

*Dust*

The first thing you notice while waiting at a checkpoint is the car beside you: is it ahead of you or are you ahead of it and on that becomes dependent your hopes and despair. If you are ahead, you will experience a euphoria that might stay with you the entire day: today I am lucky, from the start. And if it is ahead of you, your internal breakdown begins. What, do you signal in that direction to follow the car in the faster lane, or do you wait until your lane moves and you nose ahead of that car! And from that point on the breakdown only becomes more severe, and you will not be able to hide it any longer. Nobody can. Nobody crosses Qalandia checkpoint without a nervous breakdown, at least a minor one.

And you wait.

And you watch.

Watching is the easiest thing to do. You are granted the freedom to watch everything. You will learn the makes of all the cars around, which are more common, which less, does the car carry the symbol "IL" or not, is the license plate green or yellow, is the driver a man or a woman, if it is a woman, is she wearing a headscarf or not, her age and level of attraction, and if it is a man, does he wear sunglasses, is he cute, is there a wedding ring on his finger, is he returning glances? Then you forget all about him at the slightest indication that the car line in which you are taking part has moved, even if it is merely the disappearance of the brake lights from the car in front of you.

I myself gave up on the idea of crossing the checkpoint by car. In the first place, I do not have one. Once or twice I borrowed a friend's car, then a misunderstanding arose between us and we stopped being friends. So I cross with hundreds of others on a dusty side-path.

During the summer this crossing becomes very hot. Everything becomes a signifier of the intensifying heat, especially the discarded plastic bags submerged under gray dust, which gives the bags a gloominess deeper than anyone could have imagined, so deep that even the thought of these bags having once contained candy or chips becomes impossible.

What can also be noticed while staring continuously at the ground is that no one wears summer shoes. High heels and open shoes go neither with checkpoint fashion nor with its conditions. The majority prefer sport shoes, as the whole foot may sink into a layer of dust, which leaves the body with a sensation that resembles touching down on raw cotton. However, if you try to escape this and not take the dirt path, you will hear, in addition to the shouts of that lad standing in the middle of the path selling ten socks for ten shekels, a soldier shouting in your direction.

Three to four soldiers usually stand at the checkpoint. And although they do not consider themselves actors on the Qalandia stage, they are. The audience is big and has been summoned spontaneously and naturally. The one on the right is speaking on a cell phone, perhaps with his girlfriend. The one checking papers is doing so really slowly, probably because he is bored with his assignment. There is another one sitting next to him, guarding him distractedly. The fourth, on the left side of the road, turned his back suddenly and began pissing. It took him some time, as if he were pissing in his private toilet at his home during the most idle hour of the afternoon. After that, he turned to the audience and began buttoning up his pants. He buttoned them up only halfway, as the soldier who was checking papers and giving cars permission to pass came over and handed him some water to drink.

Summer had ended and autumn came back with the breezes for which the area is known.

From a distance I saw it, the autumn. I was approaching the checkpoint in the most neutral manner possible. And there I saw it, the wind that blew like a storm lifting plastic bags and dust. I stopped. I no longer knew what to do. What to do? Do I walk faster, do I keep standing, do I walk normally, do I go left or right, can I slip away between the dust particles without being touched by them? I stand powerless before the storm and before myself and before all other options.

No exit.

But the storm did not give me any more time, and it entered my mouth and swallowed me up.

Dust. This is how the tragedy is able to engulf all, even those who walk in the most neutral manner possible.

My hair and my face and my hands and my clothes, all are laden with dust and despair.

A self-made resolution decrees that I should cross the checkpoint area on foot, to the end of the car line, even if this line ends in Ramallah. I cannot bear the sight of cars waiting. I therefore walk on, steadily, as if I had an aim. In this case, it is to know the make of the last car in line.

A long, white Subaru driven by a middle-aged man with his wife to his right. Between their two seats a little girl stands, as children often do, watching the row of cars in front of her. I stand nearby, waiting for a taxi.

