



almond blossoms  
and beyond

mahmoud darwish

*translated by Mohammad Shaheen*

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## Introduction

*Mahmoud Darwish*

*13 March 1941–9 August 2008*

**M**ahmoud Salem Darwish was born in al-Birwah, a village in the city district of Western Galilee, in Palestine, to a farming family. His father was a moderately well-off farmer; his mother, who could neither read nor write, was the daughter of the headman of the village of al-Damun. Mahmoud was the second of eight children, five sons, and three daughters. After the Zionists occupied, demolished, and drove away the inhabitants of al-Birwah in 1948, the family fled to Lebanon.

One summer night, I was suddenly woken from sleep by my mother; I found myself with hundreds of other villagers running into the woods. Machine-gun rounds were streaming over our heads. I could not understand what was going on. After a night of aimless running with one of my relatives... I came to a strange village where there were other children. In my innocence I asked, "Where am I?" and heard for the first time the word "Lebanon." After living the life of a refugee for more than a year, I was told one night that I would be returning home next day. We set out on the return journey. There were three of us: myself, my uncle, and the guide. After an exhausting journey I found myself in a village, but to my great disappointment, we had come to the village of Dair al-Asad, not to my village.

When I came back from Lebanon, I was in the second class. The headmaster was an excellent man. When an Education Inspector visited the school, the headmaster would call me to his office and hide me in a narrow room, for the authorities would regard me as an interloper.

Whenever the police came to the village, I would be hidden in a cupboard or in some corner or another because I was forbidden to live there, in my homeland. They protected me from informers by saying that I was in Lebanon. They taught me to say that I lived with one of the Bedouin tribes in the North. That is what I did to obtain the Israeli identity card.

Mahmoud Darwish completed his education in difficult circumstances, obtaining a General Secondary Certificate. He lived in the village of al-Djaydeh to which his family had moved, settling there in 1960. Mahmoud moved to Haifa where he began a new stage in his life. Faced with racialism and arrogance, and flagrant infringement of basic human rights, he became politically active, joining the Israeli Communist party. He made a living by writing for the Arabic newspaper published there, and subsequently worked on the newspaper *Al-Itihad* and the magazine *Al-Jadid* (both organs of the Israeli Communist Party).

He frequently suffered arrest and imprisonment, first in 1961, in Haifa, and then in 1965, when he was imprisoned in a jail in Ramla, because he has traveled from Haifa to Jerusalem (to take part in an evening of poetry, organized by Arab students of Hebrew University in Jerusalem) without a permit from the Israeli authorities. He was jailed a third time in 1967, charged with engaging in "activities hostile to Israel." On the night of the Israeli aggression against neighboring Arab countries in June 1967, he was imprisoned in al-Damun jail. The fifth occasion was in 1969 when he was detained once again in Ramla.

At the beginning of 1970, he went to Moscow to study, thanks to the Israeli Communist Party. He stayed for over a year, and then went to Cairo in February 1971 having decided not to go back to Israel. In a public statement, he said, "The important step that I have taken stems from considerations of service to the cause: there are places where, it seems to me, there is more freedom and more liberty and which may allow me greater scope to express myself and to work than I could find in my own country. I am advancing from a place of restriction and imprisonment to a place of work. 'The hair of Mu'awiyah' connecting me to Israeli law has been broken; my ability to tolerate, to be patient, is now exhausted, especially since I no longer belong to a people that asks for mercy, that begs for alms, but to a people that fights."

In exile, he became editor-in-chief of the magazine *Shu'un Filastiniyyah* (Palestinian Affairs), published by the Center for Palestinian Research and Studies based in Beirut. After a while he left the magazine, and in 1987 he was elected to be a member of the executive committee of the PLO, and was made chairman of the Supreme Council for Culture, Education and Heritage. He resigned on

April 21, 1993, following the signing of the Oslo Accord between the PLO and Israel, and moved between a number of Arab and non-Arab capitals, finally settling in Beirut, which he left only after the Israeli military incursion in 1992. Subsequently, he lived in Tunis and Cyprus. He took the post of editor-in-chief of the magazine *Al-Karmel* and was long resident in Paris, which gave him the opportunity to explore the various cultures from around the world that co-exist there. In 1984, he was elected president of the Union of the Palestinian writers and journalists, and re-elected in 1987. He lived afterward partly in the Jordanian capital, Amman, and partly in Ramallah, in the West Bank.

Darwish's poetry has been translated into English, French, Russian, Swedish, German, Spanish, Dutch, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Polish, Italian, Persian, and Hebrew. He has been honored with the Lotus Prize by the Union of Afro-Asian Writers, the Ibn Sina Prize, the Lenin Peace Prize, the Mediterranean, the Shield of the Palestinian Revolution, the Spanish Library, France's Knight of Arts and Belles Lettres medal, the Officer Medal, a special prize from the International Cavafy Committee, the Lannan Prize for Cultural Freedom, the Dutch Prince Klaus, the Sultan Bin Ali Al 'Uwais Cultural Foundation prize, and the Arab Poetry Prize of the Supreme Council of Culture (Cairo) established by Naguib Mahfouz.

Mahmoud Darwish represents a unique poetic case in the field of Arabic poetry, beginning with the rise of modernism in the second half of the last century, up to the present day. Through his abundant creativity, he has been able to realize two things: he wrote genuinely popular poetry, at a time when Arabic poetry and its readership were both in decline; he preserved the spirit and values of poetry, while renewing and refining them, as no other writer was able to do. It has, perhaps, been his controversial popularization and originality that have made him "the Poet," one not to be confused with any other.

At the very beginning of his poetic career, Darwish was torn between two distinct phenomena: Palestinian resistance verse in opposition to the Israeli occupation and Arabic modernist verse, which was still exploring change and development in its full range. While Darwish and his poets were in quest for modernity in Arabic poetry,

he quickly became, by the mid-1960s, the Palestinian Resistance Poet par excellence, striving to create a “national poem,” while at the same time preserving the deep, human essence of poetry, which transcends context and is in tune with, as Wordsworth called it, “the still, sad music of humanity.” It was possibly this striving, which gave his poetry a special dynamic, that led him to experiment with a new type of love poem that goes beyond both the sort of love poem that Nizar Qabbani made popular and the old Arabic love poem. By identifying the lost land of Palestine with his beloved, Darwish freed the traditional love poem from its narrower associations with lover and beloved, and imbued it with universal human values, deriving from love of the land, the meaning of love as it should be, and from the anguish of exile, human exile in its existential significance. Thus Darwish will oscillate in a poem which at first appears to be merely political agitation, between the national and the human, being aware as he was, from very early on, that the meaning of poetry lies in the contemplation of what is eternal and universal: love, death, and the boundless mystery of existence.

In his first phase, Darwish appears to be a romantic or a visionary poet, one who sees the beginnings and ends of things, combining in himself an assumed human position and one that is full of darkness. Even in this phase, which favored obscurity, he created a romantic style of poetry all his own, one that delights in all things and opens language up to new subjects, rather as if this strange romantic poet was clinging to his higher self and being exalted by it. The tension between the poetry that relates to all existence and the poetry that sees itself as one of its aspects, an astonishing linguistic explosion—this tension is a feature of Darwish’s poetry. All this, in the absence of any claim that poetry is an activity of language and that poetic language breaks through and transcends reality.

If such modernist poets as Qabbani and al-Sayyab draw the inspiration for their poetry from modern subjects, or from language itself, avoiding the everyday and the immediately tangible, Mahmoud Darwish creates his language from a broad contemplation of life, which gives his poetry a spacious vividness, and from a constant dialogue with “the prestigious reader” who has expectations of the poet and whom the poet invites to come with him into the enlightening

of poetry, as it should be. In this way, the reader occupies a place of privilege in the continuation of a poem by Darwish, not in the simple programmatic sense, but in that of the “poetic question” that anticipates an aesthetic answer. The answer lies in linguistic aesthetics that combine surface simplicity and amazing intensity, with the questions of both reader and poet. This produces a multilayered text that belongs at the same time to the reader and to great poetry. Thus, Darwish’s text appears as a fabric made up of metaphor and dynamic symbolism, combined with verse that approximates prose, or prose that approximates verse, not in the technical sense, though, but in the sense of an unconditional search for the meaning and identity of poetry.

Darwish began by writing poems about Palestine, and, after long explorations of obscurity, has arrived at a human poetic enterprise, in which he contemplates the seven ancient *Mu’allaqat*, and writes *al-Jidariya*, looking to the poetic heritage of mankind as a whole. Thus, his collection *Ward Aqal* (Fewer Roses) tended toward “private verse” and this tendency became more pronounced in this collection, *Kaṣāhr al-lawḥ aw ab’ad* (*Almond Blossoms and Beyond*). At the same time, these collections, like the collection *Anthuru ila ma ureed* (“I See What I Want”) are Palestinian poems, which extend into his collection *Halat Hisar* (“A State of Siege”), where the man is visible in the Palestinian, where the Palestinian, as a human subject, shares the experience of love and grief, of future expectations, and of the inevitable fear of the impending moment of annihilation, with the rest of mankind.

