



*A small evening  
A neglected village  
Two sleeping eyes  
Thirty years  
Five wars  
I witness that time hides for me  
an ear of wheat  
The singer sings  
Of fire and strangers  
Evening was evening  
The singer was singing  
And they question him  
Why do you sing?  
He answers them as they seize him  
Because I sing  
And they have searched him:  
In his breast only his heart  
In his heart only his people  
In his voice only his sorrow*

*Poem of the Land*

# MAHMOUD DARWISH

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# The Poet of Palestine

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Abdullah Omar (org.)

# MIDDLE EAST MONITOR

Middle East Monitor is a not-for-profit media research institute that provides research, information and analyses of primarily the Palestine-Israel conflict. It also provides briefings on other Middle East issues. Its outputs are made available for use by journalists, academics and politicians with an interest in the Middle East and North Africa.

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MEMO wants to see a Middle East framed by principles of equality and justice. It promotes the restoration of Palestinian rights, including the Right of Return, a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and with democratic rights upheld. It also advocates a nuclear-free Middle East.

By ensuring that policy-makers are better informed, MEMO seeks to have a greater impact on international players who make key decisions affecting the Middle East. MEMO wants fair and accurate media coverage of Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries.

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## MAHMOUD DARWISH The Poet of Palestine

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### Abdullah Omar (org.)

Journalist and critic born in Ramallah, specialising in Sports Management at FIFA-CIES. He is also director of the Latin-Palestinian Forum and a MEMO collaborator. He writes in English, Arabic and Portuguese.



This document gather memories and accounts of Mahmoud Darwish's life presented by the Mahmoud Darwish Foundation<sup>1</sup>.

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1 <http://mahmouddarwish.ps/en/article/80000160/Mahmoud-Darwish>

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) was one of the most important Palestinian and Arab poets who contributed greatly to the development and progress of Arabic poetry. He was known as one of the writers of the resistance and his poems espoused the Palestinian cause. His poetry has been translated into several languages and his Arabic collections have sold more than a million copies.

Darwish's poetry was deep, philosophical in meanings and connotations. He was the philosopher of poets and the poet of philosophers through his introduction of symbolism to modern Arabic poetry, employing myths and historical personalities in his work. This remains open to existential issues that affect humanity, in a way that opens Arab poetry to new and multiple worlds through what critics can read from the poems, with interpretation and deconstruction of the connotations of each symbol in its aesthetic, historical and philosophical dimensions.

In his poetry, [Darwish](#) mixed together the defence of the Palestinian cause, the struggle for national liberation, the defence of humanity and its ontological issues, such as death, destiny, identity, freedom, love and peace, among other subjects. As such, it is not surprising that he is considered first and foremost an exponent of Arab poetry and creativity, and only then an advocate of the Palestinian cause. His humanity shone through in his poetry, but he was an Arab in all of his words; he believed in the cause of his people and justice for them, but he did not fall into narrow intolerance and the tribalism that many defenders of the Palestinian and similar causes around the world fall into.

Darwish is regarded as one of the greatest enemies of Zionism and its supporters. There is no war fiercer than a war of words and ideas. You can defeat a people with weapons, but be unable to defeat their cause when the people are filled with the values of liberation, freedom and desire to defend their homeland against a usurper state which lacks legitimacy and international respect. This particular enemy has built its state on

the corpses of men, women and children, and boasts of its heroism and military successes against largely defenceless civilians. In all of its military offensives it has proven that the determination of the Palestinian people is greater and more important than the weapons carried by frightened, trembling hands, no matter how modern and lethal those weapons are. Darwish was a revolutionary Palestinian poet who loved and adored his country, Palestine. It was his homeland and its occupation remains a deep wound in the Arab body. Whoever reads his poetry feels his attachment to the land of Palestine; his poetic melodies are filled with the sadness and hope that helps to resist the pain and defeatism.

## Birth and childhood

Mahmoud Darwish was born on 13 March, 1941, in the Palestinian village of [Al-Birwa](#), which is located in the Galilee to the east of the coast at [Acre](#). He was expelled from Al-Birwa with his family by Zionist militias and terrorist gangs; he was just six years old. Along with tens of thousands of other Palestinian refugees, he found himself in southern Lebanon; their towns and villages were destroyed, as Darwish found out when he went back in 1949 after the armistice; an Israeli village had been built over its ruins. He completed his primary education at the [Deir Al-Assad](#) School, and then completed his secondary education in the village of [Kfar Yasif](#).

