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Editor's Note: Mahmoud Darwish's Parting Gift

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Abstract: This is an editor's note to the Special 2009 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* in commemoration of Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), the Palestinian National Poet. The issue is titled "If I touch the depths of your heart...": The Human Promise of Poetry in Memories of Mahmoud Darwish." Besides providing an overview and appreciation of the contributions in the volume, the editor notes: "The basic gift that I personally take out of publishing this special issue and its considerable peer reviewing experience, one that I call Darwish's parting gift to me, co-editors and contributors in this volume, I think, is that poetry is not just about writing, but also about reading it, about the art of listening as well, to be able to reach out and let the message touch one's heart. The Palestinian challenge and cause, in their essence, is about not only telling, but also listening to oneself and to the other. That, it seems to me, is the lesson I am taking from this experience, thanks to all the considerable efforts made by all the co-editors and the voices of all the contributors."

*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*

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*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,
“I Long for My Mother’s Bread”

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), one of the greatest contemporary Arab and world poets, was born in Palestine. His family fled in 1948 when Israeli forces attacked his village. He lived in Israel and Lebanon, studied in Moscow and worked in Paris as editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Al-Karmel*. He published more than thirty volumes of poetry and eight books of prose and was regarded as Palestine’s Poet Laureate.

“I thought poetry could change everything, could change history and could humanize,” Darwish said in an interview with *The Progressive* in 2002, “and I think that the illusion is very necessary to push poets to be involved and to believe... but now I think that poetry changes only the poet” (<http://www.progressive.org/node/1575>; article by Nathalie Handal). Yet, it is not difficult to find millions around the world who have been deeply touched at heart by the power and promise of his poetry. *Common Ground News* featured a mourning for Darwish on August 14, 2008, where his words, “I had enough yesterdays; what I need is a tomorrow” are remembered. Recalled also are the following words expressed by Darwish during his last performance in July 2008 in Ramallah, words that convey the depth of Darwish’s heart and the sociological imagination inspiring his poetry:

As you prepare your breakfast—
think of others. Don’t forget to feed
the pigeons. As you conduct your
wars—think of others. Don’t forget

those who want peace. As you pay
your water bill—think of others.
Think of those who only have clouds
to drink from. As you go home, your
own home—think of others—don’t
forget those who live in tents. As you
sleep and count the planets, think of
others—there are people who have
no place to sleep. As you liberate
yourself with metaphors think of oth-
ers—those who have lost their right
to speak. And as you think of distant
others—think of yourself and say “I
wish I were a candle in the darkness.”
([http://www.commonground-
news.org/arti-
cle.php?id=23736&lan=en&sid=0&s
p=0](http://www.commonground-news.org/article.php?id=23736&lan=en&sid=0&sp=0); translated and included in the
article by Ibtisam Barakat)

This special 2009 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* is dedicated to the theme “If I touch the depths of your heart”: The Human Promise of Poetry in Memories of Mahmoud Darwish.” A collective of dedicated co-editors at UMass Boston comprised of (alphabetically) Anna D. Beckwith (Sociology), Elora Chowdhury (Women’s Studies), Leila Farsakh (Political Science), Askold Melnyczuk (English), Erica Mena (UMass Boston Alumni), Dorothy Nelson (English), Joyce Peseroff (English), and Rajini Srikanth (English), dedicated much of their time, love, and attention to realizing this special issue in collaboration with the journal editor as a parting gift from Mahmoud Darwish—a gift not only to readers, but also a gift to one another, of keeping a wonderful and engaging conversation with one another for many months. My thanks to them all for their generous words, thoughts, understandings, and energies. The beautiful expression “human promise of poetry” was one used as the title of an event at UMass Boston in late Fall 2008 (December 9, 2009) organized by Dorothy Shubow Nelson, Rajini Srikanth, Leila Farsakh, Askold Melnyczuk, Joyce Peseroff, Erica Mena, and

others to belatedly commemorate the untimely passing of Mahmoud Darwish on March 3, 2008 and to remember and recite his life and poetry amid a wide campus audience. My proposal later to devote an issue of *Human Architecture* to Mahmoud Darwish may have been delayed if it was not for the warm and heart-felt encouragement of Dorothy Shubow Nelson who in later months became a most dedicated and engaged co-editor alongside other colleagues.

