

OH MY FATHER, I AM YUSUF (JOSEPH)

Oh my father, I am Yusuf
Oh father, my brothers neither love me nor want me in their midst
They assault me and cast stones and words at me
They want me to die so they can eulogize me
They closed the door of your house and left me outside
They expelled me from the field
Oh my father, they poisoned my grapes
They destroyed my toys
When the gentle wind played with my hair, they were jealous
They flamed up with rage against me and you
What did I deprive them of, Oh my father?
The butterflies stopped on my shoulder
The bird hovered over my hand
What have I done, Oh my father?
Why me?
You named me Yusuf and they threw me into the well
They accused the wolf
The wolf is more merciful than my brothers
Oh, my father
Did I wrong anyone when I said that
I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon
Saw them kneeling before me ?

A Lover from Palestine

Your eyes are a thorn in my heart
Inflicting pain, yet I cherish that thorn
And shield it from the wind.
I sheathe it in my flesh, I sheathe it, protecting it from night and agony,
And its wound lights the lanterns,
Its tomorrow makes my present
Dearer to me than my soul.
And soon I forget, as eye meets eye,
That once, behind the doors, there were two of us.

Your words were a song
And I tried to sing, too,
But agony encircled the lips of spring.
And like the swallow, your words took wing,
The door of our home and the autumnal threshold migrated,
To follow you wherever led by longing
Our mirrors were shattered,
And sorrow was multiplied a thousand fold.
And we gathered the splinters of sound,
Mastering only the elegy of our homeland!
Together we will plant it in the heart of a lyre,
And on the rooftops of our tragedy we'll play it
To mutilated moons and to stones.

But I have forgotten, you of the unknown voice:
Was it your departure that rushed the lyre or was it my silence?

Yesterday I saw you in the port,
A long voyager without provisions,
Like an orphan I ran to you,
Asking the wisdom of our forefathers:
How can the ever-verdant orange grove be dragged
To prison, to exile, to a port,
And despite all her travels,
Despite the scent of salt and longing,
Remain evergreen?
I write in my diary:
I love oranges and hate the port
And I write further:
On the dock
I stood, and saw the world through Witter's eyes
Only the orange peel is ours, and behind me lay the desert.

In the briar-covered mountains I saw you,
A shepherdess without sheep,
Pursued among the ruins.
You were my garden, and I a stranger,
Knocking at the door, my heart,
For upon my heart stand firm
The door and windows, the cement and stones.

I have seen you in casks of water, in granaries,
Broken, I have seen you a maid in night clubs,
I have seen you in the gleam of tears and in wounds.
You are the other lung in my chest;
You are the sound on my lips;
You are water; you are fire.

I saw you at the mouth of the cave, at the cavern,
Hanging your orphans' rags on the wash line.
In the stoves, in the streets I have seen you.
In the barns and in the sun's blood.
In the songs of the orphaned and the wretched I have seen you.
I have seen you in the salt of the sea and in the sand.
Yours was the beauty of the earth, of children and of Arabian jasmine.

And I have vowed
To fashion from my eyelashes a kerchief,
And upon it to embroider verses for your eyes,
And a name, when watered by a heart that dissolves in chanting,
Will make the sylvan arbours grow.
I shall write a phrase more precious than honey and kisses:
"Palestinian she was and still is".

On a night of storms, I opened the door and the window
To see the hardened moon of our nights.
I said to the night: Run out,
Beyond the darkness and the wall;
I have a promise to keep with words and light.
You are my virgin garden
As long as our songs
Are swords when we draw them.
And you are as faithful as grain
So long as our songs
Keep alive the fertile soil when we plant them.
You are like a palm tree in the mind:
Neither storm nor woodsman's ax can fell it.
Its braids uncut
By the beasts of desert and forest
But I am the exiled one behind wall and door,
Shelter me in the warmth of your gaze.

Take me, wherever you are,
Take me, however you are.
To be restored to the warmth of face and body,
To the light of heart and eye,
To the salt of bread and song,
To the taste of earth and homeland.
Shelter me in the warmth of your gaze,
Take me, a panel of almond wood, in the cottage of sorrows,
Take me, a verse from the book of my tragedy,
Take me, a plaything or a stone from the house,
So that our next generation may recall
The path of return to our home.