Critics describe Darwish as “multifarious,” a poet who is in conversation with both classical and modern Arabic poetry, who has meditated on the subjects of life in many poetic forms, and with great spontaneity. The diversity to be found in his poems is not to be separated from a multicultural poetic enterprise that embraces the Arab, Islamic, European, Jewish, and Greek culture in a fertile multiplicity that expresses love and tolerance, and which reveals in the poem the substance of a man, with all his inherent creative possibility.

—*Mohammad Shaheen*



“Fine speech manifests its image  
in poetics as though it were prose,  
and in prose as though it were poetic.”

—Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi  
*Al-Emta' wal-Mu'anasah*

(Enjoyment and Entertainment)  
“The Twenty-Fifth Night”

. I .

YOU

## *Think of Others*

- As you prepare your breakfast, think of others  
(do not forget the pigeon's food).
- As you wage your wars, think of others  
(do not forget those who seek peace).
- As you pay your water bill, think of others  
(those who are nursed by clouds).
- As you return home, to your home, think of others  
(do not forget the people of the camps).
- As you sleep and count the stars, think of others  
(those who have nowhere to sleep).
- As you express yourself in metaphor, think of others  
(those who have lost the right to speak).
- As you think of others far away, think of yourself  
(say: *If only I were a candle in the dark*).

## *Now, in Exile*

Now, in exile... yes, at home.  
At sixty, in a fleeting life,  
they are lighting candles for you.

So rejoice as calmly as you are able,  
because Death has strayed and missed you  
in the crowds... he put off his visit.

An inquisitive moon on the ruins laughs like a fool  
so do not believe that which comes close to meet you.  
He, in his old job, like the new March,  
returned to the trees names of longing  
and ignored you.

So celebrate with your friends and break the glass.  
At sixty you will find no tomorrow waiting  
to carry on the shoulder of anthem,  
and for him to carry you.

Say to life, as befits a mature poet:  
Move leisurely, as a woman confident in her own charm  
and cunning. For each one some secret call:  
*Come here, how lovely you are!*

Move leisurely, Life, so that I can see you  
with all the loss about me. How much I have forgotten you  
in your crossways, seeking me and you. Whenever  
I grasped one of your secrets, you would sternly say:  
*How ignorant you are!*

Say to those who are distant: You have reduced me.  
I am here to complete you!

## *When You Gaze Long*

When you gaze long at a rose  
that has wounded a wall, you say to yourself:  
*I hope for a cure from the sand.*

Your heart turns green...

When you take a woman to the circus,  
a woman whose day is lovely as an icon...  
and you dismount like a guest to the horse's prance.  
your heart turns red...

When you count the stars, and make a mistake after  
thirteen, and you doze like a child  
in the blue of the night,  
your heart turns white...

When you journey, and do not find the dream  
that walks before you like a shadow,  
your heart turns yellow...

## *If You Walk on a Street*

If you walk on a street that does not lead to an abyss,  
say to the garbage collector, *Thank you!*

If you come back home alive, as rhyme returns,  
unharmd, say to yourself, *Thank you!*

If you have expected something, and your guess has deceived you,  
go tomorrow to see where you were, and say to the butterfly, *Thank you!*

If you have cried out with all your might, and the echo replied,  
*Who is there?* say to identity, *Thank you!*

If you have looked at a rose without it causing you pain,  
and you have rejoiced in it, say to your heart, *Thank you!*

