the bridge.

That, then, is the 'Occupied Territory.'

Toward the end of 1979 I was at a conference of the Union of Arab Writers in Damascus. Our hosts took us to visit the city of

Qunaytera. A convoy of cars took us on the short journey and we saw the destruction visited by the Israelis on the city. We stood by the barbed wire behind which flew the Israeli flag. I stretched my hand across the wire and took hold of a shrub growing wild on the occupied side of the Golan. I shook the shrub and said to Hussein Muruwwa, who stood next to me: "Here is the Occupied Territory, Abu Nizar; I can hold it with my hand!"

When you hear on the radio and read in newspapers and magazines and books and speeches the words 'the Occupied Territories' year after year, and festival after festival, and summit conference after summit conference, you think it's somewhere at the end of the earth. You think there is absolutely no way you can get to it. Do you see how close it is? How touchable? How real? I can hold it in my hand, like a handkerchief.

In the eyes of Hussein Muruwwa the answer formed itself, and it was silent and moist.

Now here I am looking at it: at the west bank of the Jordan River. This then is the 'Occupied Territory'? No one was with me to whom I could repeat what I had said years ago to Hussein Muruwwa: that it was not just a phrase on the news bulletins. When the eye sees it, it has all the clarity of earth and pebbles and hills and rocks. It has its colors and its temperatures and its wild plants too.

Who would dare make it into an abstraction now that it has declared its physical self to the senses?

It is no longer 'the beloved' in the poetry of resistance, or an item on a political party program, it is not an argument or a metaphor. It stretches before me, as touchable as a scorpion, a bird, a well; visible as a field of chalk, as the prints of shoes.

I asked myself, what is so special about it except that we have lost it?

It is a land, like any land.

We sing for it only so that we may remember the humiliation of having had it taken from us. Our song is not for some sacred thing of the past but for our current self-respect that is violated anew every day by the Occupation.

Here it is in front of me, as it has been since the day of creation. I said to myself: "Land does not move away." I have not reached it yet. I merely see it directly. I am like someone who has been told he has won a large prize, only he has not got it in his hands yet.

I am still on the Jordanian side. The hours pass. I go back to the waiting room. It is clear there is nothing new for me. I sit on the chair and take out my papers. I pass the time in leafing through them: epigrams and poetic 'sketches' I am preparing for publication under the title "The Logic of Beings"—my ninth volume of poetry. I cast a quick look over the lines and return the papers to the bag. The anxiety of waiting reflects into an anxiety about the work. Before publication I lose my enthusiasm and doubt the value of the text that is about to escape from my control.

I love the poem as it forms under my fingers, image after image, word after word. And then fear arrives and certainty disappears. That contented moment when the creator is fascinated by his creation ends for me.

This happens and has happened since the first poem I ever published. I remember it well.

I was in the fourth and final year at university. I used to read some of my poems to Radwa on the steps of the library and she used to assure me they were good poems and that I would definitely—one day—be a poet. And one day I gave one of my poems to Farouk 'Abd al-Wahab to publish in *Theater Magazine*, which was edited by Rashad Rushdi. And then I spent days of terror.

Every day I would think of asking for the poem back, but I was afraid he would consider me weak and indecisive. I would see him in college and almost ask what he thought of the poem and stop myself at the last moment. From the second that poem left my hands I felt it was no good and should not be published. Now I know it really was bad.

The days passed until we arrived at Monday, June 5, 1967.

I went to a baker to stock up with bread, for we thought we were in for a long war. I stood in the long queue and on the pavement beside me—an extension of a small bookshop that had stayed open—were piles of newspapers, magazines, and books. Among tens of magazines I saw the *Theater Magazine*. I paid for it and riffled through the pages looking for my poem and—I found it. "Mourid al-Barghouti: 'Apology to a Faraway Soldier.'" What coincidence is this?

My first poem published on this strange morning. On the cover of the magazine, the date: Monday, June 5, 1967. A journalist once asked me about this. I told him the story, then added, joking: "I wonder if the Arabs were defeated and Palestine was lost because I wrote a poem."

We laughed, and did not laugh.

I leave the room again.

I go for a walk in the small space between the room and the river. I contemplate the scene. I have nothing to do except contemplate.

A desert land so close to the water. And the sun a scorpion.

"*Tell the eye of the sun . . .* "—that sad song which became an elegy for men lost in another desert not so far from this place comes to my mind. June 19, 1967: a knock on the door of my flat in Zamalek brings in a man of strange aspect and clothing, his face burned by the sun. I embrace him as though he had descended

directly from a cloud and into my arms: "How did you get here, *Khali* 'Ata?"

He had walked for fourteen days in the desert of Sinai. Since June 5 he had been walking.

"We didn't fight. They destroyed our weapons and chased us with their planes from the first hour . . . ."

My uncle was an officer in the Jordanian army, then—at the beginning of the sixties—went to work as a trainer in the Kuwaiti army. In the '67 war they sent him with the Kuwaiti battalion to fight with Egypt. He said they were now in a camp near Dahshur under the command of the Egyptian Army and did not know what the next step would be.

I did not see any of the returning soldiers except him, and that was enough to sadden the heart. One man was enough to embody the whole idea. The idea of defeat.

It is noon. My tension increases with each new minute of waiting. Will they allow me to cross the river? Why are they so late?

At this point I hear someone call my name: "Take your bag and cross the water."

At last! Here I am, walking, with my small bag, across the bridge. A bridge no longer than a few meters of wood and thirty years of exile.

How was this piece of dark wood able to distance a whole nation from its dreams? To prevent entire generations from taking their coffee in homes that were theirs? How did it deliver us to all this patience and all that death? How was it able to scatter us among exiles, and tents, and political parties, and frightened whispers?

I do not thank you, you short, unimportant bridge. You are not a sea or an ocean that we might find our excuses in your terrors. You are not a mountain range inhabited by wild beasts and fantastical

monsters that we might summon our instincts to protect us from you. I would have thanked you, bridge, if you had been on another planet, at a spot the old Mercedes could not reach in thirty minutes. I would have thanked you had you been made by volcanoes and their thick, orange terror. But you were made by miserable carpenters, who held their nails in the corners of their mouths, and their cigarettes behind their ears. I do not say thank you, little bridge. Should I be ashamed in front of you? Or should you be ashamed in front of me? You are near like the stars of the naive poet, far like the step of one paralyzed. What embarrassment is this? I do not forgive you, and you do not forgive me. The sound of the wood under my feet.

Fayruz calls it the Bridge of Return. The Jordanians call it the King Hussein Bridge. The Palestinian Authority calls it al-Karama Crossing. The common people and the bus and taxi drivers call it the Allenby Bridge. My mother, and before her my grandmother and my father and my uncle's wife, Umm Talal, call it simply: the Bridge.

Now I cross it for the first time since thirty summers. The summer of 1966, and immediately after, no slowing down, the summer of 1996.

Here, on these prohibited wooden planks, I walk and chatter my whole life to myself. I chatter my life, without a sound, and without a pause. Moving images appear and disappear without coherence, scenes from an untidy life, a memory that bangs backward and forward like a shuttle. Images shape themselves and resist the editing that would give them final form. Their form is their chaos.

