

NEW LETTERS

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Between Sin and Sin: Border Crossings

PETER CHILSON

From inside the guard shack, we hear paper rustling, murmured voices. Outside, we stand in line—truckers, farmers, midwives, traders, teachers, men and women, citizens, and me—with our passports, visas, identity cards, vaccination records, vehicle registrations, shipping lists and customs declarations, wads of documents with the weight of governments and international treaties behind them, centuries of politics, war, colonialism, and diplomacy stuffed into a few pages to be judged by a bored, sweaty customs officer with a rubber stamp. This is West Africa 1988. I'm riding a bus from Burkina Faso to Cote d'Ivoire to do a newspaper story about how travelers and merchants cope with national borders. At the exit post, a red pole hangs over the asphalt beside a concrete guard shack. A dozen big trucks wait to cross into Cote d'Ivoire. Most carry onions. The smell stings my eyes. Drivers wear bandanas over their noses and mouths.

Then come the unmistakable cries of someone being beaten. People look at the ground as if unaware of the

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grunts, the thuds, and shouts. *Non, non, s'il vous plait!* On my turn, I enter the shack and hand my passport to a customs officer. I'm secure in my American nationality and travel papers. But I'm remembering an incident from my school days in Aspen, Colorado, the image of a boy's bloody face, eyes darting about as his class-mate tormentors pressed his cheek into dirt. Through a closed door behind the customs officer, I hear sickening, muffled fists and boots striking flesh. No more cries, only gasps and blows without witnesses. I think, maybe the guy's dead. On impulse, I step around the table and yell, "Hey, Hey!" pounding on the door, which opens so quickly that I freeze, face to face with a man in a green uniform and beret. Behind him I see someone lying on the floor in brown cotton trousers. I can't see above his beltline. The guard grabs me by the shoulders and slams me against the wall as people watch through the doorway. I use the word "slam" because days afterward I have bruises on my shoulder blades and a lump on the back of my skull where it hit the wall. The guard says: *Il est trafiquant. Etes Vous son ami?*—"He's a smuggler. Are you his friend?"

The customs officer, probably fearing a complicated incident, pulls the guard away and hands me my passport. "Go!" he shouts.

I stumble out, touching the back of my head and feeling blood on my fingertips. The bus driver cleans the wound with a wet cloth. He says, "You must mind your own business."

I've tried that. I once watched three boys, high school seniors like me, beat another boy in a school parking lot. He came from a different school. The seniors intercepted him crossing our grounds on his way home and jumped him with closed fists, while I and others watched. A teacher broke it up and told the aggressors to go.

Every time I travel, I think of that day at school when I said nothing, and I see that man on the guard shack floor,

soles of his feet sticking out from his brown trousers. I hear the coughing and gasping and feel the guard's sour breath, my shirt collar bunched in his hands.

There's this, too: I knew the beaten man in the Burkina Faso guard shack but didn't realize it right away. His name was Hissène Ibrahim, a truck driver I'd interviewed about cross-border trade. Weeks later, after the beating, I returned to Burkina Faso for follow-up research. I called on Hissène at home in the capital city of Ouagadougou. He'd been released without charge. I knew nothing of his ordeal when I found him sitting on a cot in the courtyard of his cinder block house, surrounded by family. His right arm hung in a sling. He had a cast on one leg. After talking a few minutes, Hissène and I figured out we'd been at the border at the same time and that I'd witnessed his beating.

He worked for a trucking company that paid fees and bribes in advance. "A guard pulled me into a room and punched me," Hissène told me. "He said I was smuggling, but I had all my papers." I felt a twinge of disappointment when he remembered nothing of someone pounding on the door and shouting. "They left me in a hospital." He shrugged. "I'm Toubou. That's why they beat me."

The Toubou are nomads of northeastern Chad, a thousand miles from Burkina Faso. They survive by their livestock. "The guards don't know Toubou." He smiled, as if this were an old issue. Hissène was short and wiry, with lighter skin than most Burkinabe and a strange accent when he spoke French and Mooré—the language spoken by the border guards. In West Africa, no matter where, to drive 100 miles in any direction means crossing one or two or more tribal and language zones. The national borders that slice these zones are European inventions, drawn by colonial powers a century ago, or more. Burkina Faso is a former French colony. The borders crisscross Africa today like rusty barbed wire.

Hissène recovered and returned to driving his truck. As far as I know he's still at it. I've not forgotten something else he said, sitting on that cot, bad leg stretched across the mattress. "I'm different than they are," he said of the border guards. "I look different, I sound different."

Borders create frustration and occasional terror. We worry about crossing them and how to protect ourselves when we're upon them. We fret about people and values and languages we don't understand streaming over borders and invading our lives, taking our jobs, changing our communities, committing crimes. We hear about lives ruined in borderlands, about people dying in the desert on the United States-Mexico border and others trapped in airports. We see images of a million people from the Middle East and Africa, lurching from border to border across Europe—where political borders between nations were supposed to die.

I'm Anglo American. What do I know about border crossings? Not much, yet borders have fascinated me since childhood when I realized how people draw lines between themselves. In school, I stumbled between social groups, trying to learn the customs and usually failing. If I'd grown up in another part of the world, like Europe or Africa, I'd have had to learn multiple languages as a child, like Hissène Ibrahim, who by age 16 spoke French, language of the colonizer, as well as Arabic, Fulani, and his native Tedaga. "I had to know languages," he told me. He grew up near Chad's border with Libya in the market town of Bardai, a historic stop for trans-Saharan camel caravans that traded between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe over hundreds of years. "Everybody came to Bardai. The market is how I became a truck driver. My father was a driver. He spoke all these languages, and English!"

I came of age in a North American ski resort. I knew only English in a country most of whose citizens, to

quote Vietnamese-American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, are "afflicted . . . with monolingualism." People like Jack Nicolson, Cher, and Donald Trump came to Aspen, Colorado, in the 1970s (like today) for pleasure in a place walled off by mountains and money. We weren't rich, but my dad, who moved us to Aspen from Detroit in 1971, built an island for us on a small savings and loan. I felt trapped by the mountains and escaped into movies about foreign lands. On television, I watched a 1973 Cold-War story, *Night Flight from Moscow*, which ends with an exchange of captured spies on a bridge between East and West Germany. At the theater, I saw the 1977 World War II drama *Julia*, where Jane Fonda as the Jewish playwright Lillian Hellman crosses the Franco-German border by train in the late 1930s, carrying in the fabric of her hat money and messages for the anti-Nazi resistance. At the Paris train station, a friend warns her, "You know what they do to Jews in Germany."

My father gave me Graham Greene's 1978 spy novel, *The Human Factor*. I imagined myself in the story, bored and paranoid, toiling in an obscure office of MI6 in London. I was actually picking my way through school, trusting no one, as if the whole place were foreign territory. I loved the quandary of Maurice Castle, the capable but aging spy living with the consequences of falling in love with an African woman, when he was a young spy in South Africa. Their love broke race laws, and in a deal to get her safely out of the country he became a Soviet agent, a man straddling multiple borders, racial and political, as an act of love.

Greene, a Catholic convert, found redemption at borders. In 1938, he went to Mexico to report on the revolution and its denunciation of the Church. He turned the experience into his 1940 novel, *The Power and the Glory*, about a rogue priest on the run. Greene also published an account of his own journey, *The Lawless Roads*, which opens on the border at Laredo, Texas. "The atmosphere of the border is like starting over again," he wrote. "There is something about

it like a good confession: poised for a few happy moments between sin and sin."

Recently I spoke at a mosque in Pullman, Washington, where I teach writing and literature at a university. Because of my experience as a journalist in Muslim West Africa, I was asked to discuss the situation many Muslims in the United States feel acutely, caught between Islamophobia and Islamist radicalism, not to mention fear of deportation. The congregation includes hundreds of members from 30 countries. Some—from countries like Libya, Syria and Somalia—feel trapped in the United States, unable to return home for fear of strife and persecution.

The Pullman mosque is a simple, sand-colored building, small and unremarkable except for a modest domed minaret from which rises a metal crescent moon fixed atop a pole, symbolizing a guiding light to God. Inside, the day I spoke, 150 men gathered on a green Turkish rug. A few women sat on a second-floor balcony, behind a wood screen. I talked about Mali, where I've made reporting trips in recent years to write about the war with jihadist groups. I told them about a Malian imam (the prayer leader at a mosque) I met who'd been harassed by jihadists for refusing to govern his community under strict Islamist law and wage war against non-believers. "Only God declares war," the imam said. "Only God decides who rules over any man. They threatened to kill me but I am still here." I pressed him to explain the meaning of jihad. "In Arabic, jihad is the word for struggle," he said. "It's a struggle to find your path to God. Jihad is not about killing people."

I felt uneasy, facing this congregation as if I knew anything and my empathy would mean something. When I finished, a Jordanian engineering student stood up. "What are we supposed to do about our situation in this country?" he asked. He had large, intent eyes, not angry but fearful. He wanted practical advice. "It's like our religion has been

hijacked," he said, "but I don't know how to explain that to people. Americans stare at me. Sometimes they insult me. They tell me to go back home. Then when I return to Jordan, many people, like my mother, want to know which side I am on. They are afraid I've been radicalized here in America." He threw his palms up. "In my own religion, it's like I am between two countries."

I didn't know what to say. No travel document, no passport or visa, can protect him.