“The first Lebanese village I remember back then was [Rmeish](#),” recalled Darwish years later. “Then we lived in [Jezzine](#) until the snow fell in the winter. In Jezzine, I saw for the first time in my life a great waterfall... Then we moved to [Naameh](#), near [Damour](#). I remember Damour well in that period: the sea and the banana fields. I was six years old, but my memory is strong, and my eyes still recall those scenes. We were waiting for the war to end to go back to our villages. But my grandfather and my father knew that the matter was over, so we came sneaking back with a Palestinian guide who knew the secret routes to the north of Galilee. We stayed with friends until we found out that our village of Al-Birwa no longer existed.

“The return to my place of birth was not possible. We lived as refugees in another village called Deir Al-Assad in the north. We were called refugees and found it very difficult to obtain residency cards, because we entered ‘illegally’; when the population register was conducted, we were absent. Our description in Israeli law was: ‘present-absent’, meaning that we were physically present but without papers. Our lands were confiscated, and we lived as refugees.”

Mahmoud lived in Haifa after the family moved to another village called [Jadeidi](#) and owned a house there. “I lived for ten years in Haifa and finished high school, then I worked as an editor for Al-Ittihad newspaper and I was prohibited from leaving Haifa for ten years. My residency in Haifa was house arrest, then we got our ID back, a red ID at first and later a blue one, and it was like a residency card during those ten years. From 1967 until 1970 I was forbidden to leave my house, and the police had the right to come at night to check for my presence. I was arrested every year and imprisoned without trial. Then I had to get out.”

Darwish joined the Israeli Communist Party and worked in its media such as Al-Ittihad and Al-Jadeed, of which he later became the editor-in-chief. Accused of activity hostile to the State of Israel, he was arrested in 1961, 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1969, and house arrest was imposed until 1970.

He was unconventional when it came to making known his biographical details. “My biography is written in my poems. There is a saying that every lyric poem is an autobiographical poem, according to which there is a theory that says that the reader does not need to know the poet’s biography in order to understand and communicate with him. Moreover, I must feel that there is something in my biography that is useful, or that provides benefit. I will not hide from you that my biography is very ordinary. I haven’t even thought about writing my autobiography. I do not like to complain excessively about my personal life and its problems. So I do not want to brag about myself, because the biography sometimes pushes

one to brag about oneself, and the writer portrays himself as if he were a different person. I wrote features from my biography in prose books such as [Journal of an Ordinary Grief](#) and Memory for Forgetfulness, especially about my childhood and the Nakba.”

### **Extract from “The Dice Player” in which Darwish talks about his birth and childhood**

Who am I to say to you  
what I say to you?  
I was not a stone polished by water  
and became a face  
nor was I a cane punctured by the wind  
and became a flute...  
I am a dice player,  
Sometimes I win and sometimes I lose  
I am like you  
or slightly less...  
I was born next to the well  
next to the three lonely trees, lonely like the nuns  
born without a celebration and without a midwife  
I was named by chance  
and belonged to a family by chance,  
and inherited its features, traits,  
and illnesses:  
First - an imbalance in the arteries,  
and high blood pressure  
Second - shyness in addressing the mother,  
the father, and the grandmother - the tree  
Third - hoping to cure from flu  
with a cup of hot chamomile  
Fourth - laziness in talking about the gazelle and the lark  
Fifth - boredom of winter nights

Sixth - a gross failure in singing...  
I played no role in who I became  
It was by chance that I became a male...  
and by chance that I saw a pale moon  
like a lemon, flirting with sleepless girls  
I did not strive to find  
a mole in the most secret places of my body!

### Moscow 1970

Mahmoud Darwish went to the Soviet Union to study in 1970. About that period, he said: “My first trip outside Palestine was to Moscow. I was a student at the Institute of Social Sciences, but there was no real home for me; it was a room in a university building. I stayed in Moscow for a year. Moscow was my first encounter with the outside world. I had tried to travel to Paris before, but the French authorities refused me entry in 1968. I had an Israeli document, but my nationality was not specified on it. French security was not required to understand the complexities of the Palestinian issue. How can I hold an Israeli document but my nationality is not specified in it? I told him insistently that I am a Palestinian. They kept me for hours at the airport and then took me back to my occupied homeland.