Her eyes and the tattoo on her hands are Palestinian,
Her name, Palestinian,
Her dreams, and sorrow, Palestinian,
Her Kerchief, her feet and body, Palestinian,
Her words and her silence, Palestinian,
Her voice, Palestinian,
Her birth and her death, Palestinian,
I have carried you in my old notebooks
As the fire of my verses,
The sustenance for my journeys.
In your name, my voice rang in the valleys:
I have seen Byzantium's horses
Even though the battle be different.
Beware, oh beware
The lightning struck by my song in the granite.
I am the flower of youth and the knight of knights!
I am the smasher of idols.
I plant the Levantine borders
With poems that set eagles free.
And in your name I have shouted at the enemy:

Worms, feed on my flesh if ever I slumber,
For the eggs of ants cannot hatch eagles,
And the shell of the adder's egg
Holds but a snake!
I have seen Byzantium's horses,
And before it all, I know
That I am the flower of youth and the knight of knights!

THINK OF OTHERS

(Translated from Arabic by Ibtisam Barakat)

As you prepare your breakfast think of others.

Don't forget to feed the pigeons.

As you conduct your wars think of others.

Don't forget those who want peace.

As you pay your water bill think of others.

Think of those who only have clouds to drink from.

As you go home, your own home, think of others

Don't forget those who live in tents.

As you sleep and count the planets think of others

There are people who have no place to sleep.

As you liberate yourself with metaphors think of others

Those who have lost their right to speak

And as you think of distant others

Think of yourself and say

"I wish I were a candle in the darkness."

Ibtisam Barakat is the author of *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

Psalm Three

On the day when my words
were earth...
I was a friend to stalks of wheat.

On the day when my words
were wrath
I was a friend to chains.

On the day when my words
were stones
I was a friend to streams.

On the day when my words
were a rebellion
I was a friend to earthquakes.

On the day when my words
were bitter apples
I was a friend to the optimist.

But when my words became
honey...
flies covered
my lips!...

Translated by Ben Bennani

We travel like all people

We travel like everyone else, but we return to nothing. As if travel were a path of clouds. We buried our loved ones in the shade of clouds and between roots of trees.

We said to our wives: Give birth for hundreds of years, so that we may end this journey within an hour of a country, within a meter of the impossible!

We travel in the chariots of the Psalms, sleep in the tents of the prophets, and are born again in the language of Gypsies.

We measure space with a hoopoe's beak, and sing so that distance may forget us.

We cleanse the moonlight. Your road is long, so dream of seven women to bear this long journey on your shoulders. Shake the trunks of palm trees for them. You know the names, and which one will give birth to the Son of Galilee.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me rest my road against a stone.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me see an end to this journey.

He Is Calm, and I Am Too

He is calm,
And I am too.
He drinks lemon tea,
And I drink coffee.
(this is the only thing different about us)
He, like me, wears a loose striped shirt,
And I stare, like him, in a monthly magazine.
He does not see me as I eye him discreetly;
I do not see him as he eyes me discreetly.
He is calm,
And I am too.
He asks the waiter for something;
I ask the waiter for something.
A black cat passes between us,
And I touch its night of fur;
He touches its night of fur.
I do not tell him: The sky is clear today,
More blue;
He does not tell me: the sky is clear today.
He is the seen and the one who sees;
I am the seen and the one who sees.
I move my left leg;
He moves his right leg.
I hum the melody of a song;
He hums the melody of a song.
I wonder: Is he the mirror wherein I see myself?
Then I look towards his eyes, and I do not see him.
I leave the coffee shop in a hurry,
I think: Maybe he is a killer,
Or maybe he is only a man passing through
And thought I am a killer.

We love life

And we love life if we find a way to it.
We dance in between martyrs and raise a minaret for violet or palm trees.

We love life if we find a way to it.

And we steal from the silkworm a thread to build a sky and fence in this departure.
We open the garden gate for the jasmine to step out on the streets as a beautiful day.

We love life if we find a way to it.

And we plant, where we settle, some fast growing plants, and harvest the dead.
We play the flute like the color of the faraway, sketch over the dirt corridor a neigh.
We write our names one stone at a time, O lightning brighten the night.

We love life if we find a way to it...

(translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah)