

From Now On You Are You

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# MAHMOUD DARWISH

## two poems

*Translated by Fady Joudah*

### From Now On You Are You

Mount Carmel sits as a master in his place, looking down at the sea.  
And the sea sighs, wave by wave, like a woman washing her aloof lover's feet.

As if I had not strayed too far. As if I have returned from a short visit  
to bid a friend farewell and found myself sitting here waiting for me  
on a stone bench under an apple tree.

Whatever was an exile apologizes, on my behalf, to what was never an exile.

Now, right now, backstage, a woman in her thirties goes into labor, gives birth to me  
in front of the stage decorators and photographers.

A lot of water flowed into the rivers and wadis. A lot of vegetation grew on the walls.  
But forgetfulness migrated with the birds, to the north.

Sometimes time and history are allies, other times they feud  
over the borders between them.

The high willow doesn't heed this or care. It stands by the side of the road.

I walk lightly lest I fracture my fragility. I walk heavily lest I fly.

In both cases the earth  
protects me from vanishing into what isn't of it.

In my depths there is a hidden music, I guard it from going solo.

I have committed enough errors to make me want to mend them, write  
some more in my notebook, where there's faith in the future. Who hasn't erred  
in the past does not need this faith.

A mountain, a sea, and a space. I fly and swim as if I were an air-marine bird.  
As if I were a poet.

Every prose here is a primal poetry prohibited from skilled craft.  
And every poem here is a prose piece within the pedestrians' reach.

With all the happiness in me, I hide my tears from the oud strings that skulk  
at my croakiness and lurk at the desire of girls.

The private is public and the public is private... until further notice,  
away from the present and from the poem's intent.

Haifa! It's no surprise that strangers love you, compete with me over what's in you,  
and forget their countries in your parts, since you are a dove  
building its nest on a gazelle's nose.

I am here. Everything else is slander and rumor.

O time, the sentimentalists' doctor, you turn wound into scar and scar into sesame seed.  
I look behind me and see my self running in the rain. Here, and here, and there.  
Was I happy and didn't know it?

It's the distance: it trains sight to do vision's work and polishes steel with a far off flute.

The beauty of nature improves one's habits, except those habits that are not innate to it:  
Mount Carmel is peace, and the rifle is dissonance.

Unguided I walk. Not looking for a thing. Not even for myself in all this light.

Haifa at night... the senses are preoccupied with their secret chores,  
away from their owners who stay up late on the balconies.

O intuition! Conqueror of metal and evidence.

I cajole my critics and treat the wounds of those who envy me my love for my country  
with a bit of elision, and a metaphor that bears several faces.

I did not see a general to ask him: What year did you kill me?  
But I saw soldiers chugging beer on the sidewalks, waiting for the end  
of the coming war, to go to the university and study Arabic poetry  
written by dead poets who have not died yet, like me.

I imagined my previous steps on Mount Carmel were guiding me  
to "The Mother's Garden," and that repetition is echo's reverberation  
in an incomplete sentimental song that thirsts after a renewing lack.

No fog. A pine tree on Mount Carmel summons a Cedar tree on Mount Lebanon:  
Good evening sister!

There's an unpopulated region in my heart, it welcomes the youth  
who search for an unoccupied sphere where they can pitch a summer camp.

I cross a wide street to the wall of my first prison and say: Salaam, my first teacher  
of freedom's law. You were right: poetry wasn't innocent.

Did one of them say: "The master of words is the master of place"?  
This is neither conceit nor play. It's a poet's manner in defending the use of words  
and the fixity of place in a shifting language.

The scent of summer trees is erotic.  
Here I merge with grass, fuzz, freckles, etc. . . . under the moonlight.

Haifa says to me: From now on, you are you.

## A Ready Script

Let's presume now that we,  
the enemy and I,  
fell from the air  
into a hole . . .  
what might happen?

A ready script:  
In the beginning we wait for luck,  
the rescuers might find us here  
and toss a safety rope our way,  
and he'd say: me first  
and I'd say: me first  
and in vain we'd curse  
each other out  
before the rope reaches us

The script says  
I, a selfish optimist, will  
whisper to myself without wondering  
what my enemy whispers to himself

He and I  
are partners in one trap  
and in the probability game,  
we wait for the rescue rope  
so we can part ways  
by the edge of the hole—the chasm,  
and go to what remains  
for us of life  
and war . . . if we  
are able to survive

He and I  
are frightened  
and don't exchange any words  
about fear, or other than fear  
since we are foes . . .

What might happen if a snake  
were to appear to us here  
out of one of the scenes and hiss  
before swallowing the two  
frightened ones, he and I?

The script says:  
We will partner up in killing the snake  
to survive together  
or alone . . .

Yet we will share a phrase of gratitude  
and congratulations on what  
we have accomplished together  
even if it was instinct, and not us,  
that defended itself, and instinct  
has no ideology

And we did not converse:  
I remembered the law of communication  
over mutual frivolity  
when he once told me:  
What has become mine is mine  
and what is yours  
is yours  
and mine . . .

And with time, and time is sand and soap bubbles,  
boredom and silence  
broke what's between us, and he asked me: What now?  
I said: Not much, let's drain the possibilities  
He said: Where will hope come from?  
I said: From the air  
He said: Did you forget I buried you in a hole like this?  
I said: I almost did, because an alluring worn out  
tomorrow pulled me by the hand . . .  
He said: Will you negotiate with me now?  
I said: Over what now in this hole, this grave?  
He said: Over your share and mine  
of our void and our mutual grave  
I said: What's the use? Time has run away  
from us, and destiny doesn't follow the rule,  
the murdered and his murderer sleep in this hole,  
and another poet must see this script through  
to its end!

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MAHMOUD DARWISH (1941–2008), a Palestinian, was perhaps the most prominent  
poet in the Arabic language, and was honored the world over. He died in Houston,  
Texas, on August 9, 2008, from post-operative complications.

FADY JOUDAH's *The Earth in the Attic* won the Yale Series for Younger Poets in 2007;  
his translations of Mahmoud Darwish's *The Butterfly's Burden* received the Saif  
Ghobash–Banipal prize for Arabic translation from the Society of Authors in the UK.