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In Jerusalem by Mahmoud Darwish

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In Jerusalem, I mean within the old wall,
I walk from one era to another without a memory
guiding me. And the prophets there distribute
the history of the holy amongst themselves... They ascend to the heavens
and return with less frustration and sadness, for love
and peace are holy, and both come into the city.
I used to walk above a slope and ponder: how
could the narrators differ when speaking of light in a stone?
Is it that from a scarcely lit stone wars erupt?
I walk in my sleep. I stare while I dream. I do not
see a soul behind me. I do not see a soul in front of me.
All of this light is for me. I walk. I am light. I fly.
Then I transform into someone else. The words
grow like grass from the prophetic mouth of
Isaiah: "If your faith does not remain firm, then you will not remain secure."
I walk as if I am someone other than myself. And my wound is an evangelical
white rose. And my hands are like two doves
on the cross, soaring and bearing the earth.
I do not walk, I fly, I transform
into someone else. There is no place and no time. So who am I?
I am not myself in the moment of ascension. But I
think: on his own, the prophet Muhammad was
speaking in Classical Arabic. "And what next?"
What next? Suddenly a female soldier yelled:
It's you again? Haven't I killed you?
I said: you've killed me...and I, like you, have forgotten to die.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) was the informal poet laureate of Palestine, though he was forced to live in exile for many years. He wrote poems about the land and its unique traits as well as his strong connection to it, which was representative of his fellow Palestinians' connection to the land that has known decades of colonization, occupation, and oppression. All of these are present in his widely esteemed body of work.

The original poem, I feel, works diligently to create a very delicate and precise balance among the symbols of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Darwish includes a short citation from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, which he most likely had read in the original Hebrew. For that reason, I chose the NET Bible version over the King James translation, "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established," as it more closely resembles the stylistics of the poem and more literally represents both the Arabic version of the Old Testament as used by Darwish and the Hebrew original: "אִם לֹא תִאֱמְנוּ בִּי לֹא תִאֲמָנּוּ."

Darwish was also a talented orator of his own poetry. I urge the readers of this poem to listen to the poet's oration, even if they cannot understand the original Arabic. When translating, I often reverted to the poet's oral rendition of the poem, as the vocalization in the written version was occasionally questionable. A good example of Darwish reciting the poem may be found here: http://youtu.be/o1V_HlXmg8g.

Arabic is not my native language. I grew up between Tel Aviv and New York speaking Hebrew and English. It was only in high school that I began studying Arabic, and it took me several years of studying and specializing in Arabic to be able to read poetry. Mahmoud Darwish's works—both poetry and prose—are never as simplistic as their linguistic style may cause one to think. Darwish was a poet, yes, but also a displaced citizen; a Palestinian who had been banished from his own land; a multilingual and multicultural intellectual who knew how to communicate with his fellow Palestinians in Arabic as well as he did in Hebrew with Israelis and with followers in the West who spoke French and English. Yet his vision, like this poem, was not one of all-encompassing friendship and harmony.

Jerusalem had become a city of two peoples but it is, in fact, two cities in one. There is no symmetry between the occupying people and the people whom they oppress. Darwish treats the ancient traditions embodied in the city with almost impeccable equity. The three monotheistic religions are all given their fair share of attention: the Christian Evangel, the Jewish prophet Isaiah, and Muhammad, messenger of Islam, are all mentioned very briefly. But the ending breaks the idyllic balance. We are not told that the soldier is Jewish, but we know she is. We are not informed of the religious or ethnic background of the narrator, but the context reveals he is a Palestinian.

Translating this poem invoked my skills as a linguist, as a person who can communicate in Arabic, English, and Hebrew. Yet it also involved my great appreciation for Mahmoud Darwish as a symbol of the Palestinian struggle for freedom, a struggle I have been an ardent supporter of since childhood.