



In the Presence of Absence

Mahmoud Darwish, ?????? ?????? , Sinan Antoon (Translator)

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"Darwish is to be read with urgency, in the night, when nothing else moves but his lines." —*The Village Voice*

By one of the most transcendent poets of this generation, a remarkable collection of prose poems that explores themes of love, pain, isolation, and connection. In this self-eulogy written in the final years of Mahmoud Darwish's life, Palestine becomes a metaphor for the injustice and pain of our contemporary moment.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) was one of the most acclaimed poets in the Arab world. His poetry collections include *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* and *A River Dies of Thirst* (Archipelago Books). In 2001 Darwish was awarded the Lannan Cultural Freedom Prize.

In the Presence of Absence Details

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Leif says

One must be careful when witnessing a self-elegy. Too sentimental or nostalgic and the piece becomes saccharine and cloying, even self indulgent. Too brusque or critical and it becomes an allegory to the reader, not self-elegy at all but the adoption of a perceived voice in the presence of obsequious self-consciousness, and unpleasant to read at all that. Darwish's *In the Presence of Absence* falls into neither of these camps but rather, navigating between whirlpools, strikes at a beautifully moving reflection on life and writing from the margins. How does he do this? By recognizing the uncanny duplication of writing, not in surprise but, accepting such mirroring, exploring the potential relationships of an elegy to the person elegized. In an apostrophe to his own corpse laid out on a burial stone, Darwish writes

If you are the one saying what I am not saying in your silence, then death will be no more than a means for the soul to find the journey awaiting it. If I am the one saying what I say to you now, on this stone, then I am death's ultimate excuse to introduce life to its obscure antagonist. An antagonist incapable of introducing life to its opposite in another place, or non-place, which those who fear nothingness have called immortality.

No surprise that Darwish proved so inspirational for Breyten Breytenbach, the displaced Afrikaner poet. In this memorable and gracefully written self-elegy the best of Palestinian poets demonstrates a formidable command of words and brilliance of mind. Reflections on love, on exile, and on mourning prove the fulcrums of this meditation on dying. But Darwish always keeps his prose poetry accessible and hospitable. In the presence of his own death, the knowledge of his coming absence, he keeps a mindful and equanimous hospitality to the reader who, he knows, participates in the prosopopoeia of his own mourning work. And, finally, for all his confidence, he knows better than to give an answer to death's universal question, a question that constitutes life and writing alike.

Stars gaze down at us, my friend, like golden buttons shimmering on eternity's coat. They gaze down at us from a distant death that has yet to reach us. As I recite my address to you, a star slips into my words and illuminates my darkness. Perhaps death is a metaphor to remind us of a secret of life we failed to notice. So what is it?

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Hiba Arrame says

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הנהגתו של השר, הנהגתו של השר, הנהגתו של השר.

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Manuel Alberto Vieira says

"[...] Stars gaze down at us, my friend, like golden buttons shimmering on eternity's coat. They gaze down at us from a distant death that has yet to reach us. As I recite my address to you, a star slips into my words and illuminates my darkness: Perhaps death is a metaphor to remind us of a secret life we failed to notice. So what is it?

What is it? Were we to know, our plans would have changed, for what we do not know exists and what we do know is limited and bound to change. Grass, stronger than you and me, grows on your grave and I do not know whether or not to grieve, because life is a dancing widow who only takes interest in what she needs."

Sawsan says

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