

Update: “Checkpoint” with Izzy Hawamda - Transcription

Izzy:

Hey, Ken.

Ken:

Hey.

Izzy:

How are you, brother?

Ken:

Good. Long weekend. My birthday weekend, as you saw. I saw that you-

Izzy:

Yes. Happy Birthday!

Ken:

Thanks.

Izzy:

So what, 25, 26? What is it?

Ken:

Yeah, exactly [fades out]

VO:

Good day to you, Undercurrents listeners. Today I've got a special update episode featuring Izzeddin Hawamda, a Palestinian poet, teacher, and friend, who shared his poems with us in an episode called, "Home," from Season 2.

Many listeners were moved by his poems. And so when I heard that Izzy had written a new poem inspired by an extended trip back home to the West Bank that he had taken with his family earlier this year, I invited him to share it with us on Undercurrents. Izzy graciously agreed.

Ken:

So Izzy, you went back home?

Izzy:

Yeah.

Ken:

Tell me about that trip.

Izzy:

I mean, I could go on and on about how beautiful Palestine is, but the one thing, the sad thing that I did find this time that I've never touched before or seen before, is the amount and the evidence of despair in the Palestinian eyes. The people in Palestine are hopeless, majority of people. You can feel the hopelessness on the leaves of the trees, on the window cells. You could touch it in the voices of the radio hosts. It's everywhere. Now, if someone may ask, "Oh, this is a very sad look, or a very dark look on life", and I'll answer them by saying, "Come and live in the West Bank, you can see how it is". We have one of the highest costs of living in the region. It's very, very expensive to live in the West Bank. Jobs are very rare, unemployment is very high, poverty is definitely evident and Covid made that even more real. And being under occupation and having Israel control all of your entry and exit points makes it that much harder for regular Palestinians, young Palestinians to go and seek work in the West Bank or outside of the West Bank.

Izzy:

On a daily basis you've got about almost 70,000 workers entering Israel to look for jobs, many of whom don't have permits to work in Israel. So you get into Israel illegally. Now you risk getting caught, getting beaten, getting jailed and getting fired. But people do it. And then when I say people, I'm talking about young people, 18, 17 years old, 19 years old guys who have absolutely no other choice but to risk their lives, to go through long and hilly and illegal ways to get into Israel to find a job so they can send money back to the West Bank and feed their families. I've got people in my village who, when I asked about how they were doing, two guys in particular, the families said, "We haven't seen them for 12 months". I said, "They've been in Israel for that long?". They said, "Yes, because if they come back, they might not be able to go back". Right? So this story occurs and it just keeps happening.

My uncle goes to Israel to work every morning. He's a welder. He gets up at 2:30 in the morning and to go to Israel to make it by 8:00am. So 2:30, 2:00 he's up and he usually takes a few guys with him to work from the village. They get into his car and they drive the carpool together, yes. So think about it, you'll get up at 2:00 or 2:30. You get to the checkpoint by 3:30, so 3:30 in the morning. It takes you from 3:30 or 3:00 in the morning till about 8:00 or 7:30 to get through, okay? And on the way back, you do the same thing, right? So he comes home at 7:30, 8:00 in the evening. So six days a week, that's what he does.

I've never heard him complain about the checkpoint. All my life, I've never heard my uncle say a word about the checkpoint. He just accepted it. You know why he doesn't talk about it? Because talking about it is also a privilege that I have here in the West that I get to talk about it, share my feelings about it, to write a story about it, to write to poem about it, have a podcast about it, and so on. My uncle doesn't have these avenues. Once he says to me, "Okay, I'll talk about it, then what? I go back there the next morning. So I open up, I share all these things and for you to go, "Oh, I'm sorry for people to go, this is sad", but then what? Is it going to make going through the checkpoints easier?"

So again, when I talk about resiliency, we have to understand it is different in areas of conflict, then we assume or identify resiliency as in the West here. But the stories, he talks to me about the snapshots of what he sees or what they go through. And of course, I hear these things at random places. We would be sitting at a salon, getting a haircut, he'd share a story. We'd be going for a walk, he'd share another story. And sometimes, not with but me, he'd be talking in general. And those collections, those pieces inspire this writing. And the one thing that, when I

started writing this poem, I wanted to end with, I wrote the last line as the first line when the old man says, "We will be back tomorrow". That's where I started. And I built my way up, and I didn't know how else I could build it. I didn't. I started with that, and over the duration of a month or two, it's just one line after another. And every line I thought about the people who said it. And I collected all these imageries and all these stories and the people who sent them. And I tried to be their voice in some way or another.

The one story that stuck with me is how someone waited and waited. And after the soldier went for a nap or where they went, they assumed it was a nap. They came back all cranky and said, "Today, nothing - nobody goes through, go home". So again, they pick up their backpacks. They usually have small backpacks with water and food. And because you'd know you be stuck there for a long time, so you bring some food. And if you're going to Israel to work, you take some lunch with you. But for me, what came out of those backpacks are birds that chipper.

Izzy:

It was a different imagery. The backpacks were resembling of a homeland that we carried on our backs. And out of these backpacks and out of these homelands, there were sounds of beauty and weddings and traditional songs and mothers calling their children to come to eat. Because as a writer, I refuse to victimize my story. I don't live in that victim narrative. I am not a victim, I am a Palestinian, and I'm strong. So I try my best to show that side of our story. So when all these things connected, I was able to write some of it. And it's always, it's an intimate conversation with myself. Am I doing justice to this story? Am I telling the story as it should be told? When people read this, are they going to feel bad for me? Which I don't want them to do. That's one of my biggest fears, if you will. Anytime when I write this with people who are listening or reading will they go, "Oh my goodness, this is heartbreaking. How could I help?" Yes, I want them to sympathize and understand the cause, but that's not the only emotion I want them to have. How do I tell them that I am still strong? I'm still here. I am not going anywhere. This is my land.

"CHECKPOINT" by written and read by Izzy Hawamda.

As I wait,
Words,
question me,
A soldier,
Debates my connections,
To the morning dew,
To the rows
Of my land,
An M16,
Sniffs me,
It stumbles
Over fields
of saffron
Growing in my chest,

I wonder,
if my ID is enough
To enter,
My childhood,
stares...
me in the face,
The sun rays
Search
through
my shirt,
The line grows longer
At the checkpoint
A Soldier,
Holds up the line
to go
for a nap
When he returns,
he's moody
He shuts down
the metal doors
And says,
go back!!
The people in the line
waited all day,
The people
Pick up,
their homelands
On their backs
again,
Out of their backpacks,
The Goldfinch
chippers,
As we walk back,
The sky,
Welcomes the people,
Here,
on my land,
We don't have a

Homeland,
We've been searching
between our wounds,
And behind the shadows,
There's only a
tent and a refugee
Waiting to return,
The line gets smaller,
Like a creek flowing down
From a mountain,
An old man,
Says to me,
"Son,
this is our land,
We will be back
Tomorrow..."