“Moscow was the first European city and the first big city I lived in. Of course, I discovered its huge landmarks, its river, its museums and its theatres. Imagine the reaction of a young student moving from a besieged residence to a huge metropolis! I learnt a little Russian to manage my own affairs. But my daily encounter with the problems of the Russians made the idea of the “paradise” of the poor, which is Moscow, evaporate from my mind and diminish. I never found it the paradise of the poor, as they taught us.

“I lost the ideal of communism, but I did not lose faith in Marxism. There was a great contradiction between our perceptions about Moscow and

what the Soviet media said about it, and the reality in which the people live, which is full of deprivation, poverty and fear. What shocked me the most about the people was their fear. When I talked to them, I felt that they were speaking in complete secrecy. In addition to this fear, I used to feel that the state was present everywhere. This is what transformed the city of Moscow into an ordinary city.”

### Extract from “The horse fell from the poem”

The horse fell from the poem  
and the Galilean women were wet  
with butterflies and dew,  
dancing above chrysanthemum  
The two absent ones: you and I  
you and I are the two absent ones  
A pair of white doves  
chatting on the branches of a holm oak  
No love, but I love ancient  
love poems that guard  
the sick moon from smoke  
I attack and retreat, like the violin in quatrains  
I get far from my time when I am near  
the topography of place...  
There is no margin in modern language left  
to celebrate what we love,  
because all that will be... was  
The horse fell bloodied  
with my poem  
and I fell bloodied  
with the horse’s blood...

## Cairo 1970-1972

Darwish talked about Cairo, his second stop after leaving his homeland. “Living in Cairo was one of the most important things in my personal life. In Cairo, the decision to leave Palestine and not return was established. This decision was not easy. I was waking up as if I wasn’t sure where I was. I would open the window and when I saw the Nile I’d confirm that I was in Cairo. I had many obsessions, but I was fascinated by being in an Arab city; the names of its streets were Arabic and the people spoke Arabic. More than that, I found myself inhabiting the literary texts I had been reading and admiring. I am almost a son of Egyptian culture and Egyptian literature. I met the writers of whom I was a reader and whom I considered my spiritual fathers.

“I met [Mohammed Abdel Wahab](#), [Abdel Halim Hafez](#) and others, and I met great writers such as [Naguib Mahfouz](#), [Youssef Idris](#) and [Tawfiq al-Hakim](#). I did not meet [Umm Kulthum](#) and [Taha Hussein](#), and I would have loved to meet them.”

He added his gratitude that [Mohamed Hassanein Heikal](#) appointed him as a member of the staff at Al-Ahram Writers Club; his office was on the sixth floor, alongside Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz and Youssef Idris. “Tawfiq Al-Hakim was in a single office and the rest of us were in one office. I developed a deep friendship with Mahfouz and Idris, the two contrasting personalities: Mahfouz was a punctual, disciplined person who arrived at a specific hour and went at a specific hour. And when I asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee, he looked at his watch before answering, to see if it was time for coffee or not. As for Yusuf Idris, he lived a chaotic life, and was a bright man. In Cairo, I also befriended the poets I loved: [Salah Abdel-Sabour](#) and [Amal Dunqul](#). These were very close friends. All the poets and writers I loved; my relationship with them strengthened. Cairo was one of the most important stages of my life.

“It was in Cairo that a transformation took place in my poetic experience, as if a turning point had been reached. When I was in the occupied territories, I was seen as the poet of resistance. After the 1967 defeat, the Arab world applauded all poetry or literature that came out of Palestine, whether it was good or bad. The Arabs discovered that in occupied Palestine there are Arabs who are steadfast and defend their rights and their identity. Hence, the views of such people were devoid of any general literary taste. Thus, literary standards were dropped from the Arabs’ view of these resistance voices in poetry and literature. Among the important poems that I wrote in Cairo was “Serhan Drinks Coffee in the Cafeteria” which was published in Al-Ahram newspaper and was published in the book [I love you or I do not love you](#).”

