

**MAHMOUD  
DARWISH**

*Something Out of Nothing:  
A Letter to Samih al-Qasim*  
Translated from Arabic  
by Ibrahim Muhawi

# No one dreams as another does,

and no one dreams for another. Yet poetry dreams that it may dream for all, and on behalf of all. Is this how we are able to explain the permanent and mysterious need for it? Or is it by the desired pain of love that we don't want? Or by aching for a woman we do love, yet pretending it's her we love, not love itself. Or is it perhaps by pretending the opposite, as if we loved love itself in the shape of a woman we don't really love?

We're always changing. We change without signals, and for no reason.

And it's in the power of a bird flying on its way to lift us out of an abyss as it marks with its beak the line of the horizon.

It's also in the power of a visiting bird to dump dirt on us.

I'm not pessimistic to the point of delirium, but one day when I brought in my first cup of coffee to sip it slowly, I heard a strange moaning in the corner of the room. A moaning emerging from the ashes of the morning. I fixed my gaze at its source but I couldn't see a thing. As it appeared to be coming from the wall, I approached it, only to find a strange body asleep in the lampshade.

Do you know what I found?

I discovered a big bird hiding there, with a large pebble in its long yellow beak. I took it for a good omen at first, but was soon alarmed at its lack of fear. I waved my hand at it, but it didn't move. I shouted at it, but it didn't try to fly away. It gazed at me from this close distance. It was gazing with eyes wide open, without interruption or fear. It was threatening me, menacing me, piercing my breast and turning into a wild creature. I tried with an umbrella to force it away

and leave me my morning, but I didn't succeed.

So I took my coffee and my disappointment, and went to hide in another room. What is this bird that is turning into a letter I didn't want to receive? Eventually, I became fully convinced this visitor was not a bird. What then was it?

Do beautiful creatures have the power to stir within us this type of pessimism? And can they also fix us with such piercing looks? The woman who looks after the apartment was able to get the bird out of the lamp and throw it out of the room, only for it to return a second and third time until it died where it wanted to die — in my lamp. But why did it hold that large pebble in its beak? Was it a message from someone? Was it a present? What did it want to say to me? What did it want from me?

No one can wipe away the urgency of that vision. How long, I wonder, will that pebble and those eyes follow me around?

Several months later, and without my having said anything to her about that bird, the Assyrian diviner Junia said to me: "Don't fear what you saw. You will live. That bird was dying instead of you, leaving behind a cold bed for a deserted woman. Do you know her?"

"I don't know her," I answered.

"I see that you're lying," she said. "Is it your habit to lie?"

"In these matters," I answered, "there's no recourse but to lie. But where did I see that bird?"

"In your imagination," she said.

Junia is not a magician or a fortune teller. She's a medical researcher and a member of the Academy of Sciences. She has in her hands an electrical power which enables her to determine with great accuracy the magnetic field around the human body. She can observe whatever flaws there are in that field. If there is anything pointing to the existence of an illness, she can diagnose it.

She had me stand up for two minutes without asking me to remove my clothes. She moved her hands around my body, and then said, "There's something wrong with your heart. In the bottom right-hand corner of your stomach there's some disorder. In your bladder there's an infection. In your left leg there's some

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hardening of the arteries. And in your third tooth on the left there is some pain."

"And what's on my mind?" I asked jokingly.

"A woman gradually fading, and the name of a flower gradually opening."

"And where do I live?"

"On the fifth floor of a building surrounded by trees."

I went to the hospital, and after a week of testing and probing, the medical report revealed what Junia had discovered in two minutes.

"And what's on my mind?" I joked with the professor.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Do you see the name of a flower opening?" I asked.

"Are you a poet?" he said.

"No," I answered, "but Junia could tell what was in my body long before you were able to know, and she said that on my mind was the name of a flower opening."

He said, "Junia's a doctor, not a diviner."

Then he recited his medical instructions. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't get angry. Don't get tired. Don't get excited. Don't worry. Don't fall in love. Don't be sad. Don't get agitated. Don't think. Don't get drunk. Don't stay up late.