A distant childhood. The faces of friends and enemies. I am the person coming from the continents of others, from their languages and their borders. The person with spectacles on his eyes and a

small bag on his shoulder. And these are the planks of the bridge. These are my steps on them. Here I am walking toward the land of the poem. A visitor? A refugee? A citizen? A guest? I do not know.

Is this a political moment? Or an emotional one? Or social? A practical moment? A surreal one? A moment of the body? Or of the mind? The wood creaks. What has passed of life is shrouded in a mist that both hides and reveals. Why do I wish I could get rid of this bag? There is very little water under the bridge. Water without water. As though the water apologized for its presence on this boundary between two histories, two faiths, two tragedies. The scene is of rock. Chalk. Military. Desert. Painful as a toothache.

The Jordanian flag is here: red, white, black, and green; the colors of the Arab Revolt. After a few meters, there is the Israeli flag in the blue of the Nile and the Euphrates with the Star of David between them. One gust of wind moves both flags. *White our deeds, black our battles, green our lands* . . . poetry on the mind. But the scene is as prosaic as a bill of reckoning.

The wooden planks creak beneath my feet.

The June air today boils like the June air yesterday. "*O wooden bridge* . . . ." Suddenly Fayruz is there. Unusually for her, the lyrics of the song are more direct than one would wish. How have they settled in the hearts of intellectuals and peasants and students and soldiers and aunts and revolutionaries? Is it people's need to have their voice heard through listening to it from the mouth of another? Is it their attachment to a voice outside themselves expressing what is inside them? The silent ones appoint the speakers to deputize for them in an imaginary and forbidden parliament. People like direct poetry only in times of injustice, times of communal silence. Times when they are unable to speak or to act. Poetry that whispers and suggests can only be felt by free men. By the citizen who can speak

up and does not have to give that task to another. I told myself our literary critics copy western theories with half-closed eyes and wear cowboy hats over their Arab skull-caps. (This metaphor of hats is a cliché, why does it come to me now?) And here is the first Israeli soldier—wearing a yarmulke. This is a real hat and not a literary conceit. His gun seems taller than him. He leans on the door of his solitary room on the west bank of the river, where the authority of the State of Israel begins. I can tell nothing of his feelings; his face shows nothing of his thoughts. I look at him as one looks at a closed door. Now my feet are on the west bank of the river. The bridge is behind me. I stand, a moment, on the dust, on earth. I am not a sailor with Columbus to cry out—when they were almost dead—"Land! Land! It's Land!" I am not Archimedes to cry out "Eureka!" I am not a victorious soldier kissing the earth. I did not kiss the earth. I was not sad and I did not weep.

But *his* image flickers in front of me in this pale wasteland; the image of his smile coming from over there, from his grave where I pillowed him with my own hand. In the darkness of that grave I embraced him for the last time and then the mourners pulled me away and I left him alone under the tombstone on which we had written: "Mounif 'Abd al-Razeq al-Barghouti, 1941–1993."

I walked a few steps.

I looked at the face of the soldier: for a moment he seemed a mere employee: bored and discontented. No. He is tense and alert (or is this my own state I project onto him?) Again no, it is a routine stance he takes every day as he sees thousands of Palestinians like me passing with their bags for a summer visit or leaving for Amman to get on with their lives. But my situation is different.

I said to myself, why does everyone in the world think that his

particular situation is 'different'? Does a man want to be different even in loss? Is it an egotism that we cannot shake free of? Is it justified—since I am passing through here for the first time in thirty years? Those who lived under the Occupation were able to come and go across this bridge. So were the exiles who carried visiting permits or reunion permits. For thirty years I failed to get either. How would he know this? And why do I want him to know?

Last time, my spectacles were not so thick, and my hair was completely black. My memories were lighter, and my memory was better. Last time I was a boy. This time I am a father; the father of a boy who is as old as I was the last time I passed through here. Last time I passed through here I was leaving my country to go to a distant university. Now, I have left my son behind at that same university.

Last time no one argued my right to Ramallah, now I ask what I can do to preserve my son's right to see it. Shall I have him taken off the registers of the Refugees and the Displaced?—he never moved and never sought refuge. All he did was get born outside the homeland.

And now I pass from my exile to their . . . homeland? My homeland? The West Bank and Gaza? The Occupied Territories? The Areas? Judea and Samaria? The Autonomous Government? Israel? Palestine? Is there any other country in the world that so perplexes you with its names? Last time I was clear and things were clear. Now I am ambiguous and vague. Everything is ambiguous and vague.

This soldier with the yarmulke is not vague. At least his gun is very shiny. His gun is my personal history. It is the history of my estrangement. His gun took from us the land of the poem and left us with the poem of the land. In his hand he holds earth, and in our hands we hold a mirage.

But he is vague in another way. Did his parents come from Sachsenhausen or from Dachau? Or is he a settler newly arrived from Brooklyn? From Central Europe? North Africa? Latin America? Is he a dissident Russian émigré? Or was he born here and found himself here without ever wondering why he was here? Has he killed any of us in the wars of his State or in our continuous uprisings against his State? Can he develop an appetite for killing? Or is he performing a military duty he cannot avoid? Is there anyone who has tested his humanity? His own individual humanity? I know everything about the inhumanity of his job. He is a soldier of occupation, and in any case his situation is different from mine, especially at this moment. Can he notice my humanity? The humanity of the Palestinians who pass under the shadow of his shining gun every day?

We are here on the same bit of land, but he has no bag in his hand, and he stands between two Israeli flags that fly freely in the air and in international legitimacy.

"Wait here till the car comes."

He said it in Arabic.

"Where will the car take me?"

"To the border post. All the procedures are there."

I waited.

In his small room—which I had expected would be cleaner and more tidy—there were tourist posters depicting the beauties of . . . Israel! My eyes stopped at a poster of Massada. Their myth recounts that they had held fast in the fortress of Massada until they were all killed—but they did not surrender. Is this their message to us, they hang it on the gate to remind us that they will stay here forever? Was this a deliberate choice, or just a poster?

I look at the room: Two old chairs. A rectangular table. A mirror, the left corner of which is broken. Hebrew newspapers. A small kitchen and a rudimentary electric stove for tea and coffee. A standard guard's room, with the guard guarding our country—against us.

I thought he would interrogate me. He said nothing.

And even if he spoke to me, or asked me anything, would I have heard him? Or would I have turned a 'deaf ear?' And how could I have heard him when their voices have surrounded my silence since I sat on this chair? Those whom I saw coming through the door one after the other, to stand around me in this room, this bridge between two worlds; the world in which they took stands and felt joy and sorrow, and the world I shall soon see.

Would I have listened to him while the sound of their eternal silence fluttered here? Right here? In this place that they died far away from, were martyred before they reached?

The dead do not knock on the door. Enter my grandmother, the poet who lost her eyesight in old age and who improvised her verses—sad or happy—at the weddings and funerals of the village. I hear her whispered prayers at dawn; prayers I never found in poetry or in prose; they were unique to her. I used to lift the edge of the quilt and listen to the music of her words. I would slip into bed next to her when she went back to sleep. I would ask her to repeat her magical prayer, then take its music with me into a warm sleep. The music would stay with me in class; ring on the pages of my schoolbooks and turn the boredom of multiplication tables into the first enemy of my childhood.