I will stop the car that does not honk at me. First, because this means the driver is not of the nagging type. He will not disrupt my inner peace by honking at any moving thing capable of paying a passenger fee. Besides, my friends are always late. Why should I always arrive on time, wait, and suffer doubts about time, place, day, and the notion of clarity itself.

I also will not take a car with a yellow license plate because it would be from Jerusalem, and people from the area of Ramallah are more in need of income. Also I will only take a seven-passenger Mercedes because these cars are old and their drivers are old men, whereas the owners of new cars are young gangsters.

All of this ideology takes about fifteen minutes, and many dust storms have no option but to accumulate on me.

The ideal driver came and I paid him. But I am filthy and about to shred myself, as I cannot stand the feel of my skin.

I arrived. My friend, who noticed how filthy I was, offered me a shower. I said maybe only my hair.

Her young son took me to the bathroom to help me wash it. The whole thing seemed so unfamiliar to him that he took it for a children's game. I put my head under the water, and he began to pour the shampoo on his little hand, and he poured out almost half of the bottle. So I screamed.

I almost slapped him, get out of my face, you idiot!

I said to him with the utmost self-restraint:

“Sweetheart, shampoo shouldn't be poured like this.”

But these words were enough to frighten him and make him leave me alone under the water. At least his sister was still waiting outside to comb my hair.

How long it has been since someone combed my hair.

No time for us to read a story because I have to visit other friends.

I have three friends left at the most, after making some cutbacks to the list. I visit them once a week during the same trip in order to pass the checkpoint as little as possible. So my visits to them turned into a race with time. I started cutting them off in mid-sentence. I no longer listened to the end. No topic to the end. Headlines only, some with broken heads. After each hour and a half I have to move on. An hour; at least an hour. Half an hour on the road from one home to the next.

Each time I leave the house of a friend, the question “why did I come” recurs to me. These visits became a duty, and in part a defiance of checkpoints. But what else do I defy, if these checkpoints are now set up inside me!

I no longer even know whether my friends desire these visits, or if they still love me. I can no longer feel. But I will feel. I will come back next week. Especially to my little one whom I almost slapped. If I arrive before sunset next time, we will go together to watch it, the sunset.

Maybe I can bear pain, but I do not want to bear the dust on top of it. A new self-made resolution: from now on I will walk around with a hat on to avoid dust.

In the beginning I was too shy to put it on, this hat, but I decided to cross the barrier of shyness and I put it in my bag. I will take it out at the checkpoint.

On my way I stopped at the post office with a box that I wanted to send overseas. I also have to pay the phone bill. With time, the bills for the telephone had diminished as had its ringing.

In the post office I went to stand in a line. I no longer care how long I will have to stand. Waiting has become a lifestyle.

There are three ahead of me, and I am taking shelter inside my silence. I read all the advertisements in the place. There is a little girl clinging to her mother’s blue dress. She stares at me shamelessly. Sometimes she stands on one foot while her mouth moves

as if humming a song that she has just improvised but which is voiceless. She only moves her lips, and stares at the box and at me. Her mother whispers in the ear of another woman beside her. And I do not know if she too is in the line. If so, there would be four in front of me. In front of them are a man and his daughter, who paces up and down the post office, then she returns to her father and whispers in his ear.

Later, a new woman joined us.

Most of the people standing in line are Palestinians. The only Israeli is at the head. His voice alone fills the space with an American-accented Hebrew, while the others whisper.

They look around them and comment on things in whispers.

And I, if I speak when I reach the teller, how will my voice come out? I try to imagine my voice. I rehearse its melody in my head.

I will speak in English. Will I say hello or go straight to the subject?

The two little girls look at me and I do not know why. I do not want to smile at them. They continue to look at me, especially the one in front of me. I look back at her, and at length I notice a glimpse of fear in her eyes, and my eyes fill with tears.

I lower my eyes, and a teardrop falls from my nose to the floor between my feet. The little girl continues to look at me.