"Enough! Enough!" I shouted. "You could easily turn any poet into an ass." "But," he retorted, "are you able to turn an ass into a doctor?"

Are we in need of this kind of good health? Are we in need of an ass like myself?

This reminds me of the story of the political prisoner sentenced to death. A few hours before carrying out the sentence, they asked him for his last request. He said, "I want to get married so I can leave behind a son to carry my name." They found his request strange, but they brought a prostitute into his cell. In a few minutes she came out, and he hadn't touched her. They asked him why he had given up his desire to have a child, and he answered, "This homeland is already full of sons of whores. It's in no need of a new one."

But, dear friend, I ask you, "Is not a living ass better than a dead poet?"

Perhaps.

In any case, we wouldn't like to believe that it's praiseworthy for anyone to empty the poet of any of his idealism. Certainly not in the philosophical sense. Otherwise, what is the meaning of a bird that can kill you, or one that can bring you back to life? For in the territory of the spirit, in the obscure regions of the soul, there's a domain which science has not yet reached. And it cannot be seen or treated except with magic, poetry, and a mysterious power to see what cannot be seen. If not, how then could Junia have read the name of a flower opening in my heart and mind? She's a woman who feeds me in winter and I am like a chestnut roasted on the brazier of happiness. She's a woman... Before I even saw her, I dreamed I was flying with her on a white cloud hugging a flower.

And how could a young woman have revealed her fears to her mother: "I don't want to go with you on this trip because I'm afraid." "What're you afraid of?" asked the mother, and the girl answered, "In my sleep I saw a bird with legs twisted and head bowed." But they took her on the trip anyway. Suddenly the trembling girl threw herself into her mother's lap. "I'm afraid," she said. "Afraid. Death has come!" And before she had finished her sentence, her family's car crashed into another with such force that the girl was thrown some distance away. The mother watched from afar, only to see her daughter take the shape of the bird of her dream — her head bowed, her legs twisted, and dead.

What does science have to say about that?

Here, too, I am coming out of a dream all of a sudden. Opening the door of my apartment to pick up the morning mail, I saw oranges filling the entrance of the house. Yellow, golden oranges, with a square orange the size of the door at their head.

You know that I don't like the taste of oranges, however much their colour enchants me. And when I woke up, I ate an orange and waited to see what the oranges of my dream would reveal. Then I remembered the first woman who twenty years ago made me eat oranges in order to prove that I loved her. Is she like the winter woman now, who forces me to love not only her but also the love of her and the sensations it spreads in my spirit and releases in my body of galloping horses?

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In this context it is not necessary to ask, "Does reality shape the matter of our dreams, or is it the dream that forms the elements of our reality?" That is because the comprehension of scientists is different from the insight of poets who need to read reality with the implements of the dream.

What do I want to say to you?

Nothing. Nothing to say, except to carry on with reflections which are not focused on a particular subject. Such thoughts open out on a mystery that we are not able to grasp in ourselves, a mystery which elucidates and clarifies poetry to such an extent that we may define the poet through them as the being who has thousands of "antennas of perception." These discern the distant lightning, sense the storm from afar, and make out the approaching time that has no duration. And the poet... He is a visionary, true. Because he considers his dreams.

Is it strange then that the diviner, a member of the Academy of Sciences, should need poetry to grasp what she can't understand — the names of places, women, and flowers that she's read in our minds?

Don't ask if I actually believe what is said to be nonsense.

Rather ask if I believe in my need for poetry.

Everything is grey these days. Grey and black. Grey, written with a cosmic black charcoal. Yet, in order to increase the number of oranges around my heart, this little card has reached me from a young woman, Zeinab, who comes from the very land of the airport. "You have entered our heart without identity papers," the card says. "And because we know your place of birth, our hearts have received and embraced you even more. So, to hell with the airport. Let's understand each other and laugh together until they cry."

I thank Zeinab because she has made up the difference, and because she has shown me something I didn't know: one can dream the dream of the other, and one can dream for another.

And this alone, this alone is what poetry tries to express.

Your brother,

Mahmoud Darwish

*Paris, 27 January 1987*