Enter my father: from a grave I left behind me in Bayadir Wadi al-Sayr in Amman. He comes with his quiet tenderness, his narrow eyes, and his calm: bruised by the world and contented with it at the same time.

Enter Mounif who was laid waste by death: they ruined the beauty of his heart and of his intentions. They destroyed forever his dream of seeing Ramallah—if only for a few days.

Enter Ghassan Kanafani, whose voice could be silenced by nothing less than a bomb, an explosion that shook the whole of Hazimiya.

Would I have listened to this green soldier while Ghassan plunged the insulin syringe into his arm and produced a welcoming smile for Radwa and me in his office? Only on the posters covering the wall behind his shoulders was there thunder and lightning.

The posters of that time that was so unlike this. The star on Guevara's beret. The questions on Lenin's brow. Embroidery with the pen and the brush for the stolen name. A boundless horse, bounded in a frame. Photographs of the leaders of liberation movements in Asia and Africa and Latin America, slogans and images and writings we thought would lead to Palestine.

I wonder, is Ghassan closer now or farther from Acre?

I compare the posters in the room of this teenage soldier with the posters in Ghassan's office in Beirut. Opposed worlds: in Ghassan's world there was room for the poems of Neruda, the words of Cabral, Lenin's outstretched hand, and the vision of Fanon and the personal colors with which a novelist tries to paint the dream: in navy blue and apricot and orange, and with everything the rainbow may suggest to a narrow, gloomy sky full of omens of disaster and loss. And here? I look at the walls and the drawings. They are scenes from my country. But their context and their reason for being in this place at the forbidden border are aggressive. I remember the big picture that Naji al-'Ali gave me.

He asked Radwa and me to dinner at the Miami Restaurant on the beach in Beirut. At the end of the evening he got the picture out

of the car: "This is what they printed with your poem in *al-Safir*. I drew it again—bigger. For you and Radwa and Tamim."

Then he drove off to his house in Sidon, and Radwa and I returned to our room at the Beau Rivage.

A child's face fills the center of the drawing. Her braids stick out horizontally: one to the right, the other to the left. The braids have turned into barbed wire, reaching to the edges of the drawing, against a very dark sky.

Enter Naji al-'Ali from his old death, his death that is still fresh. This is the smile in his eyes and this is his thin body. I listen to the cry that broke from my chest as I stood in front of his grave in a London suburb. I whispered—as I looked at the mound of dust—one word: "No!"

I said it in a whisper. Nobody heard it, not even nine-year-old Usama, who stood in front of me, my arm around his shoulders, both of us staring at his father's grave. But I could not regain the silence.

That 'no' refused to end.

It grew.

It rose.

I am wailing: one long, continuous wail.

I cannot pluck it back from the air, it hangs there, in that drizzle that fell on all of us together: on Usama and Judy and Layal and Khalid and Widad and me. As though it meant to stay in the sky until the Day of Judgment. That distant sky, not white, not blue, not ours, not . . . .

Widad's brother held my shoulders tight. I heard him say: "For God's sake, Mourid. Calm down, my brother. Calm down, so that we can stay on our feet."

I pulled myself back from the wail that had turned into a semi-

swoon. I closed my mouth with my hand and after a while I found myself saying, my voice weak: "He's the one who's standing. Not us!"

We returned from his grave to his house in Wimbledon.

His family insisted that I should stay in his room. I slept among his unfinished drawings, his sketches. I saw his chair and his desk raised on a wooden platform he had made himself. A platform that raised his desk so that it was on a level with the window looking out on gardens and skies. The window had no curtains, the glass faced the world unprotected. Widad said she had made a curtain for it but Naji had taken it down because he "loves space" and felt that the curtain stifled him. The darkness of his grave leapt to my ear as I heard her describe his love of space.

In that room of his, I spent a week with the family. At his small desk, on his blank paper, with one of his pens, I wrote something about him. About his life and his drawings and his death. A poem I named "The Wolf Ate Him Up"; the title of one of his most famous drawings. I read it later at the opening of an exhibition of his works, organized by the Iraqi artist Dia al-'Azzawi and other friends in one of London's galleries.

At the door of the gallery three young men lined up to greet the guests arriving for the memorial service and the exhibition:

Khalid, son of the martyr Naji al-'Ali.

Fayiz, son of the martyr Ghassan Kanafani.

Hani, son of the martyr Wadi' Haddad.

All in the full bloom of youth. My mouth was dry as I embraced them at the entrance to the gallery. What funerals brought forward these high shoulders and these alert, intelligent eyes? What ruins did their childhood mature in to emerge now into manhood, unlicensed by the murderers?

Khalid presented his two friends to me and I greeted them. I wanted to hear their voices, their tones.

They seemed to me that night as though they were in a scene in a novel rather than in real life. I said to myself as I watched them stand in a row to receive the guests: in our traditions, the men who stood like this to receive those who come to condole or congratulate were the notables of the families or of the political factions (for factions have their notables too). Today, these young men put forward their new definition—fresh and wonderful—of 'notable.' That word which—before them—I could not stand.

I went back to Budapest trembling at the shape of our days to come, leaving under the distant British earth one of the bravest artists in the whole of Palestinian history.

Their faces swam around me as though they were icons of Andre Rublyev, glimmering in dark temples in the thirteenth century. The armed guard's room was not dark, neither was the emptiness outside his room. I have never felt a day as hot as this. Or is it the beginning of a fever creeping up on me? Abu Salma entered and so did Mu'in and Kamal, and with them the poetry of their hearts that were bigger than their papers. Mounif and Naji came back a second time, and a third, and tension once again filled the room. Faces, fantasies, voices appear and disapear. I look at the glance. I call to the voice. Completely with you. Completely alone. May your darkness forgive me this particular day, my friends!

Is all this confusion mine? The absent are so present—and so absent. This ennui surrounded by the salt of the Dead Sea.

I am used to waiting. I have not entered any Arab country easily, and today too I will not enter easily.

The car arrived.

I walked toward it slowly.

A tall driver, fair-skinned, he wears a shirt with the buttons undone. It seemed to me he said something in Arabic. He did not speak much, otherwise I would have found out if he was an Arab or an Israeli. Things are getting confused. We used to read about the Arab workers in Israel. Is he an 'Arab worker in Israel'? Is he an Israeli who knows Arabic?

My questioning did not last long; we arrived at the border post.

He took his fare in Jordanian dinars.

I entered a large hall, like the arrivals hall in an airport, and here I saw the Palestinian police and the Israeli police.

A row of windows to deal with people going to the West Bank, and those going to Gaza.

So many people.

The hall led to a narrow electronic gate. The Israeli police asked me to put any metal objects—watch, keys, and some coins—into a plastic dish.

I passed through the gate and found myself facing an armed Israeli officer. He stopped me, asked for my papers, looked through them, and returned them.

In an attempt to deal with my own tension I decided to be the first to ask a question: "Where do I go now?"

"To the Palestinian officer, of course."

He motioned toward a room nearby.

The Palestinian officer takes my papers and turns them over in his hands then gives them back to the same Israeli officer, who smiles in a deliberate fashion and asks me to wait. I ask him, where?

