

# For Mourid Barghouti (1944–2021)

## A Portfolio

HARETH YOUSEF

Introduction by Ahmad Diab

The great Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti passed away in February 2021. Throughout his protracted exile, Barghouti made it his life's mission to transform with language the power structures that dictate one's relationship with one's intimate geographies. A poem such as "I Have No Problem" delivers an almost tactile linguistic experience of these relations, as in the following lines:

The TV presenter's smiles no longer make me cringe  
I've got used to those in khakis arresting my every color  
Night and day  
That is why I take my ID everywhere  
Even to the swimming pool  
No problems here.<sup>1</sup>

One of the paradoxes of Barghouti's legacy as a Palestinian poet is that his best-known work is arguably *I Saw Ramallah* (1997)—a work of meditative autobiographical prose, not poetry. The text recounts his melancholic return to occupied Palestine after thirty years of exile, specifically his return to Ramallah and his native village, Deir Ghassanah.

The portfolio seen here—a series of photographs produced by Hareth Yousef, a talented young artist—is conceived in oblique relationship to the models given to us by Barghouti in his narration of place and of place denied. Yousef, too, knows these places (or the versions of them created in their place). He hails from Kobar, a village outside of Ramallah, not far from Barghouti's native Deir Ghassanah. Currently employed as a photographer at the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, Yousef offers workshops to museumgoers on how to compose images in smartphones so

as to tell a story. Something of the materiality of Palestine that one encounters in Barghouti's poetry is also present in Yousef's images and videos, except that the Palestine of Yousef's work is often a place of pastoral bliss. Through his montage, camera angle, and postproduction processing, this place's otherwise austere and modest hills become lush, layered, and luminous.

In this case and for this occasion, we decided that Yousef would reread *I Saw Ramallah*, travel to Deir Ghassanah, and take a series of photographs of the village and its surrounding lands. When Yousef told me about an Israeli colony on the way, I asked him to photograph it as he would a crime scene. What we have is a photo of a crime scene where the crime is in progress, and the photographer cannot get close enough because of an active shooter on the ground. From the hilltop that houses a Muslim shrine in Deir Ghassanah—which has remained accessible to Palestinians so far—Yousef can see the Mediterranean on the horizon. What we see in the photograph in this special lighting is the Tel Aviv skyline in the background, with the dome of the shrine in the foreground. What we don't see in this photograph are the bits of ceramic tile that continue to wash ashore to this day in a modern seaside park. These bits of ceramic tile used to don the walls of Palestinian houses in a Jaffa neighborhood that has now been completely razed to make room for the park. Or rather, the park was conceived precisely to erase the neighborhood. We see the skyline of a modern city, another out-of-place Miami, appearing as a jagged blade that cuts through the landscape and severs Palestinians from their sea and indeed from their geography and their history.

Once Yousef was in the village, he found it difficult to determine which exact house was Barghouti's family home. He took two photographs of the façade of what he thinks is probably the correct house. Yousef rarely features people in his photographs or videos. His main human subject is his grandmother, often captured in videos focused on her hands kneading, knitting, or foraging through Palestine's flora. When he noticed two kids playing in front of the house, he took this photograph. We had two nearly identical images. We debated which one to use—specifically, whether to include “the human element,” as he put it. Between the image chosen as cover art for this issue and the one here, closing this portfolio, lies the tension that has long animated Barghouti's poetry: the place of the human in the montage of power and language. Can Palestinians be free to edit their story with their landscape, or will the Israeli master narrative continue to diminutize Palestine and diminish Palestinians? Barghouti's is a legacy of dissecting the montage and cataloging its contradictions.



FIGURE 1. Lush hillsides and grazing grounds outside Ramallah. Photo by Hareth Yousef, 2021.



FIGURE 2. An Israeli colony on the road between Ramallah and Deir Ghassanah. Photo by Hareth Yousef, 2021.



FIGURE 3. The view from a shrine outside Deir Ghassanah. Photo by Hareth Yousef, 2021.



FIGURE 4. The Mediterranean Sea and the Tel Aviv skyline as seen from a hill in the West Bank. Photo by Hareth Yousef, 2021.



FIGURE 5. Kids running in front of the façade of Barghouti's likely family home. Photo by Hareth Yousef, 2021.

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**HARETH YOUSEF** is a photographer based in Ramallah. Born in Jerusalem in 1990, Yousef holds a bachelor's degree from Birzeit University in journalism and media with a minor in sociology. He also holds a bachelor of arts degree in photography from Columbia College, Chicago. He teaches a photography class titled "Image Making" at Birzeit University. His work has been featured in numerous collective and individual exhibitions in various locations, including in Chicago, Wilson, NC, Louisville, Sydney, and Ramallah.

**AHMAD DIAB** is assistant professor of modern Arabic literature and cinema at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his BA in English literature from Damascus University. He completed an MA at the City University of New York while on a Fulbright scholarship. He was awarded a PhD from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, New York University. He is currently working on his first academic book, provisionally titled *Intimate Others: Representations of Arabs in the Palestinian Imaginary*, and finishing his Arabic translation of *After the Last Sky*, by Jean Mohr and Edward Said.

### Note

1. Translated from the Arabic by Ahmad Diab and Alexander Key. Barghouti's poem "Lā Mushkila Laday" was first published in 2005 in the collection *Muntasaf al-Layl*. For a full English translation published by Barghouti's wife, the novelist Radwa Ashour, see Barghouti, *Midnight*.

### Works Cited

- Barghouti, Mourid. *I Saw Ramallah*. Translated by Ahdaf Soueif. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000.
- Barghouti, Mourid. *Midnight, and Other Poems*. Translated by Radwa Ashour. Lancashire: Arc, 2009.
- Barghouti, Mourid. *Muntasaf al-Layl*. Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes, 2005.