

POEMS

Ghassan Zaqtan

Easter/Spring 1988

A crystal clear day from the window pane
And beyond the fence
Are the Christians' vines
With a dove's soft feather
The sun outlines
The rustling of the far-off hills.
Between the fence and the window pane
The earth abounds.
Meadows, flowers and pristine waters
As light as a bird on wing.
On such a morning
In such a sun
Maidens should be our witness.

For Them There is No Death

On the route to Al Arrab
The dead rise up at night
The come down
From the hills and
From the age-old paths
Behind the houses and
From the vineyards.
Shrouded
In the dust of death
In memories
In innocent sleep and
The call to evening prayer
One by one
The dead advance and
From the stiles and
Grassy corners
Collect whatever
The psalmist left
A mother's tears and
Whatever those fingers left to dry
...Generous dew!

The dead will rise up again and
 Solemnly walk down
 Slowly walk down
 Exhausted by the weight of the earth and
 The darkness of age-old ponds and
 The old ways and
 The righteous paths
 In the silence of the first pond
 Under the three stone arches
 The dead will sit
 Remembering nothing.
 And down below
 Beneath the ground
 Rivers flow and houses whinny
 The dead will keep the vigil
 One by one
 For them there is no night and
 Their eyes shine on the houses.

Another Death

Prostrate in front of the door,
 Her corpse where she used to stand.
 Remember her singing at night,
 The glitter of her silver comb,
 Her knee that semaphored lightning
 At us, like her glass rings;
 Her hennaed hair, the pagan motion of her head,
 And her laugh in front of the door.
 We knew the meaning of her hair bound or worn free,
 As we cycled through the lamplit alley,
 Bells tinkling, horns blaring, her heart would dance...
 (her head's supported by two paving stones.)
 Her outstretched arms reached along the door,
 Five fingers, nails crested like scythes,
 Our confrontation with her cosmetics,
 The fringe of her hair,
 The perpetual awe with which she viewed the world,
 And our wonder at the sight of her open shirt.
 Useless to say, Good morning..
 Your face and hands are cold.
 ...Good morning...
 You will always be alone now.

Your journey is solitary through the street,
 Without your glass rings, the flash of your knees.

Voices will build to a roar around you,
 The torrent hidden in the rocks will growl,
 the cars cruising the big market will scream,
 and the boys' reflection will flash
 in the windows as they run.

...You will go out alone into the road,
 without the keys to your rooms,
 on your mother's advice
 and the road will open to your footsteps,
 and on a sudden you'll surprise the river that shines
 like a crystal thread suspended by a god.

...
 And as you pass, light will sleep in your hands,
 The river finds the contours in your fingers,
 The torrent will pool itself in your palms,
 The rocks rest their foundation in your hands.
 The place in the courtyard where you washed will shine.

You go by yourself down the road,
 Restoring the earth, melting the stubborn salt,
 And you'll be shy; you were always shy.
 Wind will bring fragrance from the ridge,
 A stork cry overhead,
 And the carrion crow will preside over all,
 bringing us children from the streets,
 as we follow it, shouting, rejoicing.

Translated by Lena Jayyusi and Jeremy Reed.

Grandmother Aicha

On her house is a crescent and
 Stars and words of wisdom
 On her doorstep three men
 Neither enter nor leave
 But merely stand and wait.
 Which one is the most handsome now?
 Which one after a long life's death...
 Grandmother Aicha
 Which one is the most handsome now?
 Alone with her seventy-odd years
 An ageless peace lies in her soul...
 Endlessly

Why should unseeing eyes be closed!
 The bottle of kohl gleams brightly

The one she can no longer see
There on the shelf

And ten colored handkerchiefs will wave
While three dead men drowse on the doorstep'
The last thread of night slowly unravels
The last of the faithful hurries on
The hymns have all been sung
The night grows cold.
But they still stand on the doorstep
Neither enter nor leave
Holding a shroud
In a stream of light.

The Death of Kheimas Nimr ¹

How much you must have struggled
How often must your hands
Have reached up to the sky
How many stars must have fallen
To gleam in the curls of your Arab hair.
How often you must have tried
How often must your hands
Have trembled
As you climbed up high.
How you must have despaired
As your hands lifted in pain
As your body was sketched
Like a frightened flower
Against ladders and sky.
How cold you seemed to be
Swaying in the wind
How frightened you seemed to be
Of the heavy night air
Of being so far from home
Of the death lament from the ancient ponds
After the call of the evening prayer
Frightened and bewildered
By what your little fingers
Could never understand
Then because you found your tears
You cried.

¹ An 11 year old Palestinian child who was hanged by Zionist settlers in El Quods on March 10, 1988.