

Zakaria Mohammed

Zakaria Mohammed was born in Nablus, Palestine, in 1950. He graduated from Baghdad University and has lived in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, and Tunisia. He has been chief editor of many literary magazines, among them *al-Karmel*, which was edited by Mahmoud Darwish, and gains his living as a journalist and editor. In 1994, after 25 years in exile, Mr. Mohammed returned to Palestine and now lives in Ramallah.



His publications in poetry include *Last Poems** (1981), *Hand Crafts* (1990), *The Horse Passes Iskadar* (1994), *Sun Stroke* (2003), *Stunning Stones* (2008), *Thimble* (2014), and *'Alanda* (2016). A prolific writer, he has published two novels, *The Blank Eye* (1997), and *Cyclamen* (2002), as well as numerous articles that deal with questions about Palestinian culture and society. His special interest, however, is in religion and mythology, and he has published a number of books on pre-Islamic religions in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, editor of the *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, published by Columbia University Press, New York (1992), wrote: Among Palestinian poets, "we have Zakaria Mohammed who, above all others, has more radically broken with the old heroic stance, the stance of the poet as a hero and liberator shouldering great national responsibilities... He writes poetry that is confessional, intimate, almost self-deprecating, but weighted, nevertheless, with great collective consciousness of his people... Zakaria's poetry is one of the great examples of modern Arabic poetry, in which the inherited spirit of heroics and self-assertiveness, so rampant in the old poetry and in much of the poetry of the older generation of Arab poets, has totally disappeared, and where language is modernized, echoing the real pulse and rhythms of contemporary Arab life."

More information on Zakaria Mohammed can be found at *Lyrikline*, <http://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/6657#.WKMwDtKGPcc>.

*All English titles are translations from Arabic.

Eight Poems

1

I am a star, a tiny star
Light seeps from my body
No, I am an ant
an ant carrying the dictionary's words
in its jaws
to nibble at them
in its house

2

There is no death
There is only a tiny cloud that passes
and covers your eyes
Like a friend who comes from behind
and blindfolds you with his hands
There is no death
There is a black goat and a tattooed
hand milking an udder
White milk fills your mouth and flows
in your eyes
Again, there is no death
There is a raspberry tree
It holds your shoulder and hurts you
because it wants to open the way for
turtles
There is no death
There isn't
at all

3

Don't make anyone suture your wound
for you
The wound is yours
The thread is yours
Blood is your thought bleeding between
them
Don't wet your lip with water
Your lip is taken prisoner with wine
and ransomed by it

4

The murdered are in the morgue
We ascend to the refrigerator to identify
their corpses
Each points to his murdered
and his pursed lip
As for the souls
They'll never be found
Bullets burst them like soap bubbles

5

A flock of birds fly in the evening
In search of a tree on which to perch
and spend the night on its branches
I am a tree, a dark tree, in the evening
That's why the birds will perch
on my elbow, shoulder, hair, and heart
The noise they make as they perch is
unbearable

But I can't chase them away
This big flock is the souls of my
brothers
and I am obliged to be its house
A large, lost, and shivering multitude
I am the only tree in this dreary plain
called night
The shivering hands want firewood to
warm themselves
And I, who appear to be a tree, am
obliged to feed the fire my branches
This is what they call memories

6
Words are of no use
Six of them are for mourning
Only one for joy
Nay, ten are for mourning and only
one for joy
Ah, if only we could send them back
to God
Who threw them like a grenade in our
mouths and throats

7
The poem starts with desire
There is no idea, words, or rhythm
Only a vague nameless desire
Then you climb dark stairs
As if they are not there, or yet to appear
You climb fearing that you might trip
and break your heel
But when you place your foot on the
last step
light emanates
As if a shut door were suddenly flung
open to the sun

You see the stairs you climbed
the stairs you built
Then you come down happy
to count the steps you made and
climbed

8
One day I will reach the house
Take the weight off my shoulders and
place it at the door and go in. No one
will be there. I will push the door, enter,
and sit in the silence. The setting sun
divides the house with its sword into
two halves: one dark, one lit. I will sit
between the darkness and the light. The
past flows behind me like a brook. The
future wriggles before me like a snail.
And I am without time. There, in the
silence, between darkness and light, I
will become stone, a statue on a huge
sculpted boundary stone. With the
chisel, the sculptor's hand will engrave
my thigh: This is the boundary. This is
the dam. The past's waters flow to the
past and the future's in the opposite
direction.

One day I will be a statue with a broken
neck: One hand eaten by darkness and
another gnawed by light.

Translated from Arabic by Sinan Antoon.
From the collection *Thimble*.

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Plate

In the morning I strip off the pea pods
of my life in a plate
Every passerby takes his share of peas
Everyone gets a handful and leaves.

In the evening I crawl between chairs
on my knees
Looking for a single pea that could have
slipped from their hands
A pea that could give me a taste of
my life.

The carriage

Could the arrow stop and return to the
hand that shot it?

I am rushing and rushing to keep alive

The arrow has a hand to shoot it again
The hand that threw me has new lads
to shoot

So I am rushing and rushing

I want to reach my end crushed and
smashed
Breaking through hands, tongues and
thoughts
Skates of wrath and desire in my feet
Sliding me to the sky

It is not for glory
Nor for happiness
It's only to press the last drop of the
grapes of my life

There is no time for a cup of coffee
There is no time for writing a word
Others have to write what is to be
written
And drink what is to be drunk

But me, I have to rush and rush
I don't want to be a wise man with
grey hair
Wise men are arrows that stopped to
look behind

My heart will stop before I stop
I will cross thousands of miles after my
heart stops

The ones who will reach far more than
I did
Will find me scattered on the road:
smashed skull
screws
and cogwheels still shivering and
revolving.

Artwork courtesy of Bank of Palestine.