The very existence of the passport—a booklet of paper leaves bound by thread and staples—mystifies me. It retains authority rooted in 2,400 years of tradition. One of the earliest known uses of something like a passport dates to the year 450 B.C. in the Book of Nehemiah of the Hebrew Bible. The story goes that the Persian King asked Nehemiah, a Jewish slave and trusted advisor, to go to Jerusalem in the province of Judah to establish himself as governor and rebuild the city. "If it pleases the king," Nehemiah said, "let letters be given me to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah."

Today the passport determines our identity, our origins, our ability to pass or not pass, while offering nothing about our true motives, character, integrity, the complexities of our ethnicity, our pains and joys. The passport is a document of faith. This is true in Africa and many other places around the world, where most border posts are deeply rural, disconnected from electricity, so guards have no access to computers or cellphone connections that might turn up more data from a traveler's name, picture and address.

In Mali, during the 2012 jihadist occupation of the north, the passport endured a demotion of sorts. I visited refugee camps in neighboring Burkina Faso, where people told stories about armed jihadists in Mali who boarded buses looking for anyone wearing glasses, a symbol of Western

education. The jihadists forbade Western clothes and shoes, demanded that men grow beards like the prophet Muhammad, and that women cover every inch of their bodies. They asked for identity papers, but in fact they were more concerned that travelers prove their religious faith. Did the traveler carry a prayer rug? Could he recite from the Quran in Arabic? Eyeglasses lay smashed by the roadside.

All this makes me nostalgic for the story of Ibn Battutah, the Arab historian who crossed the Empire of Mali in 1351. From his home in Morocco he walked to Mali alone or in the company of a camel caravan. Along the route he wrote letters of introduction, visa applications, if you will, defining his purpose—to see all the lands of Islam. Battutah explains in his journals that he sent the letters (in Arabic) ahead to a village chief or the imam of a mosque or a prominent merchant to secure permission to enter a place. He worked through a negotiator or “takshif,” whom he paid to carry letters and arrange transit, much the way journalists today hire “fixers” to cut red tape in foreign countries. Once inside Mali, West Africa’s first great Muslim power, Battutah moved freely, a fact that amazed him. In his journal, he praised Mali’s “. . . universal security . . . for neither the traveler nor the resident there has to fear thieves or bandits.”

Five centuries later, in the 1880s, the French explorer Louis-Gustave Binger flew his country’s tricolor from a staff as he trekked West Africa to what is now Cote d’Ivoire. Like Battutah, he collected letters in Arabic from local leaders as he walked. He wrote in a memoir about a warlord who issued a letter that “authorized me to cross his domains,” from southern Mali to the coast, about 400 miles. Less than a decade later, France claimed Cote d’Ivoire as a colony and named Binger its first governor. Today Europe and the United States debate closing their borders to the former colonies that helped enrich them.

One of my sharpest memories is of obtaining a visa for Turkey in 1982. At the Turkish consulate in Strasbourg,

France, where I was a university student, the consul was also a bookseller. Stacks of books crowded the floor and tables of his office. An enormous old Quran sat on his desk. As the consul prepared my visa, scribbling and stamping my application forms, he offered me that great holy book for \$1,000. Grunting, he picked it up and plopped it on my lap. It must have weighed 20 pounds. I remember nothing of the publisher or edition, but I haven’t forgotten its leather cover embossed in gold Arabic lettering and the pages within, text in black ink, framed by red and gold trim.

The consul validated my visa with his looping signature in blue ink. In the Sahara, Tuareg nomads reject identity papers for a traditional polished iron or wood medallion worn around the neck, signifying home region and clan. Today many countries, like Australia, sell visas from a website, so the visa is not carried in the passport but waiting in a computer when you get off the plane.

While I waited, delicately turning the pages of the Quran, the Turkish consul talked about the glory of the Ottoman Turkish Empire and its architectural and cultural feats, like the 16th-century Suleymaniye Mosque with great ornate dome and minarets that pierce the stratosphere, a giant work of art the Islamic State denounces because it and all of Istanbul’s great mosques dare compete with God and should be destroyed and replaced with unadorned, simple structures.

“How old is this Quran?” I asked.

“Very old,” he said.

“It’s like I’m holding Islam in my hands. Thank you for letting me see it.”

“You are holding Islam in your hands,” he said. “It’s the Holy Quran.”

I stood and placed the book carefully on his desk. He handed me my passport, refusing the \$35 in French francs I’d counted out for the visa. “You show respect for the Quran,” he said. “You are welcome in my country.”

Days later, on a train to Turkey, I was asleep in a crowded compartment, head against the window when we pulled into a station on the Yugoslav side of the Austro-Yugoslav border (today's Austro-Slovenia border). Shouts awakened me. I stepped into the passageway and saw border guards in green uniforms ejecting a family of gypsies—parents and three children. The guards shredded plastic bags of belongings. One picked up a wide-eyed boy, maybe seven years old, and tossed him out the train-car door. The boy landed on his feet and stumbled, screaming. Another guard ripped open a detergent box and dumped the powder on the floor. When he saw me watching, he ordered me to my compartment where I waited out the noise and anguish. Days later, at the Greco-Turkish border, an Egyptian man on his knees begged a policeman in English to let him across. The man said his wife and child were in Istanbul. The policeman shook his head. "No visa," he declared.

My passport records my route from France across Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, in dated stamps. No one gave the thing more than a glance.

I've been lucky at borders. I'm thin and unimposing, with premature white hair. I'm 56 now and started going gray at 17. This helps in Africa, where people respect advanced age, or the appearance of it, partly because of the experience that comes with age and partly because in Africa not many people live past their 50s. Crossing borders is also an acquired skill. I'm a nervous, reactive person, but at borders I've learned calm. I learned calm in 1986 when I made the mistake of carrying whiskey from Senegal into the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. After detaining me an hour, the guards let me go with a stern warning, but they kept the whiskey. I learned it in 1991, entering Nigeria from Niger, when a bribe-hungry customs officer insisted my passport was fake. I talked my way through without paying a bribe. In 2011, in Guinea, on Mali's southern border, I quietly

obeyed when a guard forced me to kneel and unpack my bag, item by item. He mistook my balled up green socks for a hand grenade. I've never been detained more than a couple of hours.

It's 2014, and I'm not concerned about my luck holding out as I go through customs at Charles De Gaulle International Airport in Paris after a flight from Mali. Americans don't need a visa for France, just a passport. When I give mine to the customs officer in a glass booth, I'm alarmed to see the pages fall out in his hands. I realize that a wad of added visa pages must have stressed the binding. Not to mention damage done by damp heat because I carried my passport in a leather sheath in a breast pocket against my chest under the West African sun. The spinal threads holding it together had decayed. But the French customs officer only shrugs as he finds the page with my picture, glances at me, and taps the pages in place. Handing it back, he says, *Le passeport est fatigué*—"The passport is worn out." I thank him and walk down the hallway.

Behind me is Idrissa Sissoko (I changed his name), a Malian artist I sat with on the plane. Years earlier I bought two of his paintings in Bamako, Mali's capital. I linger, hoping to grab a coffee with him before catching our connecting flights. I'm off to Seattle. He's headed to an art show in Berlin, wearing sandals, a red fez, white leggings and long white kaftan. The officer, in navy blue uniform and pillbox kepi, studies Idrissa's passport. He picks up his phone, says something, and two more officers show up. One takes Idrissa's bag and they lead him away as waiting travelers look on. Idrissa is calm, like he's done this before. He smiles at me reassuringly. I feel like I've witnessed a kidnapping, but what can I do?

I walk back to the booth where the officer is examining a woman's documents. I tap the glass. "Excuse me," I say in French, "That man you took away is my friend. What are you doing with him?"

The officer looks up, hand on his telephone. "This is not your business, sir."

"But he's my friend."

"Monsieur! C'est pas votre affaire!"

I wonder: If I've declared myself a friend of the man detained, how is it not my affair? But I obey the laws of the land. I move on.

Using my phone in the departures lounge, I find a number for airport customs. I'm trying to figure out how to explain myself to them, when I see Idrissa buying a coffee. I rush up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Idrissa laughs. "It was nothing. I have a business visa. They wanted to know about the art I sell." Sitting with our coffees, he says: "The French don't like Africans. I don't understand." He was detained less than an hour, but the indignity bothers him and me. Holding his coffee in both hands, he studies the floor as if it might explain.

"I've made this trip for many years," he says, "but now they cause me trouble."

I don't mention what sits between us: that my papers are literally not in order.

I give him my number before seeing him off at the Lufthansa gate. In English Idrissa says, "Be well, my friend."

Fifteen hours later a Seattle customs officer frowns when my passport falls apart on his desk. He squints at me. "Your passport is mangled." I look at him through thirty hours of flights and customs checks in three countries and the detention of Idrissa Sissoko. I explain the African heat and my mistake of carrying the passport close to my skin. He swipes the identity page through a scanner and types something. Then he taps the pages inside the blue cover like a deck of cards and hands it back to me. "Apply for a new one," he says.

Three Poems

KELLY CHERRY

That Boy

Halfway around the world, that boy who wore
blood in his hair and sat obligingly
because he could not comprehend Assad's
reign of evil is, I now believe,
the son I would have had, if only I
were younger and if only I could have
had a child and if he did not belong
already to a family in Aleppo.

I too can't comprehend Assad's black reign
of evil. Does it cheer him up to fling
small boys into a cauldron of hurtling fire?
I think it must. Yet all a little boy
wants is a toy or two and his parents
and if he has a sibling, then he wants
his sibling. Pita bread would also be
good, but there is no pita bread.