### Extract from “In Egypt, One Hour Isn’t Like Any Other”

In Egypt, one hour isn’t like any other...  
 each moment is a memory renewed by a bird  
 of the Nile. I was there. The human creature  
 there invented the Sun-God. No one calls himself  
 by name: ‘I’m a son of the Nile, that’s name enough  
 for me.’ From your first moment, you call yourself  
 ‘Son of the Nile’ to avoid the heaviness of the abyss.  
 There, the living and the dead pick clouds of cotton  
 from the land of Upper Egypt and plant wheat  
 in the Delta. Standing between the living  
 and the dead, two guards take turns watching over  
 the palms. Everything romantic is within you,  
 you walk on the edge of your soul in time’s labyrinth,  
 as if before you were born Mother Egypt  
 had given birth to you first, as a lotus flower.  
 Do you know yourself now? Egypt sits with itself  
 in stealth: ‘Nothing is like me.’ And mends  
 the battered coat of eternity with a wind blowing

from any direction. I was there. The human creature was writing the wisdom of Death-Life. Everything is romantic, moonlit... except for the poem as it turns around to look for tomorrow, thinking of immortality but speaking only of its frailty before of the Nile...

### Beirut 1973-1982

“After Cairo, I moved to Beirut and lived there from 1973 to 1982. I still carry my longing for Beirut. I have a beautiful disease called permanent longing for Beirut. I do not know what its causes are; I know that the Lebanese do not like to praise their city in this way, but Beirut has a very special place in my heart. Unfortunately for me, after a few years of my residence in Beirut, which was a workshop of ideas and a laboratory for literary, intellectual and political currents, conflicting and coexisting at the same time, the civil war broke out. I think that my poetic work stumbled at that time.

“I wrote many beautiful poems, but after the outbreak of the war, blood, bombardment, death, hatred and murder... all of these dominated the Beirut skyline and disturbed it. Some of my friends there died and I had to mourn them. And the first to be lost there was [Ghassan Kanafani](#). I think that the civil war in Lebanon disrupted many of the cultural and intellectual projects that were sweeping the capital.

“From the beginning of the war, I was expressing to my friends and acquaintances my pessimism about its outcome. I was asking if we could not have been drawn into the war as Palestinians. The official answer was that the role of the Palestinians was to defend themselves and confront attempts to exclude us. But we erred in Beirut when we created something like a state within a state.

“I was ashamed of the checkpoints that the Palestinians set up on Lebanese soil to ask the Lebanese people their identity. Of course, all these things have explanations and justifications. But I always felt ashamed. I used to ask myself many questions about these matters, even in front of my friends who were enthusiastic about the Palestinian cause and the national movement. Among these was, what does it mean to be victorious in Lebanon? This is a question that has always been with me. Suppose we ended the war and won, what does victory mean here? To occupy Lebanon and take power in Lebanon? I was very pessimistic. I did not write about the Lebanese war except for semi-critical writing.

“After the wars ended — the Palestinian-Lebanese war and the civil war — you could look through neutral eyes at the positive effects of the Palestinian interaction with Lebanese cultural life and the Lebanese interaction with the Palestinian cause. There were positive aspects. There was the Palestinian Research Centre, Palestine Affairs magazine and Al-Karmel magazine, and others... I felt that my stay in Beirut would be prolonged, and I did not feel embarrassed as if I was a legal resident. But to be forced to live against the will of the Lebanese through their forced coexistence with us, this bothered me. When the Palestinian leadership and the Palestinian fighters left Beirut, I did not.

“I stayed in Beirut for several months. I did not expect the Israelis to occupy Beirut, and I found no sense in my departure on a ship with the Palestinian fighters. But one morning, while I was living in the Hamra area, I went out to buy bread and saw a huge Israeli tank. At that time, I found myself alone wandering the streets, only seeing tanks, Israeli soldiers and masked men. I had really, really hard days, and I didn't know where to sleep.

“I slept outside in a restaurant and called my neighbours to ask if the Israelis had asked about me. If they said, ‘Yes, they came,’ I knew that they would not come again, so I would go to my house, take a shower and

rest, and then go back to the restaurant. Until the great catastrophe, the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Then I realised that my stay there was futile and reckless.