We were enormously pleased and fortunate to receive a series of wonderful submissions from many voices that adorn the pages of this special issue on Darwish, a fact that speaks to the power of Darwish's life (and passing) to touch the depths of the hearts of so many around the world throughout the decades. Other than keynote opening statements, the special issue is comprised of a selected series of longer and shorter poems by Mahmoud Darwish, followed by commemorative poetry, and then commemorative essays/articles that directly or indirectly engage with Mahmoud Darwish's work and/or the subject matter of his passion and love, Palestine and human rights and dignity.

UMass Boston Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Winston Langley, generously continued his by now relatively long tradition of contributing an opening key statement to the journal, in this case titled "Candle," having read almost all of the contributions before drafting his moving statement. Martha Collins shared with us her stunningly moving and expressive words in "For Gaza," ones that resonate well in the hearts and minds of all those who witnessed through the media and news the tragedies of Gaza in the ending days of 2008 and early days of 2009. She had recited her poem in an event on January 30, 2009, in Cambridge, MA, protesting the atrocities being committed in Gaza. It is thanks to co-editor Askold Melnyczuk who invited her (and Robert Lipton, see further below) to contribute to the issue, that we

can share the gift, in memory of Mahmoud Darwish, of her poem.

We are deeply appreciative of Palestinian-American poet and major translator of Mahmoud Darwish's work, Fady Joudah, who contacted the editors for consideration of sharing his introduction to a still-yet-to-be-finalized/published collection of translations of Darwish's poetry, titled *If I Were Another: Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009). We are grateful to him, and to Joyce Peseroff who reminded me again later in the process to contact Joudah to inquire into the possibility. He graciously offered the introduction from his forthcoming book, and facilitated not only the acquiring of permission from the publisher, but also proposed the publication of selections from Darwish's shorter poems from *A River Dies of Thirst: Journals*, as masterly translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham. Again Joudah offered the necessary contacts to acquire the necessary permissions from the latter collection's publisher, Archipelago, NY. The representation of Darwish's voice in the collection, in the form of three longer poems ("The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech to the White Man"; "Tuesday and the Weather is Clear"; and "Hoopoe"), and seven shorter ones ("A River Dies of Thirst"; "Assassination"; "Nero"; "The Enemy"; "The House as Casualty"; "The Rest of A Life"; and "If We Want To"), then is owed to Fady Joudah (and by extension Catherine Cobham) and their publishers and we are very thankful of that. I strongly urge readers to seek the new latest collections of Darwish's poetry as noted above.

Then we are most fortunate to have a collection of gifts of poetry from Lisa Suhair Majaj, another major Palestinian-American poet, writer and scholar. Her keynote poems are very moving and most representative of the inspiring offerings that, as in Darwish, come to us from the struggles and toils of Palestinians. Amy Tighe's letter to Darwish speaks to the very heart of our call for papers/submissions for the issue, for

through her poem/letter she speaks so eloquently and clearly why Darwish's humble words that poet only changes him/herself and not the world needs second thinking. Dorothy Shubow Nelson's poem "Truth" speaks to the hopes and pains of the separated families of Jews and Palestinians in search of a lasting peace and return to their common peoplehood, while Joyce Peseroff's poem "American Idol" invites us to seriously reflect on the changing (or not) nature of warfare, such as those waged by Israel in Gaza, through the millennia. Robert Lipton, in "Darwish Sits In" weaves the everyday moments and the larger historical predicament of Palestinians as conveyed through the poetic sense of Mahmoud Darwish, while Fady Joudah, who also kindly offered one of his own poems for the collection, titled "Wreck," directs our attention, in his own words, to the fact that "so much of the architecture of contemporary humanitarianism gives over the role of master morality at the expense of a true affirmation of life."

Shaari Neretin, invited to contribute by co-editor and Palestinian scholar Leila Farsakh, provides a compelling sense, in the form of a metaphor "The Lost and Found Warehouse" for what it must be like for a whole people to be faced with the loss of one's not only land and lives, but also with that of one's memories, while poet Jack Hirschman, memorializes Mahmoud Darwish, in his poem "Mantra for Mahmoud Darwish" offered in French and kindly translated by co-editor Erica Mena.

Then we have a series of excellent essays and articles in commemoration of Darwish, his work, and the historical context that embraced him. Leila Farsakh's keynote essay gives flesh and blood to the minute everyday ways in which Palestinians enjoyed and were moved and inspired by Darwish's poetry throughout decades. Rajini Srikanth shares with her readers, as frankly as it is courageous, her growing up challenges of learning about the Palestinian

people's struggles, and in doing so, practices a sociological imagination exemplary for many sociologists to follow. Erica Mena makes significant contribution to understanding a dimension of Darwish's life and work that may perhaps be lost in the attention given to his immediate struggles for Palestinian rights to national self-determination; Mena directs our attention to the paradoxical consideration that what made Darwish and his work so influential worldwide was his ability to speak not only critically about his people's immediate tasks, but also the broader post-national sensibilities, historically long-delayed, that Darwish also speaks to and promote through his poetry.

Kyleen Aldrich presents an important voice in comparing the historical dilemmas facing Palestinians and Native Americans, through her comparative analysis of the works of Darwish and Silko, while Nadia Alahmed pursues a similar aim, by creatively comparing the struggles of Palestinians and African-Americans as framed by the matrix of nationalism. And finally, Patrick Sylvain, extends an in-depth analysis of Darwish's work and poetry in both historical and biographical contexts.

The basic gift that I personally take out of publishing this special issue, one that I call Darwish's parting gift to us, co-editors and contributors in this volume, I think, is that poetry is not just about writing, but also about reading it, about the art of listening as well, to be able to reach out and let the message touch one's heart. The Palestinian challenge and cause, in their essence, is about not only telling, but also listening to oneself and to the other. That, it seems to me, is the lesson I am taking from this experience, thanks to all the considerable efforts made by all the co-editors and the voices of all the contributors.

Just to give the reader a taste of conversation that accompanied the significant and serious peer reviewing and publication of

this issue, I can cite a few examples from the contributions of the co-editor Dorothy Shubow Nelson:

Dear Behrooz, I have just finished reading Nadia Alahmed's comparative paper (26 pages) on the Black Arts Movement and the Palestinian Culture of Resistance. I was thrilled to read this fascinating paper and experience the energetic commitment of Nadia Alahmed to this project. In addition to describing the historical and political roots of these movements her paper shows how the cultural works that emerged "erased the borders" between politics and art. Poetry, because of its moral vision, passion and hope, can help to create the country. Scholars and writers are integrated fluently throughout these pages and contribute to making the historical moments which created the momentum for these artistic movements, come alive. ... When the poems begin to appear on these pages (Darwish's poetry as well as others) with critical commentary, the reader is riveted. The recognizing powers of the mind are fused with and illuminated and heightened by the imagination. There is so much to learn from reading this paper.

Alahmed informs us that "Traces of Darwish's poetry can be found on the political documents of the P.L.O," for example. As well, there are important reasons to revisit the origins and development of the Black Arts movements of the 60's and 70's. The essay is liberationist throughout: for example, revolutionary leaders and forces that influenced the political development of many in the Black Arts Movement are acknowledged. In addition the "neo-colonial nature of the state of Israel" is discussed directly and forcefully. Alahmed's explication of Fanon's theory of culture in

oppressed countries is a springboard for her astute comparisons. She asserts that "culture is one of the main targets of the oppressors"... and "Culture gives us a revolutionary moral vision and a system of values and a methodology around which to shape the political movement." Reading this paper confirms and deepens our understanding of the love for and continued devotion to Mahmoud Darwish. Sincerely, Dorothy.