The Israeli leaves. The man with the little girl approaches and says in a quiet hesitant voice, in Hebrew and in Arabic and in all that is available, that he wants to withdraw everything he has in his account. The teller says in a clear and neutral Hebrew that she does not have enough money in the cash register. He does not understand and she repeats the same sentence. He remains standing silently. He then asks the two women in front of me about what she has said. They say they do not know Hebrew. One of them says maybe that woman knows, pointing at the woman behind me. That one says she knows a little bit and she moves forward. Slowly and with a lot of effort and whispering she tries to ask the teller what she has said.

They did not turn to me. I do not help them because they did not turn to me. I know Hebrew very well but I do not help them. I am silent; I hear all their efforts and remain silent. I deny them.

I am not one hundred percent sure that the teller is racist but I am afraid. I fear that my box will not arrive at its desired destination

on time because I am an Arab. She will neglect it; she will forget it for weeks. It will not receive the same care other non-Arab boxes receive. I remain silent.

I am hiding my Arabness for a box. If I had been an African where would I have hidden my skin?

Now I take cover behind my silence. I do not open my mouth. I justify it by telling myself that no one has turned to me. Whereas I cannot take my eyes away from the scene. I follow it, follow their efforts, follow their hesitant whispered words, follow my betrayal.

How can I go back and use Arabic after I have betrayed it!

I wish I would no more speak. I wish I had spoken seconds ago. But I am silent. I feel my teeth and jaws very well. I cannot...

The checkpoint was suddenly quiet. I noticed there were no more passersby on the dirt path. Everyone was standing far away. This is going to be a shooting scene, but I have my dust-proof hat, so I walk on. There were some boys hiding behind cars, holding stones in their hands. I pass them by.

One of them whispered to me: "Look, look." I said: "No, leave me alone." He was pointing in the direction of the soldiers. What did he want me to look at, a soldier aiming at me?

I put my hands over my ears. I feared hearing the sound of the bullet that might kill me. Perhaps I can walk between the bullets, I tell myself, and if I cannot, the worst that could happen to me is death.

I walk. Some cars honk at me. But I do not ride in cars that honk at me. One of the drivers signals to me with his hand that I might die and I say to myself "and you keep honking!"

I walked and walked until the soothing silence came back to me. The car line ended. It was long. The last car was a white Alfasud.

I stood waiting. In the distance the echo of the bullets was still weighing the air down. Next to me stood a boy practicing how to throw stones and he almost hit me. Some other boys apologized saying he was cross-eyed.

Finally from the distance an old taxi with a Ramallah license plate loomed up, dragging behind it a sound, and a gradual return to life. I signaled to the driver to stop before he could even think of honking.

He was an old man. He drove the car slowly. After a time he stopped, a young man got in.

Then he stopped at a gas station to fill the car with diesel. Another car came and stopped in front of us, and another behind us. We could no longer move. The passenger in front tries to talk to me and I do not know why. Is it because I am wearing a hat? If I were wearing a headscarf, would he have talked to me?

I answer him curtly.

He tries to continue talking about the harm of inhaling gasoline and I do not answer. Who does he think I am, talking to me! He asked me about the checkpoint and I said there was some shooting. He said something else and I, filled with hostility, could not even hear him.

The attendant at the gas station is looking at me. What? Is there blood running down my face, what is it?

I try to look at the graffiti on the wall. How beautiful is the handwriting of its maker.

The driver returned after the car behind us had left and we returned to the road. After a little while he stopped. I looked around but I could not see why. No one was in the street.

No one at all.

After a careful inspection, I noticed two women in the distance, walking slowly towards us. I am not sure if we are waiting for them. They do not hurry. It is impossible that we are waiting for them.

Is he mad, this driver? I look for his name. His name is Ahmad Mahmoud Hamadallah.

Is this a joke?

They are strolling, these two women. And finally they arrive. They push the seat and it hits my back. I can kill you all.

We resume our slow drive.

Play, play, Ahmad, play with people's lives. What do you owe them now that they have paid you the fare?

He stops again. No one is in the street. No, I actually see a man coming out of a store. But he walks towards a private car, he opens the door, starts the engine, and leaves.

