



# Ghassan Zaqtan

Photo by Osama Silwadi

Palestinian poet, novelist, and editor Ghassan Zaqtan writes mainly in Arabic, but his work has been translated into English, French, Italian, Norwegian, and other languages. Born in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, he has lived in Jordan, Beirut, Damascus, and Tunis.

Zaqtan was editor of *El-Bayader*, the Palestine Liberation Organization's literary magazine, and of the poetry journal *Al-Shou'ra*; he has served as director general of the Literature and Publishing Department of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture and is a founding director of the House of Poetry in Ramallah. Zaqtan is a member of the executive board of the Mahmoud Darwish Foundation and writes a weekly column in the literary pages of *Al-Ayyam* newspaper. He lives in Ramallah.

Zaqtan is the recipient of numerous awards, among them the Mahmoud Darwish Award 2016; in 2013, his poetry collection *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*,

translated by poet Fady Joudah, received the Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize. Zaqtan was among the short-listed nominees for the University of Oklahoma-sponsored Neustadt International Prize for Literature in both 2005 and 2014, and for the Sheikh Zayid Literature Prize in 2015.

In recognition of his achievement and contribution to Arabic and Palestinian literature, Ghassan Zaqtan was awarded the National Medal of Honor by the Palestinian president in June 2013.

Describing Zaqtan as "a lyricist with strong narrative impulse," poet and translator Fady Joudah said of his work, "In his poems he sketches or carves psychological portraits that surpass the finalities and categories of consumed or consumerist analysis." Griffin Poetry Prize jurist Wang Ping commented: "What does poetry do? Nothing and everything, like air, water, soil, like birds, fish, trees, like love, spirit, our daily words ... It lives with us, in and outside us, everywhere, all the time, and yet, we are too often oblivious of this gift. It's a poet's job to bring this gift out and back, this gift that makes us human again. And Mr. Zaqtan has done it."

## A Picture of the House in Beit Jala

He has to return to shut that window,  
it isn't entirely clear  
whether this is what he must do,  
things are no longer clear  
since he has lost them,  
and it seems a hole somewhere within him  
has opened up

Closing up the cracks has exhausted him  
mending the fences  
wiping the glass  
cleaning the edges  
and watching the dust that seems, since he has lost the things,  
to lure his memories into hoax and ruse.  
And from here his childhood appears as if it were a trick!  
inspecting the doors has fully exhausted him  
the window latches  
the condition of the plants  
and wiping the dust  
that has not ceased flowing  
into the rooms, on the beds, sheets, pots  
and on the picture frames on the walls

Since he has lost them he stays with friends  
who become fewer  
sleeps in their beds  
that become narrower  
while the dust gnaws at his memories "there"



...he must return to shut that window  
the upper story window which he often forgets  
at the end of the stairway that leads to the roof

Since he has lost them  
he aimlessly walks  
and the day's small  
purposes are also no longer clear.

### **You're Not Alone in the Wilderness**

In Star Mountain, by the woods, the wizard will stop me  
by a passage for boats with black masts  
where the dead sit before dawn in black garments and straw  
masks  
a passage for the birds  
where white fog swims and gates open in the brush  
and someone talking down the slope  
and bells are heard and the rustles of flapping wings

resembling the forest passing over the mountain and nicking  
the night!

...and peasants, fishermen and hunters, and awestruck  
soldiers, Moabite,  
Assyrian, Kurd, Mamluk, Hebraic with claims  
from Egypt, Egyptians on golden chariots, nations  
from white islands, Persians with black turbans,  
and idolater-philosophers bending the reeds  
and Sufis seeking the root of ailment...

the flapping of wings drags the forest towards the edges of  
darkness!

In Star Mountain, by the woods  
where the absentee's prayer spreads piety's rugs  
and the canyon is seen through to its limits  
and the furrowed sea scent cautiously passes by  
the cracks like the jinn's harvest  
and the monks' pleas glisten  
as I glimpse the ghosts of lepers sleeping on decrepit cypress

In Star Mountain, by the woods,  
I will hear a familiar old voice  
my father's voice throwing dice towards me

or Malek's  
as he tows a blond horse behind him in his elegy

or the voice of Hussein Barghouthi  
laid to rest beneath almond trees  
as he instructed in the text

And my voice:  
You're not alone in the wilderness!

### **He Thought Long of Going Back There**

He thought of going back there  
where he had left her listening  
in a blue shirt and short sleeves

There was a man crossing the street without looking  
whereas his infidelities were behind him stumbling like a heap  
of obese women, whereas he was going down the three steps  
careful not to bump into the pampered flower pot

He thought long of going back  
where he had left her listening  
with honey eyes and a cloven heart

A few boys were swinging intensely  
from the peach tree he has no memory of  
while he was trying, in vain, to discern the steps  
and move the bougainvillea pot out of the way

When, suddenly, the bell rang  
the ancient bell on the hill  
the hill which, since that night, the bougainvillea has covered,  
that night when the eleven brothers killed  
their only sister.

### **The Orchard of Roman Women**

Behind the fence  
and the junkyards  
by the end of the crossroads  
there were thirty Roman women waiting  
like an army of sibling nuns climbing  
up to the convent  
where the dirt paths  
had been leveled by hardship  
narrow paths  
like a woolen rope  
while the convent  
at the end of the mountain  
was a kite.

All poems are from the collection *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*.

Translations from Arabic by Fady Joudah.

*Artwork by Taisir Barakat, courtesy of Bank of Palestine.*