Regarding Fady Joudah's translations of Darwish's poetry in *If I Were Another: Poems*, Nelson had the following to offer:

I have just finished reading the first 100 pages of IF I WERE ANOTHER and wanted to share my thoughts briefly with you. ...

This is a challenging task—to choose a few poems from this extraordinary collection of Darwish's work. From the first poem to the one I just finished (A Horse for the Stranger) I was carried away, completely absorbed and taken in by the language, tone, lines, cadences, historic scope, ironies, electric metaphoric expressions and the determination of the poet to reach for what is almost inexpressible in these poems. The poems soar like the birds that Darwish speaks of. The connection of human existences to the earth and all living things is both ancient and very contemporary here. I felt the presence of the poet and the emotional power of the poems strongly as I have in reading *Memory for Forgetfulness* which was translated by Ibrahim Muhawi. Darwish's reading of ancient scriptures (Arabic and Hebrew) bring these poetic texts to life. In A Horse for the Stranger, The West is awakened to an Iraq that is not the Iraq they know.

I appreciate so much Nelson's and all issue co-editors for the gift of conversations on this journal issues.

As editor of this issue, I must say that working on it has encouraged me to be even more than usual open, to listen, and to try to understand the other; and this I consider to be Darwish's parting gift to me personally. Perhaps a poem's touching one's heart is a two-way street, and not just a result of efforts and skill of the master poet. And it is this insight, perhaps, that may explain why poems can change life. Perhaps the answer to Darwish's question, regarding whether poem can change the world or not, is somewhere in between, and not predetermined. Poetry CAN change both the poet and the world. It may not change one or the other, but it CAN, and this requires the participation of both the poet and the reader. And as Amy Tighe, the listener to Darwish's voice, writes by example in her letter to Darwish, listening to poems is and must be seen as an integral part of its art. So, we have many further poets in you, the reader, to reach out to, by publishing this issue, and having you read it.

One last, final point, is in order before I close this already long editor's note. This relates to the journal's cover image. I was struck by the image, when it first emerged soon after the Israeli invasion of Gaza in Dec. 2008-January 2009. The image is quite powerful, and speaks to the depth of strength, hope, energy and inspiration of Palestine and its people. Amid such tragedy and horror, its children express their humanity and love for life, and the continuity of their struggles, so well, simply, and powerfully. A living poem indeed, a Darwish resurrecting from the rubble, his wood firing the hope of those witnessing the children's play.

Meanwhile, I was shocked and deeply saddened by the images coming from Iran recently, specially the bullet piercing the heart of Neda Agha Soltan, who was so innocently killed just for expressing her wish

that her vote be counted. There have been many others killed, injured, and yes, over many decades, on all sides of the Iranian social conflict as well. Tragedies have befallen Iran too, and it has had its own shares and forms of them. The look of imminent death in the rolling eyes of Neda just before her sudden passing has haunted me as so many others, and reminded me so painfully of the look in the eyes of the Palestinian boy Mohammed just before he died a few years ago being protected by his father against the bullets of Israeli soldiers amid a cross fire. The look in the eyes were exactly the same, the horror of the moment was captured by the sophisticated technologies, which were not invented for transformative purposes, but for "American Idol" (see Joyce Peseroff's poem in this issue) entertainments, perhaps. But people are inventive, creative, and make new uses of the "Antikythera mechanisms" of today in exposing the modern achilles' war conquests. But amid the deepening conflict in Iran, and in a global context as well, what the image of the children of Gaza on the journal cover conveys is strength and hope, of joy amid adversity, and of coping with hardships amid a long, long struggle. Iranians can again learn a lesson or two from the hopeful and skin-thick children of Gaza, in whose veins and skeletons and flesh and blood, Darwish and his spirit is living. On their makeshift razed playground they tell us not to give up hope in making sure their lives, and votes, are counted.

In a last communication from Lisa Suhair Majaj, she wrote:

"Ah, if only Mahmoud Darwish were here to see our humble honoring of him!"

I can't find a better way to end this editor's note, and on behalf of all the issue co-editors, and let the reader move on to the heart of the human promise of poetry in the following memories of Mahmoud Darwish.