

ART OF POETRY AND “SONGS OF EXILE”:

AN INTERVIEW WITH BÄNOO ZAN

By Hanieh Khosroshahi

“Poetry is a way to hold on to what I never had: a sense of perfect belonging, a full union with my loved ones.” – Zan

Bänoo Zan, poet, curator, editor, translator and teacher left her native Iran and immigrated to Canada in 2010. She has been writing poetry since the age of 10, and her poems have appeared in both national and international publications. After initially struggling to adjust to her new life in Toronto, Zan began to make her mark on the city’s poetry scene. She founded Shab-e-She’r (Poetry Night) in 2012, which brings artists together in what is now known as the most diverse poetry reading and open mic series in Toronto. Most recently, Zan’s second poetry collection, *Letters to My Father*, which was written after the death of her father in 2012, was launched by Piquant Press in Toronto.

Songs of Exile” is Zan’s first English-language poetry collection. Published by Guernica Editions in 2016, it not only deals with exile - geographically, politically, and metaphorically, but also notions of identity and belonging.

In this interview, I ask Zan about how poetry, as an art and craft, enables her to share her experiences and anxieties. We discuss memory, immigration, and reconciliation. Although our exchange deals specifically with her recent body of work, it transcends beyond that, touching on the complex journey that has led to it.

INTERVIEWER

How do you describe your poetic style? How does it enable you to communicate or convey your poetic voice and message? How would you describe your poetic voice? Your message?

ZAN

Frankly, this is not a question I should be answering. It is the job of literary critics and historians to figure me out. I have taught literary theory and criticism and applied it to the work of poets and writers in my classes. As a poet, however, I am not going to teach my own work. As a poet, I have the right to remain a poet. Don't ask me to tell you what my poetry should be telling you. Ask my poetry what it is about.

In the words of Rumi, "My secret is not far from my melody."

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that your poems deal a lot with the concept of identity, its plurality, its abstractness, and its complexity. In many cases, you express identity through experience, and "The Journey" is a perfect example of this: Not all trips/are destinations/I wish/I never had to wish/for what/I let go. How do you define identity, and how do your experiences influence your poetry?

ZAN

Identity has recently been a dividing line: a line that separates you from everyone unlike you. What is worse is that everyone proves to be unlike you –anyone who has darker or lighter skin; who is not from your country; who is or loves a different gender; anyone who dares to be stronger than you; anyone who exercises their right of critiquing you and their and your community. This has gone to such a ridiculous extreme that you see members of Toronto's and Canada's literary community accusing one another of the most horrendous crimes, forgetting the real enemy: the division, the separation, the enmity, the intolerance, the short-sightedness and the hatred.

To me, identity is what connects me with everyone else. We are identically human. All of us! Regardless!

On another level, though, you are what you go through. What you go through is oftentimes not the physical documentable experiences. Poetry is a camera that captures the incapturable. The expression is better captured through fiction. The emotion comes out more pure in poetry.

It is not the experience that makes a poet out of you: it is you who make a poet out of you. You don't need to go through any extraordinary experience to be a good poet. You need to be a good poet to transform experience into extraordinary poetry. If you are a good poet, anything that happens or refuses to happen helps you as poet: exile, separation, loss, friendship, love, happiness, growth, fulfillment and frustration. These are what everyone experiences, but not everyone becomes a poet.

Many people have gone through what I have gone through. None of them have turned out to be the poet I am, except me.

INTERVIEWER

As an immigrant, your relationship with Iran is highlighted and emphasized in your work. It's a loving, muse-like, and nostalgic expression of your homeland: What is passed/is not gone/lost forever. Can you explain the role of memory in your work?

ZAN

I have always loved Iran, but as you may have noticed, I am also one of its greatest critics. Poetry or art does not let us get away with either/or simplifications and generalizations. Poetry reveals the complexity of life and the difficulty of classification. This is my approach to subjects of my poetry. If you are looking for easy formulae, I hope my writing frustrates you.

My poetry may strike you as nostalgic for my homeland, but this is just a trope. My real nostalgia is for humanity, kindness and understanding. Maybe the nostalgia has come to the forefront after my immigration, as I miss human and humane connections.

In the words of Rumi,

Last night the Sheikh was wandering around the town with a lantern

saying, "I'm sick of demons and beasts, and wish for the human"

They said, "It's not to be found, we have searched"

He said, "I wish for the one that cannot be found."