“I arranged the matter with the Libyan ambassador in Beirut at the time; he was able to take me from Ashrafieh to Syria, but he had to find a way to take me from my house to the entrance to Ashrafieh. We agreed with a Lebanese officer who found a street for us that the late President Shafiq Al-Wazzan would pass through, and there was an agreement between the Israelis and the government that they would not be exposed on this street, so we actually took this road and left Beirut. When we arrived in Tripoli, we went to a restaurant to eat fish after we got tired of eating canned food. I went to the bathroom to wash my hands, I looked in the mirror and saw a nose with two glasses on it. I didn’t know myself for a second, as if I was looking at another face.

“A very strange thing happened on the Syria-Lebanon border: the Lebanese border official asked for my papers; I was holding a Tunisian diplomatic passport, and he found that my residency had expired and this was a legal violation. I told him: ‘True, but don’t you hear the news? Don’t you know that there are no embassies or departments operating?’  
“When I arrived in Damascus, I stayed there for a week.”

### Extract from “Identity Card”

Write down!  
I am an Arab  
And my identity card number is fifty thousand  
I have eight children  
And the ninth will come after a summer  
Will you be angry?  
Write down!  
I am an Arab

Employed with fellow workers at a quarry  
I have eight children  
I get them bread  
Garments and books  
from the rocks...  
I do not supplicate charity at your doors  
Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber  
So, will you be angry?  
Write down!  
I am an Arab  
I have a name without a title  
Patient in a country  
Where people are enraged  
My roots  
Were entrenched before the birth of time  
And before the opening of the eras  
Before the pines, and the olive trees  
And before the grass grew.  
My father... descends from the family of the plough  
Not from a privileged class  
And my grandfather... was a farmer  
Neither well-bred, nor well-born!  
Teaches me the pride of the sun  
Before teaching me how to read  
And my house is like a watchman’s hut  
Made of branches and cane  
Are you satisfied with my status?  
I have a name without a title!  
Write down!  
I am an Arab  
You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors  
And the land which I cultivated  
Along with my children



And you left nothing for us  
Except for these rocks...  
So will the State take them  
As it has been said?!  
Therefore!  
Write down on the top of the first page:  
I do not hate people  
Nor do I encroach  
But if I become hungry  
The usurper's flesh will be my food  
Beware...  
Beware...  
Of my hunger  
And my anger!

### Tunisia-Paris

"I left Damascus for Tunisia, where I saw Yasser Arafat and his friends in what was a tragic scenario: the Palestinian revolutionaries were staying in a hotel on the seashore. This was very painful and prompted me to write a novel about such a fate. Arafat told me that Al-Karmel should be published; he was interested in cultural aspects. 'Where will we publish it?' I asked. 'Wherever you want, in London, in Paris, in Cyprus...' So I went to Cyprus to arrange for a licence. Al-Karmel was edited by me while I was in Paris and printed in Nicosia. My great collaborator was the poet [Salim Barakat](#)."

Darwish lived in Paris for about ten years, but intermittently. He travelled constantly and remained close to the PLO in Tunisia.

"Paris was more a station than a residence, I don't know, but I know that in Paris my true poetic birth took place, and if I wanted to distinguish my poetry, I stick very much to my poetry that I wrote in Paris in the eighties and beyond. There I had the opportunity to meditate and look at the

homeland, the world, and see things from a distance. When you see from a distance, you see better, and you see the scene in its totality. Moreover, aesthetically, Paris pushes you towards poetry and creativity, everything in it is beautiful, even its climate is beautiful. Paris is also the city of exiled writers from all over the world. The whole world is summarised in this city.

"I had friendships with many foreign writers, Paris gave me the opportunity to devote more time to reading and writing, and I don't really know if it was Paris that struck me, or whether my mature stage was found there, or whether the two elements coincided with each other. In Paris I wrote many poetic and prose texts, and I wrote the text of Memory for Forgetfulness. The aim of this prose book was to be liberated from the impact of Beirut, and in it I described one of the days of the siege. There I was free to write despite being elected as a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and in Paris I wrote the text of the Declaration of the Palestinian state.

### Extract from "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies"

He dreams of white lilies,  
an olive branch,  
her breasts in evening blossom.  
He dreams of a bird, he tells me,  
of lemon flowers.  
He does not intellectualise about his dream.  
He understands things as he  
senses and smells them.  
Homeland for him, he tells me, is to drink my mother's coffee,  
to return at nightfall.  
I asked him: and the land?  
I don't know it, he said.  
I don't feel it in my flesh and blood,  
as they say in the poems.