And we are still waiting. But for whom!

After a time a woman comes out of an alleyway. How did he see her?

Ahmad Mahmoud Hamadallah, if I went mad, he would be one of the main reasons that drove me to madness.

On the way back I ride in a new car with a yellow license plate, carrying the symbol "IL," and its driver is a gangster. All of this is to declare that I hate myself.

This taxi violates all traffic and moral laws in order to bypass the long lines of cars waiting at the checkpoint. Inside it, I say from inside my pain, "I do not feel."

Living, it seems, asks nothing more of me than self-destruction.

As we are waiting at the checkpoint, a little girl who is with us in the car suddenly asks in a coquettish voice, "Why are we waiting here?"

I imagined myself explaining to her, but on second thought I felt envy, because she had not crossed that threshold of knowledge, yet.

I return home. All I have left is waiting for a phone call from my lover.

And while I wait the sound of water flowing down the drain starts to resemble the ringing of the telephone.

Every movement, even the slightest, stirred up terrible dust storms at home, so I started a comprehensive cleaning campaign.

I then carried everything that had touched my body even for a second, put it all in a large suitcase that I took to Ramallah for the wash. I also made an appointment with the dermatologist.

I feel that the dermatologist, who is an old friend, is not expressing his political views openly in front of me. Is he suspicious of me? I demand an ointment despite his objections. He says I do not have a problem. I surrender, and we speak about literature.

I go out. I walk steadily down the street. My eyes are fixed on it and I cannot avoid seeing the remnants of people's spit. I feel saliva gathering in my mouth. I am going to vomit. I raise my head as high as I can, tilt it a little. I see, hanging in a shop, a large drawing of a helicopter shooting a rocket and a hole gaping in a child's chest.

On the way back the smell of clean laundry fills the taxi, and it saturates me with purity.

I recall what a friend, originally from Nablus, had just told me, that she misses her family there but since she is not allowed to travel to see them because of the checkpoints, she does not allow herself to miss them too much.



But why am I concerned with all of this? Maybe because I think more than is necessary, feel more than is necessary, a lot of “more than necessary.”

When will I return to the necessary, or have I lost it forever?

Ten socks for ten Shekels. The world is still the same.

I crossed the checkpoint and sank into the dust of the path. Those days its depth reached ten centimeters, soft and velvety underfoot.

And this time I did not mind the dust; rather, I invited it. I was going back home and I was going to take a shower. But what about the misery?

I thought of ignoring it and crossed the checkpoint casually. And to accomplish it, all I had to do was freeze all my feelings, deny them for just a short time.

But then I became frightened. I was afraid that after I crossed the checkpoint and walked a few meters, I would not be able to regain my capacity to feel.

What if I lost the few feelings that still remained to me!

I am left each day with just enough to motivate and encourage me to live through the day I have started, from its beginning to its end. This is all the desire for life I can muster.

I wanted to write down something while traveling in the taxi, but I refrained from doing so fearing that the passengers might think I was writing down information to be used against them. So I went back to staring at my shoes.

I can see that my shoes are filthy. Dusty. I want to go back home as quickly as possible to clean them.

Everything is filthy, appallingly so, but not surprisingly so. Dust has a reason; rather, all the reasons. It is the proof of crossing the checkpoint like everybody else. I must bear it. It is the least I can do.

Al-Bayhaqi related and said:

“And then approached As-Samraa’ bint Qays, sister of Abu Hazm, who had suffered the loss of her two sons. Upon seeing her, the Prophet, God’s blessings and peace be upon him, consoled her for her loss. And she replied: Any calamity diminishes compared to yours. By God, this dust I behold upon your face is graver than my grief.”

I took a brochure out of my bag in order to take my eyes away from their previous resting place and from all the dust that had settled there. The brochure described the cultural activities around. I turned its pages back and forth and then returned it to my bag just in case I might one day need the phone number of the coffee shop listed in one of the ads.

From the car to my house, and as usual, it is the farthest house. I pass through the market. Too many eyes are staring at me. I notice a group of young men. Suddenly one of them stands up, following a hand signal from another. I assume he is going to shoot me.

