

The Checkpoint

Sara Saleh

PRELUDE

Hey. Psst.

Ya zalameh? Psst.

Did you hear about the pregnant woman?

The one who gave birth to a stillborn right here?

They say it took the ambulance four hours – *four hours* – to drive
two kilometres.

Ya zalameh? Psst.

Can you hear me? I'm talking to you.

*

Stillborn or not . . . You don't say a thing.

*You don't want to talk to the other Palestinian man in line because hopefully
at least one of you will make it out.*

Or hopefully, he won't drag you down if he doesn't.

*

YOU! AT THE BACK. WITH THE BIG MOUTH. QUIET!

DID I TELL YOU YOU CAN TALK?

SHUT UP!

STAND OVER THERE. DON'T MOVE.

DON'T EVEN BREATHE.

*

How long have you been waiting?

I just got here.

How long have you been waiting?

A few hours.

How long have you been waiting?

All night.

*How long have you been waiting?
Since the day I was born.*

*

YOU. STOP. YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED.
EVEN YOUR SHADOW WILL NOT PASS THROUGH.
NO, I'M NOT INTERESTED IN WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY.
STOP. YOU WANNA GET SMART WITH ME? I WILL SHOOT YOU.
COME BACK TOMORROW. TODAY IS NOT YOUR DAY.

*

*You breathe when they tell you to breathe. And you calmly nod and smile.
That right there is resistance. It is survival.*

READING DARWISH AT QALANDIA

A woman is standing too close behind me in this
swollen crowd, her breath foggy on my neck.
I thumb the pages of my book
and sigh loudly. She sighs back.
And I can feel all the ghosts through
the towers of barbed wire and cameras:
The baba holding his clothes up like a flag
at the guards behind the tinted glass.
The student eager to make it to the final exam,
her messy bun in place with pencils.
The Teta, ready since the rooster sang sunrise in,
with her long-awaited permit to begin chemotherapy.
The devoted husband on his wedding day, he doesn't know
his body will be a bargaining chip held hostage by authorities.
The young man with autism who was chased
and shot on the spot by police. Investigation pending.
And I think of Cassius Turvey, fifteen-year-old Indigenous boy
who was punched and stabbed simply for being Black.
Palestinians know about going to school
and not making it back.
Palestinians know about bulldozers demolishing villages
and settlers torching trees, homes, and shops.
No resolution, no report, no textbook has
been able to stop the violence or remedy the wrongs.
No amount of objections and condemnations have saved
the twelve-year-old boy from the military court system.
The official explanations will state that this twelve-year-old
boy is undoubtedly the assailant in this story.

And I think about how he will be blindfolded,
 thrown in solitary confinement without food or water,
 tried as an adult for a traffic offence,
 convicted in a language not his own.

~~The evidence~~ – REDACTED

~~His rights~~ – REDACTED

~~His childhood~~ – REDACTED

At Qalandia, the soldier cradles his Uzi unrelentingly,
 like an instrument he is performing,
 the olive branch insignia on his uniform glimmers
 in the haze of lights and multilingual
 Ramadan greetings signs behind him.

I think of Article 7 of the Rome Statute:

the crime of apartheid,
 and all the other rules, customs, and conventions
 that missed the irony.

We find ways to survive this daily exercise
 in humiliation, to numb infinite time. Each
 moment any of us remains alive is a miracle.

The soldier turns to his comrade just starting a shift
 and smiles hello, revealing teeth that match their belts
 of ammo. They talk about the settlements that are expanding.

‘Thank God for cheap social housing’,

but no God gave them this land,

and no God made us the cattle in this allegory.

Just law and policy. The neat and natural geometry,
 the architected ‘safety’, all this freedom is illusory.

The very things keeping us out, keep you in.

I think of peace talks and frameworks and negotiations,
 contradictory definitions and competing legal and political interpretations.

Of terms like ‘conflict’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘casualty’
 that have sanctioned seventy-five years of this.

Of whole cities/towns/villages/valleys split in bantustans and quarters.

We grow oranges in our backyards and guerrillas on our balconies.

Power constructs borders, the faultlines of global empires.

I think of Jerusalem, al-Quds.

Of the boot soles on necks young and old in Sheikh Jarrah,

of the mobs with bats chanting ‘death to Arabs’,

of the occupying forces besieging al-Aqsa mosque,

prayers and bullets ricocheting off its ancient walls.

I think of Gaza, the forty-five-kilometre-long strip by the sea.

Of another aerial bombardment disrupting medical supplies and electricity.

Of schools, hospitals, highways, and media organisations flattened to ‘collateral damage’.

Where the water is contaminated and the food rots and the people consume it anyway.

I think of Akka and Haifa and An-Nasira.

Of the Palestinian residents called ‘second-class citizens’ who must pay taxes but still face an environmental crisis, piles of used needles, plastic bags, and garbage spilling on their streets. Where ‘democracy’ means no accountability for war crimes, and the same fascist government is voted in for a fifth time and no one seems to mind the International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction. The people march against ‘right wing’ and corruption with little thought for the millions living under occupation.

I think of Ramallah, the so-called capital of a ‘future state’.

Of children selling lemonade in sweltering afternoon traffic, of peeling yellow taxis and the rolling fruit and vegetable carts that feed families.

Of the ugly concrete wall looming twenty years after the International Court of Justice’s Advisory Opinion,

Of whole neighbourhoods fractured and farms confiscated and social services isolated and somehow our subjugation is still up for debate.

How do we not dissolve under this unbearable weight?

Then I think of the ruptures. ‘The reservoirs of hope.’

The refusals. Those who keep rising from the rubble.

The ratification of the First Additional Protocol recognised my people and all people fighting against colonial domination, alien occupation or racist regimes.

We need more than stock photos of refugees from Balata to Jenin.

We need more than another fundraiser,

than another NGO worker,

than another journalist,

we need more than another poem.

Still, I frantically flip through the pages of my book. *Reading Darwish at Qalandia*

is a provocation and words are the sharpest weapon I wield.

I confront the bare iron grids,

they are bone waiting for skin,

the toothed bars not wide enough

to squeeze a single orange in.

And I think of the generations of Palestinian women who march in our name, banners and fists raised.

Who won't accept a piecemeal or a truncation
Who fight on every front for our self-determination. Who birth revolutions.
Who are building with other women from Turtle Island to so-called Australia.
Who are questioning, deconstructing, scratching off old laws,
breaking this apart so they can put it together . . .
finally, justice for us all.