Suddenly I saw it  
as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers.  
I asked him, do you love it?  
My love is a picnic, he said,  
a glass of wine, a love affair.  
Would you die for it?

### Amman-Ramallah

“After it became possible for me to return to a part of Palestine,” wrote Darwish, “and not to a personal part but to a part of a public homeland, I stood for a long time before the option of return. I felt that it was my national and moral duty not to remain in exile. First, I would not be comfortable, then I would be subjected to endless defamatory barbs, and it would be said that I prefer Paris to Ramallah or Gaza. So, I took the second brave step after leaving, which was to return. Those are two of the hardest things I’ve ever faced in my life: getting out and back. I chose Amman because it is close to Palestine and then because it is a quiet city, and its people are good. In Ramallah I could live my life, and when I wanted to write, I left Ramallah to benefit from my isolation in Amman.

“Tension was very high in Ramallah, and the concerns of national and daily life robbed me of writing time. I spent half of my time in Ramallah and the other half in Amman, and on some travels in Ramallah I supervised the publication of Al-Karmel magazine.”

Ghanem Zureikat, a friend of Darwish, revealed some details of his life by saying that he went to Amman at the end of 1995, because it was the city closest to Palestine. “When the Palestinian leadership entered Palestine, Mahmoud began to think seriously about leaving Paris, and the choice before him was Cairo or Amman. Some friends encouraged him and welcomed him to reside in Amman, and the idea was very welcome and at the highest levels in the Jordanian state. He chose Amman because, in

his opinion, it was the best city in which he could be quiet and write; the city really provided him with this advantage, and he had very few friends there. He was calm and easy to navigate and had an eclectic set of relationships with many people, who surrounded him with a great deal of unbridled love.”

### Extract from “To My Mother”

I long for my mother’s bread  
My mother’s coffee  
Her touch  
Childhood memories grow up in me  
Day after day  
I must be worth my life  
At the hour of my death  
Worth the tears of my mother.  
And if I come back one day  
Take me as a veil to your eyelashes  
Cover my bones with the grass  
Blessed by your footsteps  
Bind us together  
With a lock of your hair  
With a thread that trails from the back of your dress  
I might become immortal  
Become a God  
If I touch the depths of your heart.  
If I come back  
Use me as wood to feed your fire  
As the clothesline on the roof of your house  
Without your blessing  
I am too weak to stand.  
I am old

Give me back the star maps of childhood  
So that I  
Along with the swallows  
Can chart the path  
Back to your waiting nest.

### Mahmoud Darwish on home

“Home to me means sitting by myself with books, with music and with white paper. The house is like a room for listening inward and trying to make better use of time. In their sixties, anyone feels that he does not have much time left. Personally, I admit that I wasted a lot of time in travelling, in relationships and so on. I am now keen to use my time in the interest of what I think is best, which is writing and reading. Many people complain about solitude, but I am addicted to solitude. Solitude is one of the great tests of one’s ability to hold things together. I feel that if I lose solitude I lose myself; I am keen to stay in this solitude, and this does not mean that it is a break from life, reality and people... I organise my time in a way that does not allow me to immerse myself in social relationships that may not all be useful.

“When I was away from home, I thought that the road would lead to it, and that home was more beautiful than the way home. But when I returned to the so-called home, which is not a real home, I changed this saying and said: The way home is still more beautiful than home, because the dream is still more beautiful and pure than the reality that this dream resulted in. The dream is now an orphan.

“My strong relationship with the home grew in exile or in the diaspora. When you are at home, you do not glorify the house and do not feel its importance and intimacy, but when you are deprived of the house, it turns into something needed, as if it is the ultimate goal of the whole journey. Exile is what deepened the concept of home and homeland, as exile is the

opposite of them. Now, I cannot define exile as its opposite, nor homeland as its opposite. Now the matter is different, and homeland and exile are two ambiguous matters.”

### Extract from “I Come From There”

I come from there and I have memories  
Born as mortals are, I have a mother  
And a house with many windows,  
I have brothers, friends,  
And a prison cell with a cold window.  
Mine is the wave, snatched by sea-gulls,  
I have my own view,  
And an extra blade of grass.  
Mine is the moon at the far edge of the words,  
And the bounty of birds,  
And the immortal olive tree.  
I walked this land before the swords  
Turned its living body into a laden table.  
I come from there. I render the sky unto her mother  
When the sky weeps for her mother.  
And I weep to make myself known  
To a returning cloud.  
I learnt all the words worthy of the court of blood  
So that I could break the rule.  
I learnt all the words and broke them up  
To make a single word: Homeland...

