



Asmaa Azaizeh

Asmaa Azaizeh received her BA in journalism and English literature from Haifa University in 2006. In 2010 she won the A.M. Qattan Foundation's Young Writer Award, and in 2011 her first collection of poetry, *Liwa*, was published. *As The Woman from Lod Bore Me* was published in 2015 and launched in a live performance of on-stage presentations. Azaizeh has participated in a number of poetry festivals and contributed to various journals and anthologies. Her work has been translated into English, German, French, Persian, Swedish, Spanish, Dutch, and Italian.

Azaizeh has worked as a journalist and presenter for various TV and radio stations and is a freelance writer for cultural magazines, a curator at Fattoush Art Space and Bookshop in Haifa, and a manager of the poetry initiative Poetry Lab.

Jurors of the A.M. Qattan Foundation Young Writers' Award 2008–2010, citing *Liwa*, a creative manuscript that indicates a promising talent, commented: "Setting itself apart from the traditional male-dominated poetry, this literary work provides a unique feminine voice ... The linguistic imagination and psychological depth of the collection manage to transform popular proverbs into philosophy and eternal wisdom. Azaizeh's poems ... are meaningful and composed in a powerful, coherent, and modern narrative. The language is concise, powerful, and full of imagery and rhythm, with meticulous attention to details."

Translated from Arabic by Sani Meo.

Do Not Believe Me If I Talked to You of War (excerpt)

War preoccupies me. But I'm ashamed to write about it. I flagellate my metaphors, then implore them. Pain makes me depict a bullet, after which I recede into depicting an emotional slap. I disembowel the words, and the Hara-kiri victims awake, all of them, and disembowel me.

Do not believe me if I talked to you of war, because when I spoke of blood, I was drinking coffee, when I spoke of graves, I was picking yellow daisies in Marj Ibn Amer, when I described the murderers, I was listening to my friends' giggles, and when I wrote about a burnt theatre in Aleppo, I was standing before you in an air-conditioned one.

Do not believe me if I talked to you of war. Because each time I bombarded the city streets in a poem, the concrete would recline, the lamps would sway towards it, and the prophets would pass by in peace.

Whenever I imagined my father's skin flayed in it, I could still touch him afterwards, safe and sound, with an embrace. And whenever I heard my mother's wailing, she would lull me to sleep with an old song, and I would sleep like a baby.

But dreams are open cheques

Signed by a Hourani woman whose features are unknown to me. Except that when my knife misses the lettuce leaf, I could smell the scent of the tribe of blood my grandfather had left in my body and hers.

Dreams are an open cheque, signed by Qasioun's sons who whispered them to



me during a reverie, and I couldn't tell whence the mountain's name had sprung without googling it.

The first cheque:

In an obscure crowd, an obscene clarity dawns on me.

In the midst of exquisite engineering of geography's tumult, a bullet quietly passes through me, at my lower back,

The crowd's mystery grows and my ears' windows are shut from within. The hole is as fresh as a spring, the blood is as warm as my mother's voice in a song, and as smooth as my father's skin.

The second cheque:

I was besieged in the world's holiest spot. Bullets rained down on me as did God's words on the prophets.

I seized a stone and it melted in my hands. I overtook the soldiers and time overtook me.

And like a scared kitten, I cowered where a young Christ slumbered before carrying us on his back.

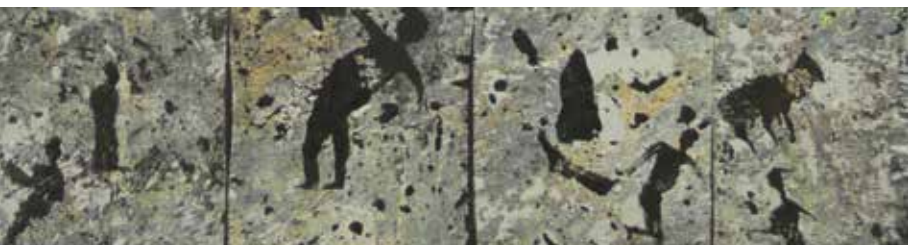
The third cheque:

Fear in the Levant.

Do not believe me when I talk to you of war

Because I've never heard a bullet shot besides the one my father threw from his double barreled gun into Marj Ibn Amer's doves. And I've never scented blood from a wound except for that which I smelled with my mother the first time I menstruated.

I do not have an account in the bank of wars, but a Hourani woman reassured me that my cheques are valid.



I Didn't Believe I Would Ever Learn to Die*

I didn't believe I would ever learn to die

I wasn't around when death was for free

But I was there when my maternal grandfather paid the price of cotton labourers' sweat that made his Ottoman suit

The price of bare miles to the women of Bosnia

The price of their tears on the chests of their men before the war

The price of God's banners

The price of the emperor's frivolousness and long-term sickness

Balkan blood dripped on my school shirt

The teachers found vows of vengeance in my backpack, and so fabricated chapters of history

I wasn't around when death happened by chance, on the road

But I was there when my paternal grandfather paid the price of a signature at the bottom of a page, the price of surrendering his village at the bottom of the mountain, of taking the occupier's hands off of it, the rebel's taking his hands off of his waist. With the move of a pen, my grandfather's ink numbed the slope. With the folding of a paper, the mountain folded history, with a handshake, he took the valley's hand from the tank's muzzle.

The almond trees died in the cardiac operation rooms, the wedding horses shrouded their eyes with henna and killed themselves.

No one cleansed my ethnicity. But the mountain's spinal cord broke. And so broke my chance to ever ascend it together, to look at Christ's footsteps on the lake and copy them.

I'm not the miracle

I didn't walk on water and I didn't heal myself of your love's ailments
But it was my heart's water which I learned to turn into asphalt whenever I remembered you

I learned to flee the lava that dripped from the mountains of your fear

And I didn't learn death

I wasn't there when death was a once and for all lesson

Where the memory of the rocket betrayed it and so forgot the way

The bullet that never meant to cease being a pen

The massacre that passed by the main road and fired peace

When I was walking in the back road

Picking yellow daisies and watching wars drawn in cartoons

I didn't believe I would ever learn to die

Until Beirut's war drowned my mother's lullaby in the well

The scent of invasions emanates from the cooking oven

The commando's voice enters Umm Kulthum's cassette

The skulls that paved the city road, they leave the poster hanging beside the bed and lull me, tapping my soft head like a long latmiya. So I stop crying, or they stop crying in it.

My heart grows in the well like a pomegranate tree, each time a branch is broken I climb another on my way to you. All of me breaks, so I become a nest. The birds look in the water and see the laughing face of a Bosnian, I look in it and see your face.

I am the child of tubes crossbred in a medical lab

I smelled the scent of dead horses in my father's sperm

And I retreated

I was born in the seventh month

After I was beaten by Bosnians in my mother's womb

And I retreated

I didn't believe I would ever learn to die

Until the Hebron massacre was committed on the cake of my ninth birthday. I lit the candles on the carpets of Abraham's house. They melted there alone and no one sang upon them. The birthday gifts fall into the well, the gifts fall, vows of vengeance, in my backpack

The vows would've dug my grave had they any hands

The almond trees would've stepped on it had they a spinal cord

The mountains would've praised it had they any poems

The Bosnian's tears would've creviced its stones had they any beaks or claws

And I would've come out

To learn the first lesson

That the smashed skull in the poster is my skull

And that the blood on my shirt

Is my blood

From an as-yet-unnamed upcoming collection.

Translated by Yasmine Haj.

* Based on a verse by Mihai Eminescu.

Artwork courtesy of Bank of Palestine.