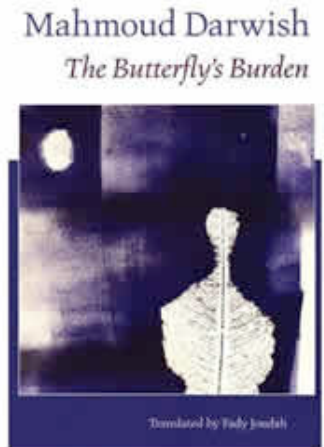


The Butterfly's Burden

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 Mahmoud Darwish
 Translated by Fady Joudah

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Reviewed by Deema K. Shehabi



Since his first volumes appeared in English, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish has been captivating his readers with a highly distinctive, imaginative, yet rooted language steeped in the telling and retelling of luminous myths, exilic histories, and prophecies on love and nature. *The Butterfly's Burden*, his latest book, constitutes three recent volumes of poetry: *The Stranger's Bed* (1998), Darwish's first collection of love poems; *A State of Siege* (2002) and *Don't Apologize for What You've Done* (2003), both distilled from the political realities of displacement and occupation, and the role of the recreated (ultimately indestructible) poetic "I" (the self) in those afflictions. The result is a lyrically buoyant conversation addressing the experience of exile; the simultaneous heaviness and lightness of that particular tension will remain etched in the reader's mind long after reading.

The late Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali once said that it is the translator's challenge to make English behave out of its aesthetic habit. As such, these translations by Palestinian-American poet and physician, Fady Joudah, are a triumph. Not only is he faithful to the circumambient style of Darwish's syntactic diversions, but he also promises great freedom for interpretation when he invites the reader to "...dance and breathe, whether with consonant or vowels—to meet the curvature of the phrase in the Darwish poem," as he says in the book's preface.

Darwish's poetry weaves across time with ease and a modern sensibility; in one poem, he might be dwelling in the deep, glorious fountains of Andalusian thought while studying the behaviour of a "quasi-orientalist." In another, he might dip his pen into the oceanic depths of pre-Islamic poetry only to emerge on a 20th century Jerusalem street corner. Based on its sensual longing, "Your Night is of Lilac" is one of the most ornamentally representational poems in *The Stranger's Bed*, where Darwish describes a night: "that flourished in its Jahili poetry/on the whims of Imru' el-Qyss and others/and widened for the dreamers the milk path to a hungry/moon in the remoteness of speech..." The

metaphor is not only extended, but also it prevents the reader from compartmentalizing the image of the hungry moon. In previous lines, the reader learns just how expansive Darwish's historical reservoir is when he says: "Night/staring at itself safe and assured in its/endlessness, nothing celebrates it except its mirror/and the ancient shepherd songs in a summer of emperors/who get sick on love."

One of the most powerful examples of the recreated and dualistic "I" in the collection is the female voice in Darwish's poem "Two Stranger Birds in Our Feathers":

"Say/that two people, like you and me/can carry all this resemblance between fog/and mirage, then safely return. My sky/is ashen, so what do you think of when the sky/is ashen?" This simple, almost hypnotic question provokes a thought metamorphosis as the reader considers the resemblance between fog and mirage. Many of the love poems in *The Stranger's Bed* encompass the haunting duality of the male/female experience. There's always a "We" born out of an "I", which results in a spiritual unity that comes from the reassessment of—and reconciliation between—the female and male voice.

Parallel to his less formulaic, metaphysical love poetry is Darwish's touchingly honest renderings of the quotidian experiences of modern-day Palestinians. Having lived in Ramallah during the siege of 2002, he recalls that dismal time with a language that is seemingly easy, accessible, and yet bursting with complex epiphany. In the book-length poem, *A State of Siege*, compressed language contrasts sharply with the vastness of meaning behind words, and elucidates the affirmation of universal human values despite collective suffering. In one part, Darwish hones in on an imaginary conversation between an interrogator and a detainee in which the latter says: "...Yes/I don't love you. Who are you that I should love you?/Are you some of my I, and a meeting over tea/And a nay's hoarseness, and a song that I should love you?/But I hate detainment and I don't hate you." By the end of this section, the reader will marvel at the visual power of the poems as well as Darwish's balancing of aesthetic discovery with the immediacy of real events as he redefines what it means to have peace: "Salaam upon whoever splits with me the attention to/light's ecstasy, the butterfly's light, in/this tunnel's light."

The elusiveness of sustained peace is reflected in Darwish's language play; his metaphorical leaps and fast-paced tone shifts give the reader continually changing pictures and undiscovered angles of perception. In the poem "What Will Remain?" from *Don't Apologize for What You've Done*, he questions the very essence of loss: "What will remain of the hemorrhage of a green idea?/—Water in holm oak veins." Indeed, the entire work is built on a feeling of transience, or of moving through the brief homesteads of exile: along the coastal road, in Egypt, in Syria, in Tunis, and in Beirut, where the poet finds himself "in a seat in an abandoned theater."

While meditative wanderings form much of *Don't Apologize for You've Done*, eulogies and switchbacks to conversations with Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, Iraqi poet Al-Sayyab, Egyptian poet Amal Donqul, and Kurdish poet Saleem Barakat are the places where Darwish's language alights and burns and alights again: "The Kurd remembers, when I visit him, his tomorrow..../so he sweeps it away with a broom:/...And my heart is the Kurd's ember over his blue mountains..." Finally, Darwish dissolves the threshold between the constraints of national narrative, the necessary isolation of a poet's creativity, and the sense of communal belonging. He does this in order to reclaim a world born anew in his poetry, a world of infinite possibilities when "another day will come, a womanly day/songlike in gesture, lapis in greeting/and in phrase. All things will be feminine outside the past," an enchanted day where "...a dove will sleep in the afternoon in an

abandoned/combat tank if doesn't find a small nest/ in the lovers' bed..."



Deema K. Shehabi is a Palestinian-American poet. Born in the Arab world, she arrived in the US in 1988, where she completed an MS in journalism. Her poems have appeared in various anthologies and journals including *Crab Orchard*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Literary Imagination*, and *The Poetry of Arab Women*. She has been nominated for a Pushcart prize, and is currently the Vice-President of the Radius of Arab-American Writers (RAWI).