But he sidesteps me. Another young man stands up, blocks my way, and I turn away in disbelief. He did not kill me.

I stop to buy a quarter kilo of coffee, two-thirds light-roasted and one-third dark-roasted with extra cardamom. I notice a strange smile on the vendor's face, and when he gives me back the change, he raises his hand in the air and does not let it touch mine. Does he intentionally not want to get close to my hand as if a disease is clinging to me? As if he is disgusted?

I continue walking. And the way home is long. I should not run. I should maintain my calm. My eyes do not leave the ground. I inwardly ponder the reflections of the shattered glass scattered all over. From one shard to the next, I shift my eyes.

I must not pass through the market again. I must change my route.

Until the end of the road, I count the remaining times when I will have to leave my house again. And I do not know, I cannot imagine how I will ever do so.

I try to continue walking casually, as if I were not a collaborator.

I am a collaborator.

I hesitate to leave my house. I am filled with horror to the point of suffocating. Horror is concentrated in my forehead, in my eyes and nose and suffocation is sealing my throat. The only solution, I think, for putting an end to this horror, is to cut off my head.

I sit on my bed and watch the floor. I can no longer stare at the ceiling.

Time passes and the refrigerator is empty. Nothing to eat at home, I must go down to the market. I try to search for some of the old traits that used to push me to go down to market every day, and I only find a trace of neutrality, so I put on my shoes and go out.

I meet some neighbors. They say they no longer see me around. They ask where have I disappeared to, but I do not feel like talking to them. I find I can no longer stand them.

I do not know what to buy. I have no desire to eat anything. I pass through the meat market. I do not find enough courage to raise my eyes and look at the merchandise. I try not to lose my balance, to walk like a decent woman, as if I were not an alien to the place. I try to fake a kind of familiarity, so I go to the same butcher.

Meats surround me. A red veal thigh, hoofs, tongues, frozen eyeballs in severed sheep heads. I cannot do it. I do not have the strength to cut meat. It is beyond my capacity. I cross the market and go back home.

And while I am walking, a boy passes me and shoots me with his finger. I do not know how I have offended him.

I keep walking while sweat trickles down my face.

A friend left a message on the answering machine, asking when I will be coming to Ramallah.

Again I pass through the market. Someone calls my name, curses me. I turn around, but see no one. I go back home.

I feel like after crying, although I have not been crying.

It is nighttime. Some soldiers stop me. One of them asks why I am carrying a passport instead of an identity card. I say because I am free. He repeats his question, so I answer: Because I'm free, because I'm free, because I'm free, because I'm free, because I'm free. Just like that. Because I'm free.

He asks me to step aside. I scream and scream and scream. Just like that. I do nothing but scream. I scream like a mad woman. I scream because I am not a collaborator. The officer comes and hands me my passport as he finds no reason to detain me. But I am still screaming and he asks me politely to leave.

And I do not know why he is speaking to me politely. What if someone passed by and saw the officer speaking to me politely, and

what if this officer returned and spoke to me politely next time, and what if he memorized my name and called me by it while I am crossing with hundreds of others, to ask me how I was doing that day!

What will I say to the passersby! I will scream again, and instead of saying I am a collaborator, they will say I am mad.

I awoke to the voice of a wailing little dog.

I rose from my bed with unusual ease and went about and sought him, wishing to come to his rescue, that wailing little dog. But I could not discover where the wailing was coming from.

I went up to the roof and sought him with my eyes and ears, while he was still wailing, as if wailing instead of me.

Suddenly I saw a woman come out to the roof of a house in the Jewish Quarter. I waved at her and in English I asked if she was hearing that voice, but she ignored me.

And sadness overtook me.

I was not asking for an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. I was just trying to find out where that wailing little dog was.

I went back to my bed and, while his constant whimpering was wrapping my head again and burning it with the salt of his tears, I fixed my eyes on the floor of the room, opening one and closing the other, toying with the legs of the table and the chair.

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