INTERVIEWER

I find your relationship to your current environment equally interesting, especially in poems like "Toronto 2012" and "Assimilation". As an Iranian, Muslim, Female in Canada, how have your struggles of re-settling changed your work? Has there been a transition in your poetry in comparison to older work when you were back home?

ZAN

I do not let my wounds blind me to the humanity of each individual I meet. I have been subjected to racist, sexist, Islamophobic, and homophobic attitudes, but I do not let these "memories" bias me against all members of the community that my opponent comes from. I do not play the role of victim and do not expect privilege based on weakness. In

my poetry, I speak as a human to other humans. I voice my anger, disappointment and frustration, and target the system, not the individuals within it.

When I first arrived and started to explore the Toronto poetry communities, I thought I was the subject of racism, sexism, Islamophobia, and homophobia. But now I know better. I am treated with suspicion and aloofness not only by some members of the white mainstream, but also by some people of colour and other marginalized groups; hence, I have come to call it xenophobia.

I am a visionary, ahead of my times and surroundings by at least a century. I know what it means not to be understood. Here in Canada, because of the history of racial, religious, and other divisions, some members of each community fiercely support other group members, and have no qualms about sacrificing justice, humanity and decency. I have also witnessed attacks against group members and insiders who dare question militant exclusivist group loyalty and advocate adventurousness and open-mindedness in encounters with outsiders.

Here both marginalized and mainstream communities want to promote themselves. Self-promotion and group mentality is so strong that it blinds some to the values of inclusion and peace across the imaginary borders of identity.

Even some artists who are “supposed to” be better than “others,” miserably fail in this. They betray xenophobic attitudes and an embarrassing lack of imagination when it comes to finding alternative solutions for the country divided against itself: Canada. Even the poets sometimes let their so-called progressive rhetoric blind them to the humanity of the other.

As a poet, I know poets are best in their poetry, but sometimes the degree of viciousness, narcissism and opportunism is nauseating.

The truth is that I can't accuse the mainstream of all crimes, and absolve the minorities of all atrocities. I have met beautiful open-minded people in all camps who are tirelessly working for peace and reconciliation and I have met intolerant people in all. Truth is nuanced. It is not black and white. It is not of any colour, in fact. It transcends exclusive identity. The good news, however, is that many people I am in touch with are truth seekers.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems deal with many paradoxes. These binaries and contrasts are seen through your use of language, imagery, as well as themes and concepts, such as East vs. West, Heaven vs. Earth, Hope vs. Despair, Self vs. Other. For example, in Phoenix IV, you say: Death/put life/in my hands. Where does reconciliation fit in your work? Would you describe achieving oneness as a goal?

ZAN

Iran has a strong Sufi tradition of poetry in which oneness with the Beloved is the ultimate goal. Our greatest poets such as Hafez, Rumi, Attar, and countless others took poetry to unforeseen heights by celebrating this ancient human need. This unity is a metaphor for oneness with the other, anything or anyone outside you.

In the words of Hafez, "If you meet the soul in the body, engage with it/ Any Ka'ba you see is better than self-worship."

Reconciliation comes from acknowledging the dichotomy. You cannot be reconciled with the other if you do not recognize its right to exist. If all you are doing is to reduce the other to yourself, you are not engaging in a dialogue; you are involved in a war. Reconciliation happens when each side, through acts of empathy and imagination,

engages the other in an equal dialogue—not in the hope of converting it to its side, but in the hope of expanding its own worldview.

INTERVIEWER

There's a sense of guilt and hostility apparent in poems like "Immigrant", where the opening lines begin with: "Coward!/You should have stayed/and fought!" and end with "You should have stayed/and died!". Do you associate with that guilt and anxiety? If there were a fight, how would you describe it? And most importantly, why do you fight?

ZAN

The first two lines are literally what I said to myself, when the plane that was to bring me to Canada took off. I left as I was brought to a point that I thought I wasn't making a difference. Still, leaving the country you love feels like betrayal. Because you know it needs you. Because you know no one can help it better than you can. Because you are being a coward by leaving it to the dogs. And someone said, "Why don't you go back, if you miss Iran so much?" The last two lines are my interpretation of her words.

The risks are real in a country such as Iran. You can lose your livelihood as well as your life. You know you have no choice, as they block your every move. But in retrospect, you realize that you face challenges everywhere if you continue to be a critic and a leader, if you refuse to obey or remain silent, if you are an independent thinker, if you take it upon yourself to change your own fate and that of others, if you are making a difference—especially if you are a woman. They hate you because how dare you live a full life. They hate you because they are jealous of your power and influence. And they hate you when they see they can't stop you.