"With the Palestinian officer, of course."

I sit in the room. The Palestinian officer comes and goes and pays me no attention.

I was abstracted. The officer sat silently at his table. There were two of us in that room, and each one was alone.

In that room I found myself retreating to 'there'; to that hidden place inside each one of us, the place of silence and introspection. A dark, private space in which I take refuge when the outside world becomes absurd or incomprehensible. As though I have a secret curtain at my command: I draw it when I need to, and screen my inner world against the outer one. Drawing it is quick and automatic when my thoughts and observations become too difficult to understand clearly, when screening them is the only way to preserve them.

I entered that empty space in which there is no room for conversation with others. I did not concern myself for long with the odd situation of the man. It was clear that the Agreements had placed him in a position in which he could make no decisions. All security, customs, and administration procedures were their business, the business of 'the other side.'

After about an hour one of their officers appeared; a different officer.

He took me to a room in which there was a man in civilian clothes. He had a printed form in front of him and his questions were of a statistical nature. He did not ask any political questions. He was opening a file for me.

"Go now and identify your bag."

Another wait for the arrival of the bag on the conveyor belt.

A hall crowded with those who had crossed the bridge and who—like me—were waiting for their bags. And on the right a room where chosen bags were searched. Cardboard boxes, domes-

tic appliances, televisions and refrigerators, fans, woolen blankets. Bedding and bundles and bags of every shape and size. When I travel I take with me the smallest and lightest bag possible. I do not like what luggage does to a traveler. And I hate having to open my bag and display its contents to an officer looking for something I am ignorant of.

Israeli men and women wearing nylon gloves and searching the contents of the bags filling the room; the owners of the bags waiting for their possessions.

A blonde Israeli girl conscript lazily matches the numbers of the bags registered on her computer to the number pasted into the passport. I give her my passport, pointing out that all I have is one bag and that I can see it among the bags in the middle of the hall. Yet she asks me to wait.

After a short while she motions to me to go into the luggage hall.

I pick up my small bag. I pass through the huge gate.

I leave the whole building for the road . . . .

The gate of gates,
No key in our hand. But we entered,
Refugees to our birth from the strange death
And refugees to our homes that were our homes and we came.
In our joys there were scratches
Unseen by tears until they're about to flow.

I walk two steps and stop.

Here I stand, with my feet upon this dust. Mounif did not reach this point. A coldness runs through my spine. Relief is not complete. Desolation is not complete.

The gates of exile were opened to us from a strange direction!

The direction that leads to *the* country and not to the countries of others.

I stand on the dust of this land. On the earth of this land.

My country carries me.

Palestine at this moment is not the golden map hanging on a golden chain adorning the throats of women in exile. I used to wonder—every time I saw that map encircling their necks—if Canadian women, or Norwegians, or Chinese carried their maps around their necks as our women do.

I said once to a friend: "When Palestine is no longer a chain worn with an evening dress, an ornament or a memory or a golden Qur'an, when we walk on Palestinian dust, and wipe it off our shirt collars and off our shoes, hurrying to conduct our daily affairs—our passing, normal, boring affairs—when we grumble about the heat in Palestine and the dullness of staying there too long, then we will really have come close to it."

Here it is now in front of you, you who are journeying toward it. Look at it well.

On the pavement opposite the building I meet the first Palestinian performing a clear and understandable function: a thin, elderly man sits at a small table that he has set up in the shade of a wall. He seeks shelter from the June heat. He calls to me in a loud voice: "Come here, brother. Take a bus ticket."

There is nothing more lonely than to be called to in this way. 'Brother' is specifically that phrase that cancels out brotherhood. I looked at him for a moment.

I paid for the ticket in Jordanian money. I moved away two or three steps, then stopped. I turned to him again—then ran for the bus. No. I did not exactly run. I walked entirely normally.

Something inside me was running. I sat in the bus until it filled up with others like me who had crossed the bridge. I asked the driver where we were going now.

"To the Jericho resthouse."

Here I am, entering Palestine at last. But what are all these Israeli flags?

I look out of the bus window and I see their flags appearing and disappearing at the repeated checkpoints. Every few meters their flags appear.

A feeling of depression I do not want to admit to. A feeling of security refusing to become complete.

My eyes do not leave the window. And images of times past and ended do not leave my eyes.

On this slow bus I recall as though I had been there yesterday the breakfast room in the Caravan Hotel where we met as family for the first time after '67.

That was in the summer after the war, the summer of 1968. I was working in Kuwait. My mother and my youngest brother, 'Alaa, were in Ramallah. My father was in Amman and Majid was at the Jordanian University. Mounif was working in Qatar.

Across all the methods of communication available to us in those days, we agreed to meet in Amman. We arrived, one after another, at the Caravan Hotel in Jebel al-Luwaybda; a small, elegant hotel of three or four stories.

This was my first meeting with my mother and father and brothers since war separated us. We took three rooms side by side. Hotels are made for sleeping. We did not sleep. Morning surprised us as though it was not agreed upon in the solar system, as though it came and went without logic and without being expected.

I have never tasted a breakfast like the breakfasts of that summer.

Wonderful to start your day with the whole family after all those strange months. We would look at one another as though each one were discovering the presence of the others for the first time in that place. As though each day we recaptured the motherhood of our mother and the fatherhood of our father, the brotherhood of brothers and ourselves as sons. The strange thing is that none of us spoke of these feelings. Our joy in being together in that hotel hung in the air around us. We felt it and did not wish to make it explicit. As though it were a secret. As though we were all required to suppress it.

The hotel itself, the idea of the hotel, implied the certainty that this was a transient meeting, passing, and nearing its end. From the first night the meeting turned to terror of the certain parting. Tension mingled with happiness. We could not agree if we should order the salad with olive oil or without; one wanted it chopped small, the other large.

The greatest tension showed when we were trying to decide on small expeditions : one suggested a visit to some relatives living in Amman, another did not want to go out at all, and a third suggested some other destination. But there was fun, and there were jokes, none of which I can remember though I remember the atmosphere so clearly.

In the Caravan Hotel I got to know my brothers and my parents all over again. For everyone there were new and exceptional circumstances I could not know completely. And for me there were others. My uncle 'Ata, with an insistence not to be resisted, had more or less made me go to Kuwait, and there I had found work in the technical college, for it was unthinkable that Mounif should carry on supporting me after I had graduated. I have never liked teaching. I took the job as a temporary measure until things became clearer.

Since '67 everything we do is temporary 'until things become

clearer.' And things are no clearer now after thirty years. Even what I am doing now is not clear to me. I am impelled toward it and I do not judge my impulse. Would it be an impulse if we judged it?

In the disaster of 1948 the refugees found shelter in neighboring countries as a 'temporary' measure. They left their food cooking on stoves, thinking to return in a few hours. They scattered in tents and camps of zinc and tin 'temporarily.' The commandos took arms and fought from Amman 'temporarily,' then from Beirut 'temporarily,' then they moved to Tunis and Damascus 'temporarily.' We drew up interim programs for liberation 'temporarily' and they told us they had accepted the Oslo Agreements 'temporarily,' and so on, and so on. Each one said to himself and to others 'until things become clearer.'