### Mahmoud Darwish on his daily writing rituals

Darwish had daily rituals and habits that he did not want anyone to break, especially the hours of his reading and writing. He was living alone in his apartment, as he had married twice previously and separated by mutual

consent. He did not stay with anyone, and he did not want anyone to stay with him often, except for some friends who sometimes came to him from Palestine and on an exceptional basis. And he usually slept early and woke up about eight, when he shaved, bathed and drank coffee, then put on his most beautiful clothes and shoes, as if he was going to an official appointment, and then he sat at the desk waiting for inspiration to write, or to seize “the revelation”, as he put it. Sometimes he wrote a page or pages, and sometimes he wrote nothing. The important thing was that this ritual was sacred. Mahmoud’s apartment had three keys; he was afraid of dying alone without anyone feeling the loss.

### Mahmoud Darwish on the dice player and his hobbies

Darwish was preoccupied with reading and writing most of the time. He spoke Hebrew, English and French and loved listening to classical music such as Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, and often listened while writing. He had a large collection of tapes and CDs. He loved to listen to Arabic singers Abdel Wahab, Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez, and watched historical soap operas. His amusement was playing dice, screaming sometimes, and getting angry at other times like a child. While watching television he was fond of drama, especially in the month of Ramadan.

#### Extract from “Think of Others”

As you fix your breakfast, think of others.

Don’t forget to feed the pigeons.

As you fight in your wars, think of others.

Don’t forget those who desperately demand peace.

As you pay your water bill, think of others

who drink the clouds’ rain.

As you return home, your home, think of others.

Don’t forget those who live in tents.

As you sleep and count planets, think of others.

There are people without any shelter to sleep.

As you express yourself using all metaphorical expressions,  
think of others who lost their rights to speak.

As you think of others who are distant, think of yourself and say,  
‘I wish I was a candle to fade away the darkness’

### Approaching Darwish’s world

Mahmoud Darwish was a sincere and friendly lover of everyone in general; he was very humble and shy, and did not like social gatherings in which more than six people attended. He was moderate in his life, in his food, drink and discussions, and he did not hold extreme opinions. He was very tolerant, and had no enmity against anyone, and rarely slandered other poets or anyone else; he was generous and often invited his friends.

Because of his many admirers and embarrassing (for him) encounters, Darwish could not go to popular neighbourhoods or walk through the streets like normal people. He distributed a large part of his library to some of his friends, as did not want to keep more than a hundred books. He was received by a number of kings and presidents, including the Queen of the Netherlands, the King of Morocco, the Prime Minister of France and the President of Tunisia.

Arguably the most impressive things about his personality were his quick wit, polite speech, tact when dealing with others, and his celebration of their experiences, especially young poets. He was happy from his heart when he discovered a distinguished poet, and he did not hesitate to express his admiration for a beautiful text, without reservations. He was a good listener, following his speaker with interest and curiosity, not inclined to theorising; he disliked the role of the professor that some expected of him. He was very well read and would not only read books given to him, but also express his opinions about them.

In 1997 he participated for the first time in the annual Jerash Festival and opened the northern theatre in the ancient city, which had been closed for two thousand years; he read his poetry to his fans accompanied by the oud player Samir Gibran. That was the first of many such appearances at Jerash, including his famous evening at the Palace of Culture, when he told the audience that he would read some of what they like and some of what he likes. In doing so he drew the audience in to pure poetry so that even poems in very high language were accepted and enjoyed.

### Mahmoud Darwish's death

Darwish died in the US on Saturday, 9 August, 2008, after open-heart surgery at the Medical Centre in Houston, when he fell into a coma and did not recover. His body was taken to the Jordanian capital, Amman, where many dignitaries from the Arab world gathered to bid him farewell. He was buried on 13 August in the city of Ramallah, where a plot of land was allocated for him at the Cultural Palace. Thousands of people participated in his funeral.