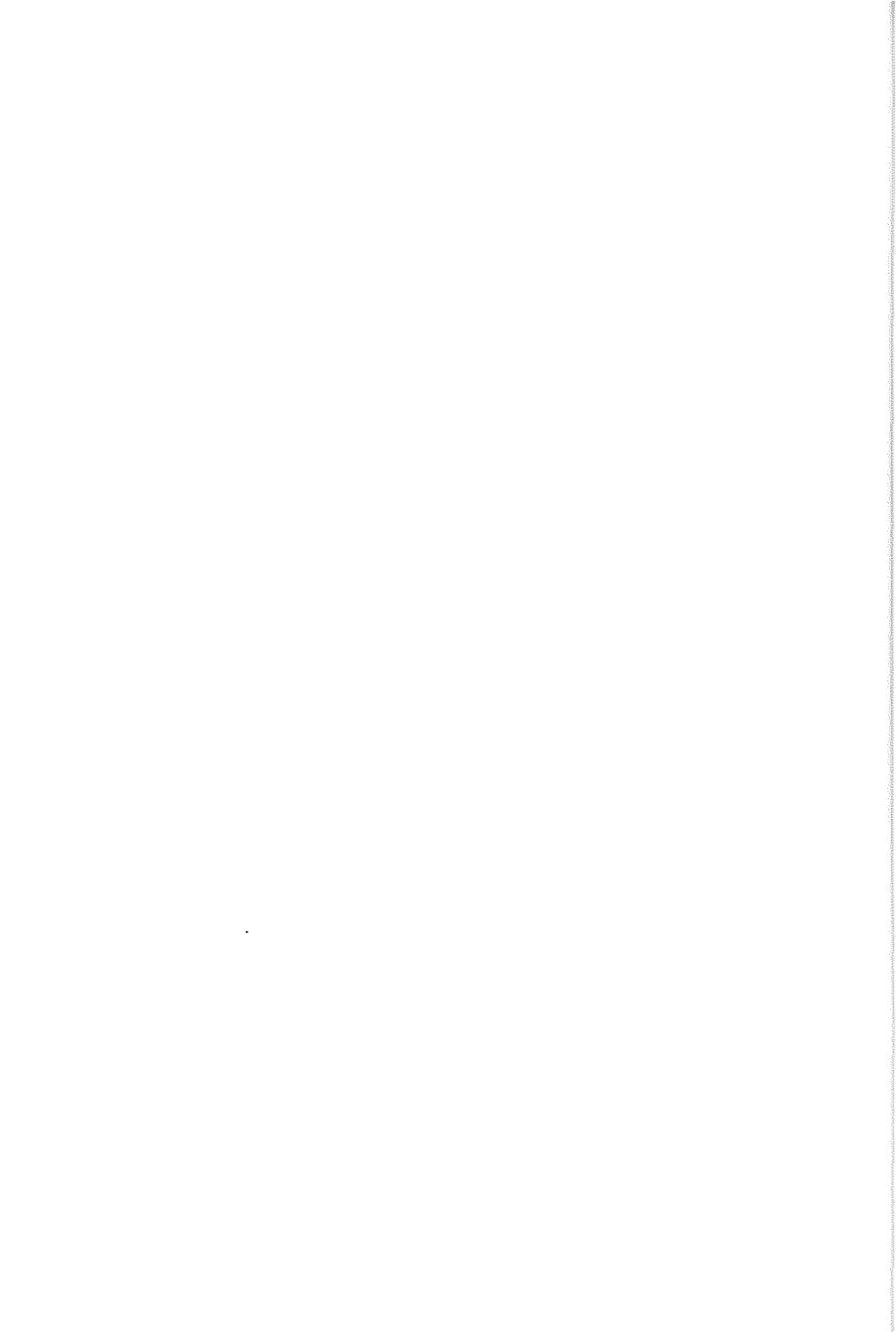
If you wake in the morning and find no one around you  
to rub your eyelids, say to sight, *Thank you!*

If you remember a letter of your name and the name of your country,  
be a good child!

So that the Lord will say to you, *Thank you!*

## *A Café, and You with the Newspaper*

A café, and you with the newspaper, sitting.  
No, you are not alone. Your cup half full,  
and the sun filling the other half...  
Through the window, you see hurrying passersby,  
but you are unseen. (That's one of the  
attributes of invisibility: you see but are not seen.)  
How free you are, forgotten man in the café!  
No one to see how the violin affects you.  
No one to stare at your presence or your absence,  
or to gaze into your fog if you look  
at a girl and are broken before her.  
How free you are, minding your business  
in this crowd, with none to watch or read you!  
Do what you will with yourself.  
Take off your shirt or your shoes.  
If you want, you are forgotten and free in your imagination.  
There is no pressing work for your name or your face here.  
You are as you are—no friend, no enemy here to study your memoirs.  
Seek forgiveness for the one who left you in this café  
because you did not notice her new hairstyle,  
and the butterflies dancing on her temples.  
Seek forgiveness for the man who sought  
to murder you one day, for no reason,  
or because you did not die the day  
you bumped into a star and wrote  
those early songs with its ink.  
A café, and you with the newspaper, sitting  
in the corner, forgotten. No one to insult  
your peaceful state of mind and no one to think of murdering you.  
How forgotten you are,  
how free in your imagination!



. II .

HE