In Iran, during peaceful periods of my life when things were going smoothly, I would sometimes wonder what is wrong with me that no one objects to me or tries to stop me. I

would wonder if I am conforming too much. I had this worry here in Canada for a long time. Fortunately, things are changing! This is proof that I *am* making a difference.

Why do I fight? Without going into details I would like to name my first significant opponent: my dear mother –whom I love to death, whom I oppose more than anyone else, who chose to play the role of the victim all her life despite the choices she had, who is a control freak, who tried to infuse her children with guilt as if she was the only mother in the world who took care of her kids, who I did not let ruin my life or fool me, and who respects and loves me more than she does her other children for this very reason! You see, if a woman is brave enough to stand up to her mother, no one can stop her!

INTERVIEWER

The poem “In the Poet’s Harem” ends with: And that is what/poetry is:/a failure. Can you describe your poetic process? Is there a dissatisfaction attached to it? Why is poetry a failure?

ZAN

Poetry has failed to improve the poets and the world. Despite excellent poems encouraging people to be kinder to themselves and others, the world is still as cruel as ever. What is worse, the poets are not better than others, outside their own poetry. Some poets act as if they have not read their own poems, and are intolerant and dismissive of the complexities of life. Their linguistic and poetic skills have not saved them from themselves.

Politically correct discourse changes over time, but poetry doesn’t. The challenge is how to write excellent politically progressive poetry; how to include content that will stand the test of the time and ring true for generations to come; how not to betray your principles, and how not to betray poetry; how to write like Hafez who is a true wordsmith with pertinent erotic, spiritual and political layers running parallel to one another in his work

six centuries after he wrote. Poets are leaders and visionaries, but not when all they write about is how much they enjoy having sex or wine. When Khayyam writes about these, however, figures of speech and thought address the politics of love and drinking.

In short, the challenge is how to write as a poet and how to write as a person; how to reconcile the person with the poet in your writing; how not to put people to sleep and how not to wake them up from this dream of life; how to bring people back to life through your art.

INTERVIEWER

Two important themes in your work are separation and belonging, both in regards to place, as well as more metaphorically, seen through your language and references. Somewhere between those two worlds exists longing - the need to not lose touch. This is apparent in your dedications: for your sister, for your father, etc. Is poetry a way for you to hold on? Is it a way to give back? How?

ZAN

If there is no attachment, separation makes no sense. But it's the one to whom/which we belong that can grant us the sense of belonging. Hence, the powerlessness. Maybe my obsession with separation and belonging comes from realizing that I cannot make anyone or anything reciprocate the sense of belonging. If the other does not embrace me, separation won't end. Separation as in immigration is not totally voluntary. In most cases, you are brought to a point that you think your own homeland refuses to belong to you. If this is how your homeland treats you, what can you expect from your new land?

On the other hand, not belonging is not an option, either. You can't undo your ties, and recreate yourself in the image of the new land, no matter how well you know the language and/or culture. To some people, belonging to a land or a set of values means not belonging to the binary opposite, other lands or other values. To others, there is no binary

opposition. And the quest moves inwards: Could I ever belong to myself? Could I unite all my selves, reflected in all other selves? Could I experience the spiritual ecstasy of the union of the divine with the human?

Poetry is a way to hold on to what I never had: a sense of perfect belonging, a full union with my loved ones. I have always been different from them in significant ways, but have always believed that we could unite regardless of differences. I want to give back to them what is rightfully theirs: my life, ideas, words and wounds. But I cannot.

After I immigrated, I started job searching. It took so long that I ran out of my life savings, and my sister Zahra sent me money. Even now that I have a contract job, I haven't been able to pay her back. Not that she wants the money back, but I want to be in a position to give back. What I did was to dedicate my book of poetry, *Songs of Exile*, to her.

The way I have tried to pay back is through being myself, fully and authentically. I think if anyone is helping "me," they want to help me remain who I am or develop into "me." I do my best to reward them by not betraying "me."

Bio

Hanieh Khosroshahi is a designer, writer and photographer based in Toronto. She completed her Bachelor's at the University of Toronto, studying literature and visual arts, and then attended Sheridan College to study journalism and new media. She completed her Masters at the University of York in Britain, studying sociology and computer science. She is interested in politics and international affairs, human rights issues and activism and technology.