#### Extract from "The Pigeons Fly"

The pigeons fly,  
the pigeons come down...  
Prepare a place for me to rest.  
I love you unto weariness,  
your morning is fruit for songs  
and this evening is precious gold  
the shadows are strong as marble.  
When I see myself,  
it is hanging upon a neck that embraces only the clouds,  
you are the air that undresses in front of me like tears of the grape,  
you are the beginning of the family of waves held by the shore.  
I love you, you are the beginning of my soul, and you are the end...

the pigeons fly  
the pigeons come down...  
I am for my lover I am. And my lover is for his wandering star  
Sleep my love  
on you my hair braids, peace be with you...  
the pigeons fly  
the pigeons come down...  
Oh, my love, where are you taking me away from my parents,  
from my trees, small bed and from my weariness,  
from my visions, from my light, from my memories and pleasant  
evenings,  
from my dress and my shyness,  
where are you taking me my love, where?  
You take me, set me on fire, and then leave me  
in the vain path of the air  
that is a sin... that is a sin...  
the pigeons fly  
the pigeons come down...  
My love, I fear the silence of your hands.  
Scratch my blood so the horse can sleep.  
My love, female birds fly to you  
take me as a wife and breathe.  
My love I will stay and breasts will grow for you  
The guards take me out of your way  
my love, I will cry upon you, upon you, upon you.  
because you are die surface of my sky.  
My body is the land,  
the place for you...  
the pigeons fly  
the pigeons come down...

## Mahmoud Darwish and Marcel Khalife, the poetry and music duo

Darwish and [Marcel Khalife](#) formed a duo performing poetry and music. The Lebanese singer, who is distinguished by his patriotic songs, put dozens of Darwish's poems to music and sang them. Their journey together began after the civil war in Lebanon, when Khalife was isolated at home and had Darwish's books for company. "I felt that Mahmoud Darwish's poetry was a part of me," he explained, "so his mother's bread tasted like my mother's bread, as well as Rita's eyes, and Joseph's pain from the stab of his brothers, and his passport bearing my photo."

After that, the two friends travelled to Paris without any particular plan in mind. Their collaboration began, the results of which were met with unparalleled approval among the Arab public.

In a eulogy for Darwish after his death, Marcel Khalife said: "If you listen, you will hear the echo of our voices coming from a place far away, from the time when you died. Perhaps our life is nothing but those sounds, Mahmoud. Life has filled your hands with flowers and forgot to give you a vase."

The dialogue with Darwish's poetry did not end after his death, and his poems remained an inspiration for Khalife to find the music within their lines. "You alone, Mahmoud, lived on the other side of the heart. There is no meaning that satisfies me except what you write, you did not write your last poem in order to prepare ourselves for lamentations. Why are you in a hurry to be absent while you are the question, and you are the answer, and you are the issue?"

## Extract from "Earth Poem"

A dull evening in a rundown village  
 Eyes half asleep  
 I recall thirty years  
 And five wars  
 I swear the future keeps  
 My ear of corn  
 And the singer croons  
 About a fire and some strangers  
 And the evening is just another evening  
 And the singer croons  
 And they asked him:  
 Why do you sing?  
 And he answered:  
 I sing because I sing...  
 And they searched his chest  
 But could only find his heart  
 And they searched his heart  
 But could only find his people  
 And they searched his voice  
 But could only find his grief  
 And they searched his grief  
 But could only find his prison  
 And they searched his prison  
 But could only see themselves in chains

When a person reads Mahmoud Darwish's poetry for the first time, there is a sense of ecstasy and a feeling that he has taken from him what satisfies his sensory and moral needs. Palestinians in particular see in Darwish's poetry his tragedy, and at the same time his dreams and hopes, as he lived the epic of his struggle and the original expression of his national

identity. And when he is read for the second time, we find deeper dimensions, and this is repeated after each reading.

Darwish realised the epic nature of the Palestinian struggle against Zionism and its supporters. His poetry came to resemble the nature of this struggle, which can only be understood through deep knowledge. It is a tragic existential struggle, just as epics and legends are, so it was no coincidence that myths were a basic component of Darwish's poetry.

In total, Darwish and his poetry are a product of this reality and the product of his personal experience with the Nakba and then with racism and the revolution in the ongoing bitter confrontation with the Zionist narrative and its racist project that denies and nullifies the existence of the Palestinian people.

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