Young 'Alaa pleads to join his father and brothers. My father is not allowed—as a soldier in the Jordanian army—to go to the West Bank after the Occupation.

My mother wants to plan the life of the family in circumstances that make the idea of planning absurd. She is absorbed in working out alternatives.

Her desire to defy difficulty and fragmentation is so powerful it paints her tired face with a new vitality. Her green eyes, almost triangular, shine with alertness even at the peak of drowsiness in the small hours of the morning.

My father's tranquility makes you think that things will work out in the end even if one does nothing to help them along. Something of the patience of the wise men of India colors his calmness; a calmness that irritates my mother, who is always questing, scratching for solutions with her fingernails.

His narrow eyes, black, do not reveal his heart except when he laughs. I am the only one who has inherited the blackness of his

eyes and their narrowness. Mounif, Majid, and 'Alaa all have green eyes like my mother. Mounif, a young man of striking good looks, who plays the part of a parent to his younger brothers at twenty-seven. Every problem he volunteers to solve and every sacrifice he hastens to make, simply and without hesitation.

Majid, always tall, has grown taller. He has a way of drawing mirth even out of tragedy. He paints and sculpts and writes poetry that he does not wish to publish (until now he will not publish, even though what he writes is remarkable). He has an alert, attentive heart.

Young 'Alaa, who loves philosophy. He wants to study engineering. He writes songs in the local dialect and wants to learn to play the lute. His fair face and African hair give him an individual handsomeness. 'Alaa has kept alive a child in himself, rare for a man whose hair is turning white.

The scattering of the family taught it to stick together. And when we meet, we four men become once again the children of our parents, no matter that we have become the fathers of their grandchildren.

After two weeks each one of us went back to his place.

We agreed that my mother would live with my father and Majid and 'Alaa in Amman for some time, then go back to Ramallah to renew her permit and identity papers so that she would not lose her right to live in—the now completely occupied—Palestine.

The right to citizenship even under occupation was something to be held on to, whatever the circumstances. My mother still carries her identity card and she is still a citizen of the Occupied Territories. But they never allowed her to get a reunion permit for Mounif or for me.

We did not meet as a whole family again until ten years later in Doha when we visited Mounif before he left Qatar for France.

I was surprised by the bus stopping, as though it had arrived

ahead of time. The porters were yelling under the windows. I remembered how short the distances were in Palestine.

I took my bag and got off the bus.

This is the Jericho resthouse.

Here, the arrivals are distributed to the different towns.

Here, there are only Palestinian flags.

Taxicabs queue under signposts bearing the names of cities: Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarm, al-Khalil, Gaza, and Jerusalem.

As in every station you are met by the drivers quarreling over fares: shouts, threats, shoves. A young Palestinian policeman appears and quietly breaks up the fight.

The car moves toward Ramallah.

I sit next to the driver in an old Mercedes carrying seven passengers.

In the car I am mute. Or am I chattering my life? Have I been struck by my life as a man is struck by a fever?—you think him asleep and silent while his whole body is telling stories.

These are my people. Why do I not talk with them?

I used to tell my Egyptian friends at university that Palestine was green and covered with trees and shrubs and wild flowers. What are these hills? Bare and chalky. Had I been lying to people, then? Or has Israel changed the route to the bridge and exchanged it for this dull road that I do not remember ever seeing in my childhood?

Did I paint for strangers an ideal picture of Palestine because I had lost it? I said to myself, when Tamim comes here he will think I have been describing another country.

I wanted to ask the driver if the road had been like this for many years, but I did not. I had a lump in my throat and a feeling of being let down.

Had I been describing Deir Ghassanah with its surrounding olive groves, and convincing myself I was describing the whole country? Or was I describing Ramallah, the beautiful, lush, summer resort and thinking that each spot in Palestine was exactly like it?

Did I really know a great deal about the Palestinian countryside? The car moves on and I continue to look out of the windows to my right and to the left of the driver. What is this Israeli flag? We entered our 'areas' a while ago. These, then, are the settlements.

Statistics are meaningless. Discussions and speeches and proposals and condemnations and reasons and maps for negotiation and the excuses of negotiators and all we have heard and read about the settlements, all this is worth nothing. You have to see them for yourself.

Buildings of white stone standing together on a stepped incline. One behind the other in neat rows. Solid where they stand. Some are apartment blocks and some are houses with tiled roofs. This is what the eye sees from a distance.

I wonder what their lives look like on the inside?

Who lives in this settlement? Where were they before they were brought here? Do their kids play football behind those walls? Do their men and women make love behind those windows? Do they make love with guns strapped to their sides? Do they hang loaded machine guns ready on their bedroom walls?

On television we only ever see them armed.

Are they really afraid of us, or is it we who are afraid?

If you hear a speaker on some platform use the phrase 'dismantling the settlements,' then laugh to your heart's content. These are not children's fortresses of Lego or Meccano. These are Israel itself; Israel the idea and the ideology and the geography and the trick and the excuse. It is the place that is ours and that they have made theirs. The settlements are their book, their first form. They

are our absence. The settlements are the Palestinian Diaspora itself.

I said to myself that the negotiators of Oslo were ignorant of the true meaning of these settlements, otherwise they would never have signed the Agreement.

You look out of the car window on your right and are surprised to find that the narrow, worn strip that carries you has turned into a wide, smooth elegant road. The asphalt shines, and soon it separates out, rising to a hill with classy buildings, and you realize it leads to a settlement.

After a while you look out to your left and you see another settlement and another good, wide road leading up to it. Then you see a third and a fourth and a tenth, and so on.

Israeli flags rise at the entrances, and the signposts are in Hebrew.

Who built all this?

When I crossed the bridge, the leader of the Likud, Benyamin Netanyahu, was waiting for the final results that would confirm that he had won the elections. It is the Labor Party then.

Since the time of Ben Gurion, the Labor Party has been building these settlements on our land. The fools of the Likud make a lot of noise about their settlement policy and about each new settlement they build. But the brains of the Labor Party remind me of a story I read long ago about a thief who stole a car:

He returned it to its owners the next day and left them—inside it—a polite note of apology. He said he had not meant to steal their car, he had just needed it for one night to go out with his sweetheart. And he is returning the car, with two theater tickets, in apology and to show his goodwill.

The owners smiled and admired the sensitivity of the lover/thief and his good manners.

In the evening they went to the theater.

They returned late at night to find everything of value stolen from their home.

A killer can strangle you with a silk scarf, or can smash your head in with an axe; in both cases you are dead.

The symmetry is not absolute, of course, between the story of the Labor Party and the story of the thief. But the duality of intelligence and stupidity has been part of the Zionist project from the beginning. And there are always, in Israel, representatives of both.

And in any case they are the winners. They gain from smooth deliberation, and from strong-arm tactics.

Moderates, at one time or another, learn a new language from extremists. And the extremists—if they have to—will learn from the moderates how to speak with silken tongues. And we, the owners of the house, lose in any case and in every way.

How did we let them build all these cities? These fortresses? These barracks? Year after year?

Bashir al-Barghouti told me, several years ago, that from the balcony of his house in Deir Ghassanah he could see the lights of the settlements proliferating year after year until they encircled the village. They had gradually, and in the shade of our long silence, spread everywhere.

