

The poetry of Mahmoud Darwish

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Mahmoud Darwish (15 March 1941-9 August 2008) was born in al-Birwa, Acre, in what is now Western Galilee. The second child of Salim and Houreyyah Darwish, he was taught to read by his grandfather. Darwish published his first book of poetry, *Asafir bila ajniha*, at the age of 19. He subsequently published over 30 volumes of poetry and eight books of prose. He was editor of *Al-Jadid*, *Al-Fajr*, *Shu'un Filistiniyya* and *Al-Karmel* (1981). His first poetry collection to be published, *Leaves of Olives* included the poem 'Identity Card'. He has received numerous awards, and his work has been translated and published in 20 languages.

Darwish left Israel in the early 1970s to study in the USSR and was stripped of Israeli citizenship. He attended the University of Moscow for one year, before moving to Egypt and Lebanon. When he joined the PLO in 1973, he was banned from reentering Israel. In 1995, he returned to attend the funeral of his colleague, Emile Habibi. During the visit, he received a permit from the Israeli authorities to remain in Israel for four days. Darwish was finally allowed to return to live in the West Bank city of Ramallah in 1995. Darwish had a history of heart problems and underwent surgery after a heart attack in 1984. He underwent further surgery in 1998. His last visit to Israel was on 15 July 2007 in order to attend a poetry recital at Mt. Carmel Auditorium. During the meeting he criticized the factional violence between Fatah and Hamas as a "suicide attempt in the streets".

Upon hearing of Darwish's death a friend wrote, "Yes, it was painfully revealing (again) to see the global mainstream media ignore or marginalize the news of the passing away of Mahmoud Darwish, the quintessential poet of anomie and loss, and of the Palestinian cause."

I come from there

I come from there and I have memories
Born as mortals are, I have a mother
And a house with many windows,
I have brothers, friends,
And a prison cell with a cold window.
Mine is the wave, snatched by sea-gulls,
I have my own view,
And an extra blade of grass.
Mine is the moon at the far edge of the words,
And the bounty of birds,
And the immortal olive tree.
I walked this land before the swords
Turned its living body into a laden table.

I come from there. I render the sky unto her mother
When the sky weeps for her mother.
And I weep to make myself known
To a returning cloud.
I learnt all the words worthy of the court of blood
So that I could break the rule.
I learnt all the words and broke them up
To make a single word: Homeland...

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Under siege

Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time
Close to the gardens of broken shadows,
We do what prisoners do,
And what the jobless do:
We cultivate hope.

A country preparing for dawn. We grow less intelligent
For we closely watch the hour of victory:
No night in our night lit up by the shelling
Our enemies are watchful and light the light for us
In the darkness of cellars.

Here there is no 'I'.
Here Adam remembers the dust of his clay.

On the verge of death, he says:
I have no trace left to lose:
Free I am so close to my liberty. My future lies in my own hand.
Soon I shall penetrate my life,
I shall be born free and parentless,
And as my name I shall choose azure letters...

You who stand in the doorway, come in,
Drink Arabic coffee with us
And you will sense that you are men like us
You who stand in the doorways of houses
Come out of our morningtimes,
We shall feel reassured to be
Men like you!

When the planes disappear, the white, white doves
Fly off and wash the cheeks of heaven
With unbound wings taking radiance back again, taking possession
Of the ether and of play. Higher, higher still, the white, white doves
Fly off. Ah, if only the sky
Were real [a man passing between two bombs said to me].

Cypresses behind the soldiers, minarets protecting
The sky from collapse. Behind the hedge of steel
Soldiers piss—under the watchful eye of a tank—
And the autumnal day ends its golden wandering in
A street as wide as a church after Sunday mass...

[To a killer] If you had contemplated the victim's face
And thought it through, you would have remembered your mother in the
Gas chamber, you would have been freed from the reason for the rifle
And you would have changed your mind: this is not the way

to find one's identity again.

The siege is a waiting period
Waiting on the tilted ladder in the middle of the storm.

Alone, we are alone as far down as the sediment
Were it not for the visits of the rainbows.

We have brothers behind this expanse.
Excellent brothers. They love us. They watch us and weep.
Then, in secret, they tell each other:
"Ah! If this siege had been declared..." They do not finish their sentence:
"Don't abandon us, don't leave us."

Our losses: between two and eight martyrs each day.
And ten wounded.
And twenty homes.
And fifty olive trees...
Added to this the structural flaw that
Will arrive at the poem, the play, and the unfinished canvas.

