

The Dice Player

Mahmoud Darwish

The great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish died in August 2008, age 67 years. His friends John Berger and Rema Hammami have translated this, his last poem, which Darwish read in Ramallah a month before his death. It is included in the volume Mural, published by Verso.

Who am I to say to you
what I'm saying?

I wasn't a stone washed by water
so I became a face
I wasn't a reed pierced by the wind
so I became a flute

I'm the way the dice fall
sometimes winning sometimes losing
I'm like you
or maybe slightly less ...

I was born beside the well
where three single trees stood like nuns
I was born without ceremony or a midwife
and belonged to a family
by chance
inheriting its features, idiosyncrasies
and illnesses:

First: feeble arteries and high blood pressure
Second: shyness in talking with mother, father,
grandmother – or a tree
Third: the belief that flu can be cured with a hot cup of
chamomile
Fourth: a disinclination to talk about gazelles or skylarks
Fifth: a tendency to boredom on winter nights
Sixth: a farcical inability to sing

I had no say in who I was
It was by chance I turned out
male

by chance that I found the upturned moon
 pale as a lemon
 urging on the night

and just as easily
 could find a mole hidden in the deepest recess of my
 groin

It's possible
 I might not have been
 and my father might not have been
 then he wouldn't have married my mother
 by chance
 I might have been like my sister
 who screamed then died and never knew it
 because she lived for an hour and didn't know her
 mother ...

Or one could say: like a pigeon's egg which breaks before
 the chick can hatch from its shell

I happened by chance
 me the survivor of the bus accident
 because I was late going to school
 forgetting the here and now
 while reading a love story at night
 losing myself in story-teller and victim of love
 til I became a martyr of passion in the story
 and the survivor of the bus accident!

I can't see myself joking with the sea
 but I am a reckless kid
 one of my hobbies is to dawdle in the waves
 when they're singing: Come to me!
 And I can't see myself being rescued from the sea
 I was saved by a sort of seagull
 who saw the playful waves paralyzing my hand

It's possible
 I wouldn't have been struck with the madness of the *Jahili*
Mu'alaqaat'
 if the door of the house had faced North

and not overlooked the sea
if the army patrol hadn't seen the fire of the villagers
 making bread that night
if 15 martyrs had been able to rebuild the barricades
if that rural place hadn't been obliterated
perhaps I'd have become an olive tree
or a geography teacher
or an expert in the realm of ants
or guardian of an echo!

who am I to say to you
what I'm saying
at the door of the church
I'm nothing but the fall of the dice
landing between predator and prey
winning a clarity that obscures my happiness on moonlit
 nights
and obliges me to witness the carnage

It was by chance
I escaped
I was smaller than a military target
and larger than a bee hovering between the flowers on the
 fence
I feared a lot for my brothers and father
feared for time made of glass
feared for my cat and my rabbit
feared for the magical moon above the high minaret of the
 mosque
feared for the grapes on the vine dangling like the teats of
 our dog
Fear walked in me and I walked in it
barefoot
forgetting my little memories or what I want from
 tomorrow
– there's no time for tomorrow –
I walk, scramble, run, climb, get down, scream, bark,
 howl, call out, wail, speed up, slow down, love, become
 lighter, drier, march on, fly, see, don't see, stumble,
 become yellow, green, blue, gasp, sob, thirst, get

tired, struggle, fall, get up, run, forget, see,
 don't see, remember, hear, look, wonder, hallucinate, mumble,
 yell I can't, moan, go mad, stay, become less and more,
 fall, rise, collapse, bleed and faint

And by chance
 with my lack of luck
 the wolves disappeared from there
 or we escaped the soldiers

I have no say in my life
 except that I am
 when life taught me its hymns
 I said: do you have more?
 so I lit its lantern
 and it tried to oblige

I might not have been a swallow
 if the wind had wanted it that way
 the wind is the luck of the traveller
 I went north, east and west
 but the south was far and impenetrable to me
 because the south is my home
 So I became a metaphor of a swallow soaring above my
 debris
 in Spring and Autumn
 trying out my feathers in the clouds above the lake
 scattering my greetings on my protector
 who does not die
 because he has God's soul
 and God is the luck of the prophet

Luckily I live next to the divinities
 Unluckily
 the cross is the only ladder to our tomorrow

Who am I to say to you
 what I'm saying
 Who am I?

It's possible

inspiration might not have come
inspiration is the luck of the loner
this poem is a dice throw
onto a board of darkness
that glows and doesn't glow
words fall
like feathers on sand

I don't think it was me who wrote the poem
I just obeyed its rhythm:
the flow of feelings each affecting the next
meaning given by intuition
a trance in the echoing words
the image of myself taken from me and given to another
with no one to help me
and my longing for the source

I don't think it was me who wrote the poem
except when inspiration stopped
and inspiration is the luck of the skillful
when they apply themselves

The only possibility was
to love the girl who asked me:
What time is it?
on my way to the cinema.
And it was only possible for her to be a mulatta
which she was
or a passing mystery and a darkness

It's like this the words multiply
I induce my heart to love so it has room for flowers and
thorns ...
My vocabulary is mystic and my desires corporeal
And I'm not who I am now unless there's a meeting of
two:
me and my feminine self

Love! What are you?
How much are you? You

and not you?