The weave of the carpet is the settlements. Some scattered figures here and there are all that is left to us of Palestine. In the terms of the (last) negotiations they left our houses, but they continue to occupy the roads leading to them. They can stop you at any of the numerous checkpoints and you have to obey.

As for Jerusalem, I was not allowed to enter it or see it. Even the road to Ramallah that used to go by Jerusalem they changed via a complex of winding roads so that we may not see the city even from the car window.

Only in the company of a Palestinian leader carrying a VIP card can you go to Jerusalem. (And nobody with a VIP card issued by the Israelis will take you to visit Jerusalem unless you are a VIP for him). I found no one to take me to Jerusalem.

When we arrived at al-Sharafa Square I asked the driver if he knew the house of Dr. Hilmi al-Muhtadi. He said: "But he died years ago."

"I know."

(I did not know. But Abu Hazim had described his house to me as 'opposite the house of Dr. Hilmi al-Muhtadi.')

I added: "I'm going to a house nearby."

Abu Hazim used to live—like us—in the Liftawi Building, but he had moved. And in spite of the careful directions he had given me—and before me Mounif—I was so distracted and tense that I could not remember what he had said. And I had arrived in Ramallah after dark.

The driver said: "I know his clinic at al-Manara, but I don't know the house."

The lady sitting in the back asked me exactly which house I was looking for.

"The house of Mughira al-Barghouti, Abu Hazim."

She asked me the name of his wife.

I said:

"Fadwa al-Barghouti. She works in the In'ash al-Usra Society."

She said she knew her and had worked with her, but she did not know the house.

Another passenger from the back seat said to the driver:

"Try taking the next left then ask. I think the doctor's house is close to here."

The driver turned left and then stopped in the hope that a passer-

by could tell us the way. It was 8:30 pm. But the moment he stopped, I heard voices calling:

"*'Ammu* Mourid, *'Ammu* Mourid. Come up. We're here!"

In a second they were around me.

"Where's your father?"

Fadwa said that the moment he had seen one of the bridge cars stopping (with the luggage on top) he had gone to the phone to call my mother in Amman.

I knew that my mother would have spent the whole day by the phone until she heard I had arrived safely. The experience of getting Mounif back from the bridge is still constantly with her. And when she said goodbye to me on the bridge her face was a mixture of hope and despair.

I knew also that Radwa and Tamim in Cairo had been waiting since noon for me to contact them from Ramallah.

"We've all been on the balconies since noon."

And her daughter, Abeer, said: "Watchtowers. Father and mother on the first floor balconies, Sam and I on the second. Praise God for your safe arrival."

Abu Hazim went for me with open arms.

He went for me with his white hair and outstretched arms: a running cross. A happy cross running toward me. Our shoulders met two-thirds of the way to his house.

I called my mother and 'Alaa and Elham in Amman, and Radwa and Tamim in Cairo: "I'm in Ramallah."

And on Abu Hazim's balcony there it was, in its black frame, hanging on the wall, the first thing my eyes fell upon: Mounif's photograph.

be blamed for not having an apartment in Ramallah. The dictates of life, along with dozens of details important in their time, forgotten or remembered later, made the situation as it is now. The decisions of all the scattered families are taken, usually, on the basis of the needs of various members and on the basis of different interpretations of reality and different predictions for the future. Decisions are controlled by changing priorities that may not always be in the wisest order.

This boy—born by the Nile in Dr. Sharif Gohar's Hospital in Cairo to an Egyptian mother and a Palestinian father carrying a Jordanian passport—saw nothing of Palestine except its complete absence and its complete story. When I was deported from Egypt he was five months old; when Radwa brought him with her to meet me in a furnished flat in Budapest he was thirteen months old and called me 'Uncle.' I laugh and try to correct him. "I'm not 'Uncle,' Tamim, I'm 'Daddy.'" He calls me "Uncle Daddy."

DISPLACEMENTS

Displacements are always multiple. Displacements that collect around you and close the circle. You run, but the circle surrounds you. When it happens you become a stranger *in* your places and *to* your places at the same time. The displaced person becomes a stranger to his memories and so he tries to cling to them. He places himself above the actual and the passing. He places himself above them without noticing his certain fragility. And so he appears to people fragile and proud at the same time. It is enough for a person to go through the first experience of uprooting, to become uprooted forever. It is like slipping on the first step of a staircase. You tumble down to the end. It is also like the driving wheel breaking off in the hands of the driver. All the movement of the car will be haphazard and directionless. But the paradox is that strange cities are then never completely strange. Life dictates that the stranger acclimatize every day. This might be difficult at the beginning, but it becomes less difficult with the passage of days and years. Life does not like the grumbling of the living. It bribes them with different degrees of contentment and of acceptance of excep-

tional circumstances. This happens to the exiled, the stranger, the prisoner, and something like it happens to the loser, the defeated, the abandoned. And as the eye accustoms itself, little by little, to sudden darkness, they accustom themselves to the exceptional context imposed by their circumstances. If you become accustomed to the exception you see it in some way as natural. The stranger cannot plan for his long- or short-term future. Even plans for a single day become difficult, for some reason, but little by little he becomes used to improvising his life. His sense of his future and the future of his family is the sense of migrant workers: every period spent with the one he loves is short, however long it lasts. He knows what it is to be a secure lover and a scared loved one. He draws close when he is far away and feels distant when he is near. And he desires his two states and his two positions at the same time. Every home he has is the home of others too. His will is contingent on other wills. And if he is a poet, he is a stranger to 'here,' a stranger to any 'here' in the world. He strives to survive with his personal treasure despite his certain knowledge that his personal treasure might be worth nothing on the market.

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. If a person is touched by poetry or art

or literature in general, his soul throngs with these displacements and cannot be cured by anything, not even the homeland. He clings to his own way of receiving the world and his own way of transmitting it. It is unavoidable that he should be taken lightly by those who hold the ready recipes; those who live by the normal and the known; those who say he is 'moody,' 'changeable,' and 'unreliable,' and so on through all the adjectives stacked like pickles on their shelves; those who do not know anxiety, who deal with life with unseemly ease.

I had to concede that the telephone would be my permanent means of creating a relationship with a child of a few months. But I did not consider my deportation from Egypt a matter that warranted any feeling of bitterness. I would be foolish to complain of being afflicted merely by the dispersal of my family, while not one Palestinian family in Palestine or in the Diaspora was free of more cruel disasters.

The massacre of Tell al-Za'tar remains at the forefront of the memory, and periodically the demolition of houses on the West Bank and in Gaza is repeated. The Israeli detention centers are crowded with young and old. The injured do not find their medicine, even if they are lucky enough to reach any hospital. The climate of overcoming problems and accepting them as simple and bearable was the climate that we created, Radwa and I, whenever we spoke to Tamim, together or singly. This was the climate that helped him quickly to get rid of the feeling that he was an unlucky child. Radwa's wisdom and her care of Tamim in Cairo, along with my tendency to make jokes and funny comments, which he met with laughter that rang across the telephone—these helped him to live a happy and comfortable childhood.