A woman told the cloud: cover my beloved
For my clothing is drenched with his blood.

If you are not rain, my love
Be tree
Sated with fertility, be tree
If you are not tree, my love
Be stone
Saturated with humidity, be stone
If you are not stone, my love
Be moon
In the dream of the beloved woman, be moon
[So spoke a woman
to her son at his funeral]

Oh watchmen! Are you not weary
Of lying in wait for the light in our salt
And of the incandescence of the rose in our wound
Are you not weary, oh watchmen?

A little of this absolute and blue infinity
Would be enough
To lighten the burden of these times
And to cleanse the mire of this place.

It is up to the soul to come down from its mount
And on its silken feet walk
By my side, hand in hand, like two longtime
Friends who share the ancient bread
And the antique glass of wine

May we walk this road together
And then our days will take different directions:
I, beyond nature, which in turn
Will choose to squat on a high-up rock.

On my rubble the shadow grows green,
And the wolf is dozing on the skin of my goat
He dreams as I do, as the angel does
That life is here... not over there.

In the state of siege, time becomes space
Transfixed in its eternity
In the state of siege, space becomes time
That has missed its yesterday and its tomorrow.

The martyr encircles me every time I live a new day
And questions me: Where were you? Take every word
You have given me back to the dictionaries
And relieve the sleepers from the echo's buzz.

The martyr enlightens me: beyond the expanse
I did not look
For the virgins of immortality for I love life
On earth, amid fig trees and pines,
But I cannot reach it, and then, too, I took aim at it
With my last possession: the blood in the body of azure.

The martyr warned me: Do not believe their ululations
Believe my father when, weeping, he looks at my photograph
How did we trade roles, my son, how did you precede me.
I first, I the first one!

The martyr encircles me: my place and my crude furniture are all that I have changed.
I put a gazelle on my bed,
And a crescent of moon on my finger
To appease my sorrow.

The siege will last in order to convince us we must choose an enslavement that does no harm, in fullest
liberty!

Resisting means assuring oneself of the heart's health,
The health of the testicles and of your tenacious disease:
The disease of hope.

And in what remains of the dawn, I walk toward my exterior
And in what remains of the night, I hear the sound of footsteps inside me.

Greetings to the one who shares with me an attention to
The drunkenness of light, the light of the butterfly, in the
Blackness of this tunnel!

Greetings to the one who shares my glass with me
In the denseness of a night outflanking the two spaces:
Greetings to my apparition.

My friends are always preparing a farewell feast for me,
A soothing grave in the shade of oak trees
A marble epitaph of time
And always I anticipate them at the funeral:
Who then has died... who?

Writing is a puppy biting nothingness
Writing wounds without a trace of blood.

Our cups of coffee. Birds green trees
In the blue shade, the sun gambols from one wall
To another like a gazelle
The water in the clouds has the unlimited shape of what is left to us
Of the sky. And other things of suspended memories
Reveal that this morning is powerful and splendid,
And that we are the guests of eternity.

(Translated by Marjolijn De Jager)

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Darwish was devastating as much in his irony:

My country is the joy of being in chains
A kiss sent in the post.
All I want
From the country which slaughtered me
Is my mother's handkerchief
And reasons for a new death.

As in his despair and weariness:

Ours is a country of words. Talk, Talk.
Let me rest my road against a stone.

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Identity Card

Record!
I am an Arab
And my identity card is number fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth is coming after a summer
Will you be angry?

Record!
I am an Arab
Employed with fellow workers at a quarry
I have eight children
I get them bread
Garments and books
from the rocks...
I do not supplicate charity at your doors
Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber
So will you be angry?

Record!
I am an Arab
I have a name without a title
Patient in a country
Where people are enraged
My roots
Were entrenched before the birth of time
And before the opening of the eras
Before the pines, and the olive trees
And before the grass grew

My father descends from the family of the plow
Not from a privileged class
And my grandfather was a farmer
Neither well-bred, nor well-born!
Teaches me the pride of the sun
Before teaching me how to read
And my house is like a watchman's hut
Made of branches and cane
Are you satisfied with my status?
I have a name without a title!

Record!
I am an Arab
You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors
And the land which I cultivated
Along with my children
And you left nothing for us
Except for these rocks...
So will the State take them
As it has been said?!

Therefore!
Record on the top of the first page:
I do not hate people
Nor do I encroach
But if I become hungry
The usurper's flesh will be my food
Beware...
Beware...

Of my hunger
And my anger!

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