

DEAR DARWISH

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Dear Mahmoud Darwish,

I want to write poems about Israel and Palestine but I am at loss. What language can I use?

Jack Spicer wrote letters to the late Federico Garcia Lorca and explained that their correspondence would enable them to “use up” their rhetoric so it would not appear in their poetry. He writes, “Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in it.” I write to you in hopes of leaving it aside.

Mahmoud, I recently encountered these lines in a poem:
how many Arabs for each
Israeli

Mahmoud, there was another prisoner swap. An Israeli soldier held captive for five years was released in exchange for 1,027 prisoners. There were images of Palestinians who had blood on their hands and then I met J.H. and he asked me if Gilad Shalit also had blood on his hands and I wonder how many Palestinians died while he was serving in a tank. I imagine a frightened young Gilad in a deafening tank following dumb orders dumbly. We all saw photos of Aziz Salha with blood on his hands but nobody thought about the blood on Gilad’s hands, myself included.

That marks one difference between Israelis and Palestinians: so many Israelis walk around with blood on their hands, hands soaked in red, red hands shaking, exchanging blood, patting a bloody hand on one’s shoulder, leaving a trace of a hand, a hand running through one’s hair, scratching a nose, leaving creases of liquid clotted and dried up on the cheekbones, taking a bath and then running a hand over one’s arms, arm pits, breasts then thighs, genitals, feet all covered with blood, blood trying to wash itself but it’s a blood so ordinary you cannot even see it.

I write this letter.

Red fingerprints smear on the page.

Mahmoud, the IDF prefers that women keep their gentle hands clean, but we are dirty.

Mahmoud, Spicer spoke of tradition as “generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with

each transformation – but, of course, never really losing anything.”

Mahmoud, if I am an Israeli woman living in Buffalo and you reside in Israel/Palestine on my bookshelf and I read and transform your poems, are we still telling the same story? Mahmoud, do I have the right to use your words? Mahmoud, would you grant me permission to do this? Can we work together to define it and its possibilities?

האם עברית תהיה השפה המשותפת שלנו?

Should we use English?

هل يمكننا أن نستخدم اللغة العربية؟

Let me try:

You ask: “Who Am I, Without Exile?”

(This is the title of my transformation.)

~~You are a stranger on the riverbank,
like the water... river
binds me to your name.
Nothing carries me or makes me carry an idea.
Water
binds me
to your name...
There's nothing left of you but me...~~
(I tried stealing this from you.)

Let me try again:

“In Time of Plague”

(I am now borrowing from Spicer.)

It “took us and the land from under us”
it soiled our hands like water:
Red stained cracks leaving
fingerprints layered with handshakes.
Red stained handles on the door

of a bus designed from the ground
upwards. Red stained water
escalating like the bricks
of demolished houses.

We have been planting
signs on the side of the road
like one thousand
bulbs under fresh earth stolen
by neighborhood squirrels.
They eat our red-stained seeds digest
the preborn and run up trees.

You ask, "Who Am I, Without Exile?" I
answer: You are the bulb of the pregrown
plant carried in the stomach
of a squirrel. You ask: Who Are You,
Without Exile? I answer: I am
wandering exile seeping my roots
in our land. You are now
the squirrel eating our bulbs snapping
water lines lifting sidewalks and we both
share the blood on our hands while I
wash them use soap and water
soap and bleach I scrub I
scrub I scrub hard until my
skin peels until I scratch the skin off
I am scrubbing my muscles and I
scrub I scrub I scrub and scrub my
bones and I scrub peel the red
peel the red peel the red until this body
becomes nothing.

I am a skeleton walking among poets.

Mahmoud,

Please teach me how to li(v)e with these stains.

Love,

M

God dressed up like a soldier today
and yelled at the top of God's lungs:
"Kid, get the fuck out of there or
I'll smash your face."

There was video footage too.
A stone. A junction. A car.

One doesn't calculate the toss.

It isn't mapped out.
Or planned.

It requires a certain spontaneity.
A reaction to circumstance.

Dear Mahmoud,

I often feel like a hostage
confined to my own history.

The world is a dark room and
I am chained to the wall.

My body pressed against
cold brick loses
trace of itself.

It is stifling in here.
I can barely breathe.
The air is thick.
I taste it.

Lips damp.
Smell of excrement
and blood. Fluorescent
blubs. Electrical discharge
turned into heat. Then
the ice. Toes numb.

I starve.
I am exhausted. And when
I let my imagination
go there
I hear others.

I feel eyes on me.
The sound of smugness scorn
of satisfaction
in the corner.

Thighs attempt to remain stable.
Feet covered in urine.
Cuts burn. I try to
think
of something else.
But a voice yells.

Asks questions. And
more questions and
repeats the questions.
Demands confessions.

I can only commit to my birth:
to encountering life
at a certain point in time.

I am not responsible for this.

I try to raise a hand
to crease the limbs
lines according to their design.

A hand enters the stomach
pressing through the intestines
pushing up towards the throat
opening the mouth
moving the lips. They say:
“I did it.” “It was me.”

Every time I fight it
the heavy metal pushed in
dictates
every move and gesture.

The hand remains in the throat
mimicking a discourse.
“I did it.” “I” “say.”
It was me.

They hang
by shackles.
Low concrete wall.
Strengthen the hood.
Kick. Push. Burn. Beat
with the butt of a rifle.

The voice yells.
Asks. Questions.

The room
windowless
barely the size
of the mattress.

I say:
I am your amnesia.
The blind spot of the mid-century.

The metal confirmed on wrists
eroding into the skin
cold and cumbersome.

A body toyed with.
A pile of limbs.

Something entered here.
It hurts. I can't tell
them to stop.

This is the story
I could have told
had you unsealed my mouth.

I was born on that day.
Life, initially, is about unintention.
Possibility is frightening.

I am here because
my freedom
is terrifying and
"when people do not
want to see something
they get mad at
the one who shows them.

They kill the messenger."

Mahmoud,

because doing this
is exceedingly difficult

and I should try

to allow myself

to feel less distracted.