The Hungarian exile was paradise for Tamim. Our home was a small apartment on the third and last floor of a pleasant building, among similar buildings, surrounded by a wall. It was not more than eighty square meters in extent and was situated on the enchanting Rose Hill, overlooking the Danube. Our apartment had a small balcony with wrought-iron railings, on which I hung rectangular flowerpots with red geraniums. I gave them so much love and care that Tamim said to me once: "You spend more time with your *mushkatli* more than you do with me and Mama." (*Mushkatli* is the Hungarian for geraniums.)

The house had a huge garden that sloped down with the hill. At its center were swings and two sandpits for the children of the district. It had two tall poplar trees that stood very close together, one slightly shorter than the other. The first thing Tamim cared about when he arrived was to make certain they were there in their place. He would hurry to the window of his small room to look at them. At the end of the garden there was an apple tree, with children always climbing its branches and playing on the pistachio-green grass underneath it, as though it bore both apples and children. Tamim was able to ride his tricycle as he pleased, without any danger, as long as he was within the large gates and in the garden, but still we would look out from the kitchen window to make sure he was all right. And if the snow fell while he was in Budapest in his mid-year holiday it turned every minute of his day into a festival. I used to see what Budapest gave him and say to myself that we owed it to our places of exile to remember the good things, if we did not wish to lie.

In this beautiful home, in this happy natural scene, as you look out every day at this green bursting with life, your telephone rings one

night and a hesitating voice tells you that so-and-so died "half an hour ago." You discover that you cannot join in the funeral, accompany him to the grave, because you have no passport, or no visa, or no residence, or because you are forbidden from entry. At one-thirty in the morning Mounif's voice came to me across the phone—my father had died. I learned later that he had had his supper and gone to bed. My mother woke to the sound of a great cry, then everything was over. I did not know what to do with myself. I forgot completely what morning does in Budapest—does it come every day?

And the night around me does not pass,
And no one around me to share my hurt and lie (truthfully)
For my soul,
Or blame my fragility so that I might blame him,
And the distance between my loved ones and me
Is uglier than a government.

At school Tamim's personality evolved as a bright boy with a good sense of humor. Before he was two years old he surprised us by giving a speech imitating President Anwar al-Sadat, repeating some of his well-known phrases: "I'll make mincemeat of him!" and "*Bismilla-a-ah,*" and others that I have forgotten now. He would come back every day from the Hurriya School in Giza with a good collection of jokes that he had learnt from his Egyptian classmates.

"Wait, wait! Give me paper and a pen so I don't forget them before I get back to Nazareth." This was Naila's cry for help on an evening we spent with her and Tawfiq Zayyad in Cairo a few years ago, and she began making notes on the jokes that came thick and fast.

He knows all the stories of Deir Ghassanah, the stories of the guesthouse, and the news of the old men and women. He tells them in their peasant dialect exactly as though he had been born in Dar Ra'd. His sorrowful anger at the cutting down of the fig tree was more than the anger of the whole family. He will not forgive my uncle's poor wife what she did to a tree that he had never seen with his own eyes nor eaten the fruit of, but he cannot imagine Dar Ra'd without it.

He knows your veranda, Abu Hazim, with everything in it. He can tell you exactly where the photograph of his uncle Mounif is hanging.

This boy, who saw the light for the first time in the district of Manyal in Cairo, the capital of the Arab Republic of Egypt, and who speaks to us at home in Egyptian dialect, and who has seen nothing of Palestine throughout his twenty years, burns to see it like a refugee grown old in a distant camp.

He writes verses in *mijana* and *'ataaba* form. He throws aside his political science textbook and comes to my study with joyful eyes, takes hold of the lute that Radwa brought him—under the instructions of Nazih Abu 'Afash—from Damascus, and starts to sing as though he were al-Huzruq, the old singer of Deir Ghassanah.

I took part in a poetry evening in 1980 in Carthage, where Marcel Khalifa and I bought him his first lute. He was three years old, and the lute was the size of a small doll, but Marcel tried it in the shop selling traditional Tunisian crafts and said that it was a real lute, despite its absurd size. In Cairo, Radwa got him a tutor, Mr. Mahmud, who made him a slightly bigger lute. He continued his studies under Mr. Taymur, and then Mr. Adib. He is still with him. Emil Habibi used to joke with him: "Why didn't you turn out to be a terrorist like your father?"

I asked Abu Saji again how long he expected it to be before we could get Tamim's permit. He said they took their time issuing permits to young people. They were easier with the elderly, with those over fifty. The word 'fifty' rang in my ears like a coffee cup breaking on marble before the guest's fingers have even touched it. I feel that I have lived long and lived little. I am a child and an elderly man at the same time.

We were seven years late bringing Tamim into this world. We married in 1970 and decided from the beginning to postpone having children (until things become clearer). We did not know what those things were that we were waiting for to become clearer. Our general situation, or our financial situation, or our political or literary or academic situation? Radwa completed her MA at Cairo University two years after we were married. She then went on a government study mission to Amherst, Massachusetts, to study African-American literature as part of her university career.

Muhammad 'Ouda, when he was asked by a mutual friend whom he met outside Egypt about our news, Radwa and I, and whether we had any children yet, replied: "Radwa and Mourid have decided to postpone having children until the Middle East problem has been solved."

When she came back with her PhD in 1975 we felt that the time had come for some kind of family stability. She became pregnant and miscarried in 1976, then she became pregnant again and we were given Tamim on June 13 1977. The birth was difficult. I saw the pain of giving birth and felt that it was unjust that children were not named after their mothers. I do not know how men have stolen the right to name children after themselves. That feeling was not simply a temporary reaction to seeing a mother suffer during deliv-

ery. I still believe that every child is the son of his mother. That is justice. I said to Radwa as we took our first steps out of the door of the hospital, she carrying the two-day-old Tamim on her arm, "Tamim is all yours. I am ashamed that he will carry my name and not yours on his birth certificate."

And then the Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat, had a decisive role in defining our size as a family. His decision to deport me resulted in my remaining the father of an only child, Radwa and I not having a daughter, for example, to add to Tamim, or ten sons and daughters. I lived on one continent and Radwa on another: on her own she could not care for more than one child.

This is the permit then, the reunion permit. A green-plastic-covered card, holding my name, the name of Ramallah, the word 'married,' the word 'Tamim,' and a Palestinian stamp.

When Mounif left Qatar to live in France I visited him often. Entry visas were easy to get and he was near Budapest, where I was living. One summer I was taking part in an international symposium on Palestine for NGOs in Geneva. I took Radwa and Tamim and we stayed with Mounif at his home in Veigy Fonceneux, a village ten minutes' drive from Geneva. But going to Geneva (something that might be repeated several times in one day) meant crossing the border between France and Switzerland. Mostly the policeman would simply wave the driver on. Sometimes he decided to throw a quick glance over the passports before he smiled and sent the travelers on their way. That summer we were not the only guests staying at Mounif's. He was also host to some of his wife's relatives and their children and to two of her sisters. We drove across the border in two

cars. The policeman stepped forward and asked for the passports. We collected them and gave them to him, and he saw an amazing sight: in his hands were passports from all over the world—Jordan, Syria, the United States, Algeria, Britain, and even Belize—and the names in all of them showed that their holders were from one family: all Barghoutis. Add to that Radwa's Egyptian passport and Emil Habibi's Israeli passport—for he had come from Nazareth to take part in the same Palestinian symposium in Geneva, and I had invited him to Mounif's house to eat *qatayef* in the land of the Franks.