Love! Rage like a tempest over us
 so we can find only what the divinities want of my body
 and pour away the rest in a funnel
 You – whether displayed or hidden –
 have no shape
 and we love you when we love
 by chance
 You're the luck of the poor

Unfortunately

I often escaped love's closure
 but fortunately stayed fit enough to re-open its door!

Secretly, the canny lover says to himself:

Love is our truthful lie
 Overhearing him, his beloved replies:
 love comes and goes
 like lightening and thunder

To life I say: slow down wait for me until intoxication has
 dried out in my glass

In the garden all the flowers are ours
 and the wind can't unwind itself from the rose
 Wait for me so the nightingales don't flee the town square
 and make me break the rhythm
 while the minstrels tighten their strings for the goodbye
 song

Go slow for me and be brief so the song won't take long
 lest my delivery interrupt the prelude and split it in two
 let two and two make one

Long Live Life!

Take your time and take me in your arms
 so the wind doesn't scatter me
 Even when I'm carried by the wind
 I can't unwind myself from the alphabet

If I hadn't scaled the mountain

I might have been happy with an eagle's eyrie: nothing
 loftier

but such glory crowned with infinite blue gold
is difficult to visit:
Up there the loner stays lonely
and can't come down on his feet
So no eagle walks
no human flies
How much a peak resembles an abyss
You – o solitude of the summit know it!

I have no say in what I was
or will be ...
It's luck.
And luck has no name
We might name it:
the blacksmith of our fate or
the postman of the heavens or
the carpenter of the newborn's cradle and the dead man's
coffin or
Let's call it the legendary gods' servant
whose lines we wrote while hiding behind Olympus ...
which the hungry potters believed
but the bloated lords of gold didn't
unluckily for their author
this ghost standing on the stage is real
Behind the scenes it's something else
the question is no longer: When?
but: Why? How? And Who?

Who am I to say to you
what I'm saying?

It's possible not to have been
suppose the convoy fell into an ambush
and suppose the family lost a son
like the one now writing this poem
letter by letter
bleeding and bleeding
on this sofa
blood black as black
not a crow's ink

nor its caw
 it's the whole night squeezed out by hand
 drop by drop
 by the hand of luck and talent

It's possible that poetry might have gained more
 if precisely this poet hadn't existed
 a hoopoe at the edge of the abyss
 Though the poet might say: If I'd been another
 I would become only me again

This is how I bluff:
 Narcissus wasn't as beautiful as he thought.
 His creators trapped him in his reflection
 so I ripple the smooth image with droplets of water ...
 Suppose he'd been able to see someone other than himself and could
 have seen the love of a girl gazing at him
 forget the stags running between the lilies and daisies ...
 if he'd been just a fraction cleverer
 he'd have smashed the mirror
 and seen how much he was like to others
 Yet if he'd been free
 he wouldn't have become a myth ...

In the desert the mirage is the traveller's book
 and without it
 without the mirage
 he won't continue searching for water
 There's a cloud, he tells himself carrying his jug of hope
 in one hand and clutching his belly with the other
 and he thumbs his errors into the sand
 to corral the clouds into a pit
 And the mirage calls him, lures, misleads him
 then lifts him up:
 read if you can't read
 write if you can't write
 So he reads: water water water
 and writes a sentence in the sand:
 without the mirage I wouldn't be alive til now

And it's the luck of the traveller that
hope is the twin of despair
or else his improvised poetry

When the sky is grey
And I see a rose sprouting through the cracks in a wall
I don't say: the sky is grey
but keep my eye on the rose and tell it:
it's quite a day!

Just as at nightfall
I say to my two friends:
If there has to be a dream
let it be like us and simple
For example: after two days
the three of us will dine
to fete our dream's premonition
that after two days
not one of us will have been lost
So let's celebrate in the moon's sonata
and make a toast to the lenience of death
who saw the three of us happy together
and decided to look the other way!

I don't say: far away life is real with its imaginary places
I say: life here is possible

By chance this land became holy
its lakes hills and trees aren't replicas of those in paradise
It became holy because a prophet walked here
prayed on a rock that began to weep
and the mount fell down from fear of God
then passed out
And by chance the slope of a field in this country
becomes a museum of dust
because too many soldiers from both sides die there
defending two leaders
who waiting in two silken tents for their spoils
give the order to Charge!
Soldiers die time and again without ever knowing who
won

Meanwhile the surviving storytellers say:
 if by chance the others had won!
 History's headlines could have been different

O land I love you green
 Green
 an apple dancing in water and light
 Green
 your night green, your dawn green
 so plant me with the tenderness of a mother's hand
 in a handful of air
 I am one of your seeds
 Green ...

That stanza has more than one poet
 and it's possible it didn't have to be lyrical

Who am I to say to you
 what I'm saying?
 It would have been possible not to be who I am
 It would have been possible not to be here ...
 it would have been possible
 if the plane had crashed that morning with me on board
 Luckily I'm a late riser
 and missed the flight

It would have been possible never to have visited Cairo
 Damascus the Louvre and other magical cities
 If I'd been walking slower
 the rifle shot might have cut my shadow off from
 the watchful cypress

If I'd been walking faster
 I might have been shattered to pieces by shrapnel
 and become a passing thought

It's possible if I'd dreamed more excessively
 I might have lost my memory

Luckily I sleep alone