

# Ibtisam Barakat

Ibtisam Barakat is an author and poet who has written books in both English and Arabic. She is also a translator, public speaker, artist, educator, and social justice advocate who focuses especially on empowering children and teens. Ibtisam's first memoir in English, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: hardcover, 2007; paperback, 2016), tells her family's story during and following the Six-Day War. Having won more than 20 awards and honors, it is now available in several languages and taught in many schools and universities around the world. *Al Ta' Al Marbouta Tateer – The Letter Ta' Escapes* – (Tamer Institute, Ramallah, 2011) won the Anna Lindh Prize for Best Children's Book in Arabic. Her most recent work is the memoir *Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Macmillan, 2016), in which she writes about her teenage years in the 1970s and early 1980s in Ramallah. *Balcony on the Moon* has received a number of top-book ratings. Ibtisam Barakat is the founder of Write Your Life seminars. For more information, please visit the author's page: [www.ibtisambarakat.com](http://www.ibtisambarakat.com).

"My writing is a clear and spacious window," Barakat states in a feature on the Institute for Middle East Understanding's website. "I know whether it's morning or night, whether it's a rainy day or a summer day, and whether it's a season of freedom outside and inside or a season of fear, all through what I see reflected in my writing." Barakat's free-verse, short-lined poems often use metaphor as a point of entrance in their explorations of themes such as healing, peacemaking, and children's experiences of war.\*



## A Poem Made of Water

The biology teacher said that people,  
all people,  
are made mostly of water.  
And I understood that all of us,  
like water,  
have been through so much:  
Fell from the sky,  
spent nights in the middle  
of a dark ocean,  
cleaned dirt out of clothes,  
and dishes of all kinds.  
Like water,  
had to freeze in winters  
and simmer under covers  
and be put in cubes that are  
hit countless times  
on kitchen counters.  
And I understood why  
when someone's tears fall  
I feel.

From the ongoing *Poetry Diary of a Palestinian Woman*.

of a key  
to the postal box  
of memory.

Alef the letter  
sits in the front  
of the bus  
of alphabets  
to see.

He sees war,  
he looks above it.  
He sees war,  
he looks below it,  
and beyond it  
to see peace.

Alef knows  
that a thread  
of a story  
stitches together  
a wound.

Alef the letter  
he is the shape of hope.



Artwork by Khaled Hourani.

## A Song for Alef

Alef the letter  
is a refugee.  
From paper  
to paper  
he knows  
no home.

Alef the letter  
he is the shape

Like me,  
a refugee.

For me,  
my refuge.

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Artwork by Rania Akel, courtesy of Filistin Ashabab.

### Singing in Key

I sing in the key of  
our house that I miss.  
When I sing in that key  
I return, and see it again.

I sing in the key of sol,  
my soul and yours.

In the key of la,  
*la* meaning no in Arabic.

"You do not know me.  
You do not yes me either."  
So, I sing.

"You cannot have my home  
without becoming me."  
Mi, fa, sol, la, ti.

Tea in the garden  
when the guards are gone  
and I run across memories  
to smell a flower that  
blooms inside a story  
my grandmother  
once gave to me.

I sit with the story  
quiet like a stone.  
Stones are the keepers  
of history until my people's  
hardship reaches a  
safer shore and they all  
come home singing in  
the key of a new history.

From the ongoing *Poetry Diary of a  
Palestinian Woman*.

### Curfew

Our city is a cell.  
Children's faces  
are replacing  
flower pots on  
window sills.  
And we are waiting.

From our window bars  
of boredom  
we enter a spit race:  
The one whose spit  
reaches farther  
is freer.

We look to the sky and  
squint our questions.

We turn the sun  
into a kite,  
and hold it  
with a ray of light  
till it is torn up  
inside the horizon,

and the day reaches its end  
like a story that we live  
but we do not understand.

Our questions remain  
a yeast  
inside our chests,  
rising.

From the ongoing *Poetry Diary of a  
Palestinian Woman*.

### My People's Story

We once lived rooted  
Like the ancient olive trees.  
Now we're birds  
Nesting on songs  
About homes we miss.  
Storms and distances  
Decide our address.

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of Age in Palestine* © 2016 by Ibtisam  
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### Palestine

At the checkout register,  
at an office-supplies store,  
I am getting ready to buy

the globe.

Fifty dollars the man says,  
one hundred and ninety-five countries,  
all for fifty dollars!

I am thinking:  
That means twenty-five cents a country!

Can I give you all the money I have,  
and you throw in Palestine?

Where do you want it?  
he asks.

Wherever there are  
Palestinians.

From the ongoing *Poetry Diary of a  
Palestinian Woman*.

### Stirrings

I thank the women  
who came before me,  
who, as they stirred

sugar into tea,  
and lemon into

lentil soup,  
had stirrings of freedom  
in their chests.  
Some spoke of that,  
and some served the food

silently.  
But all the longing

conquered the long road  
fed the ground,  
until it grew strong  
for me now to

stand on it.  
Stand my ground,  
walk, and run

my ground

as the master

of my spirit.

From the ongoing *Poetry Diary of a  
Palestinian Woman*.

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Barakat.

\* Ibtisam Barakat, *Poetryfoundation*, available at  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/ibtisam-barakat>.