I understood from the French speakers among us that the policeman asked for an explanation of this cocktail of travel documents, but when someone started to explain to him he interrupted, laughing: "That's enough! I don't want to understand."

He wished us a good time in Geneva. We continued on our way, carrying with us the Frenchman's surprise at our situation. Someone said: "You know, everybody, we really are a scandal."

Neither this ID nor even the new Palestinian passport that the Palestinian Authority has started to issue after the Oslo Agreement will solve our problems at borders. The states of the world acknowledge the Palestinian ID and the Palestinian passport on paper only. But at the borders, in airports, they tell the holder of these papers: "You have to be pre-approved by security." And this pre-approval we will never obtain.

Despite this, millions of refugees in the camps of the Diaspora are not allowed to carry the documents of the Palestinian Authority. They are not allowed to return to elect, to stand for election, to offer an opinion, or to have any political contribution. In Lebanon there is now a government decree prohibiting Palestinians resident in the camps from working in eighty-seven professions. In other words,

they may only collect rubbish and shine shoes. Anyone who is allowed to travel out of Lebanon is not allowed to return to it. Is it believable that this should hold for more than a quarter of a million refugees of Palestinian origin, thousands of whom were born in Lebanon? And there are others who have lived in Lebanon since the thirties and forties of the twentieth century, that is, from before 1948, but their Palestinian roots cannot be forgiven. Some Palestinians wronged Lebanon. The children of the camps pay the price for this every day. If only all who had wronged Palestine would pay the price too! They say the question of the refugees and the displaced—that is, four million human beings—the questions of the settlements and Jerusalem, and the right to self-determination are all postponed to the final status negotiations. What is it that is urgent, then? I discussed this with most people whom I met and I picked up the answers of others in passing without posing the question. What is certain is that everybody is waiting, and that the movement of the soldiers of the Occupation away from their homes, even just a few hundred meters, gives them a sudden hope that in the future they will move away farther.

All eyes these days look at geography more than they look at history. Longings, desires, dreams postpone themselves for the moment. Palestine has turned into a daily workshop in which the workers are concerned only with the work they do here and now. But it may be noted—despite their impatience with general theories and analyses—that one can feel constantly the shadows of their suspicions of the intentions of Israel, its tricks and its coming surprises. There is hope colored with fear and doubt. Hardly anybody uses expressions such as 'victory.' Most people wait, tensely, and adapt—even though with difficulty—to the dictated reality. It is only those who have gained an immediate and direct material bet-

terment from the new situation who see in it a victory that deserves dancing and celebration and who defend it unreservedly. I heard interesting comments from intellectuals who saw in the streets of the Intifada and in people's behavior during its first years a rare actualization of the national spirit, which was being shaped naturally every day, in spite of all the sacrifices.

Now the significations are confused. Abu Muhammad, one of our old neighbors, said to me: "Raising a small Palestinian flag on the roof of the school or a house or even on the electric wires on the street used to cost young men their lives. Rabin's army used to fire at anyone who tried to raise one flag, and we gave martyrs throughout the Intifada just to raise a flag. Now the flag is everywhere—behind the desk of every civil servant down to the smallest clerk."

"You don't like the fact that the romance has gone?"

"No, it's the absence of real sovereignty signified by the raised flag that I don't like. Israel will not let us have sovereignty even over transport. It still controls everything. You saw them on the bridge. What does the Palestinian side do on the bridge? Didn't you see? And hear?"

I saw and I heard.

He spoke about the continuous closures on the West Bank and in Gaza with a stroke of the Israeli government's pen: "They prevent even the leadership from traveling if they wish. You think you can go to Jerusalem, or even to Gaza. They've declared them enclosed areas, and their excuse this time is the elections. They stop people praying in the Holy Place even on Fridays. Barricades and searches and computers. They send us one message, all the time and in every way: 'We are the masters here.'"

"Was I wrong to come here, Abu Muhammad?"

"On the contrary. Anyone who can come back and live here should come back immediately. Should we leave it for the Falasha and the Russians and the Brooklyn Jews? Should we leave it to the settlers? Everyone should come back from abroad who can. With a permit, a reunion order, a job—anything. Build in your villages if you can. Build Palestinian settlements in Palestine. How can you ask if it was wrong? Come, my friend—come!"

He lit a new cigarette from the butt burning in his mouth: "But who told you the bastards have their eyes closed? They were forced to agree to allow a few thousand in because the world was watching, but I swear by your life, Abu Tamim, they've got it worked out. It's good you managed to get in, but I wish you had come before the closures. It's a shame that you won't see Jerusalem."

"Is it really impossible?"

"They think of Jerusalem as Israel. Closures mean that there is no movement between the Palestinian Authority areas and Israel, except for those who carry Israeli permits or a VIP card."

"And otherwise?"

"Smuggling. There are people who smuggle themselves in. It's a risk."

He was silent for a while and then said: "But after all this lifetime, are you really going to smuggle yourself into Jerusalem?"

All that the world knows of Jerusalem is the power of the symbol. The Dome of the Rock is what the eye sees, and so it sees Jerusalem and is satisfied. The Jerusalem of religions, the Jerusalem of politics, the Jerusalem of conflict is the Jerusalem of the world. But the world does not care for our Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of the people. The Jerusalem of houses and cobbled streets and spice markets, the Jerusalem of the Arab College, the Rashidiya School, and the

'Omariya School. The Jerusalem of the porters and the tourist guides who know just enough of every language to guarantee them three reasonable meals a day. The oil market and the sellers of antiques and mother-of-pearl and sesame cakes. The library, the doctor, the lawyer, the engineer, and the dressers of brides with high dowries. The terminals of the buses that trundle in every morning from all the villages with peasants come to buy and to sell. The Jerusalem of white cheese, of oil and olives and thyme, of baskets of figs and necklaces and leather and Salah al-Din Street. Our neighbor the nun, and her neighbor, the muezzin who was always in a hurry. The palm fronds in all the streets on Palm Sunday, the Jerusalem of houseplants, cobbled alleys, and narrow covered lanes. The Jerusalem of clothes-lines. This is the city of our senses, our bodies and our childhood. The Jerusalem that we walk in without much noticing its 'sacredness,' because we are in it, because it is us. We loiter or hurry in our sandals or our brown or black shoes, bargaining with the shopkeepers and buying new clothes for the *'Id*. We shop for Ramadan and pretend to fast and feel that secret pleasure when our adolescent bodies touch the bodies of the European girls on Easter Saturday. We share with them the darkness of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and raise with them the white candles that they light. This is the ordinary Jerusalem. The city of our little moments that we forget quickly because we will not need to remember, and because they are ordinary like water is water and lightning is lightning. And as it slips from our hands it is elevated to a symbol, up there in the sky.

All conflicts prefer symbols. Jerusalem now is the Jerusalem of theology. The world is concerned with the 'status' of Jerusalem, the idea and the myth of Jerusalem, but our lives in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem of our lives do not concern it. The Jerusalem of the