



The “Red Indian’s” Penultimate Speech to the White Man

Mahmoud Darwish

Translation by Fady Joudah

Did I say, The Dead?
There is no Death here,
there is only a change of worlds.
—Duwamish Chief Seattle

1.

Then, we are who we are in the Mississippi. We have what is left to us of yesterday
But the sky’s color has changed, and the sea to the east
has changed, master of white ones! horse master, so what do you want
from those who are going to the trees of the night?
Our souls are high, our pastures sacred, and the stars
are illuminated speech ... if you stare into them you would read our story entire:
we were born here between water and fire ... and will become reborn
in the clouds at the edge of the lapis coast after resurrection ... soon.
So do not kill the grass anymore, the grass has a soul in us that defends
the soul in the earth
Horse master! train your horse to apologize
to nature’s soul for what you have done to our trees:
Ah! my tree my sister
they have tortured you as they have tortured me
do not ask forgiveness
for the logger of your mother and mine ...

2.

... The white master will not understand the ancient words
here, in spirits emancipated between trees and sky ...
because Columbus the free has the right to find India in any sea,
and the right to name our ghosts as pepper or Indian,
and he is able to break the compass of the sea then mend it
along with the errors of the northerly wind. But he doesn’t believe

CREDIT: Darwish, Mahmoud. 2009. “The ‘Red Indian’s’ Penultimate Speech to the White Man.” Pp. 69-77 in *If I Were Another* by Mahmoud Darwish. Translation from the Arabic by Fady Joudah. New York: Farrar, Straus and Goroux. Gratefully reprinted by permission from the publisher of the poem.

humans are equal like air and water outside the map's kingdom!
 And that they are born as people are born in Barcelona, though they worship
 nature's god in everything ... and do not worship gold ...
 Columbus the free searches for a language he did not find here,
 and for gold in our kind ancestors' skulls, he did
 as he pleased with the dead and the living in us. Why then
 does he still see this annihilation from his grave to its end?
 Nothing remains of us but an ornament of ruin, and light feathers
 on the garments of the lakes. You have burst seventy million hearts ... enough,
 enough for you to return from our death as monarch of the new time ...
 isn't it time we met, stranger, as two strangers of one time
 and one land, the way strangers meet by a chasm?
 We have what is ours ... and we have what is yours of sky.
 You have what is yours ... and what is ours of air and water.
 We have what we have of pebbles ... and you have what you have of iron.
 Come, let's split the light in the force of shadow, take what you want
 of the night, and leave two stars for us to bury our dead in their orbit,
 take what you want of the sea, and leave two waves for us to fish in,
 take the gold of the earth and the sun, and leave the land of our names
 and go back, stranger, to your kin ... and look for India

3.

... Our names are trees of the deity's speech, and birds that soar higher
 than the rifle. Do not sever the trees of the name, you comers
 from the sea in war, and do not exhale your horses aflame in the plains,
 you have your god and we have ours. You have your faith and we have ours.
 So do not bury god in books that promised you a land in our land
 as you claim, and do not make your god a chamberlain in the royal court!
 Take the roses of our dreams to see what we see of joy!
 And sleep in the shadow of our willows to fly like pigeons
 as our kind ancestors flew and returned in peace.
 You will lack, white ones, the memory of departure from the Mediterranean
 you will lack eternity's solitude in a forest that doesn't look upon the chasm
 you will lack the wisdom of fractures, the setback of war
 you will lack a rock that doesn't obey the rapid flow of time's river
 you will lack an hour of meditation in anything that might ripen in you
 a necessary sky for the soil, you will lack an hour of hesitation between one path
 and another, you will lack Euripides one day, the Canaanite and the Babylonian
 poems and Solomon's songs of Shulamit, and you will lack the lily of longing
 you will lack, white ones, a memory that tames the horses of madness
 and a heart that scratches the rock to burnish itself on the violins' calling ...
 you will lack the confusion of the gun: if our murder is imperative, then do not
 kill the animals that have befriended us, and do not kill our yesterday
 you will lack a truce with our ghosts in the barren winter nights
 and you will lack a dim sun, a gibbous moon, for the crime to appear
 less festive on the movie screen, so take your time
 to kill god ...

time for us to be born in her, and return from and to her: we patiently give back to the earth her souls. And we preserve the memories of our loved ones in jars of oil and salt, we used to hang their names on the birds of the creeks. We were the first, there was no ceiling between the sky and the blue of our doors, there were no horses chewing the grass of our deer in the fields, no strangers passing through the nights of our wives, so leave a flute behind for the wind to cry over the wounded people of this place ... and over you tomorrow, to cry ... over you ... tomorrow!

5.

And as we bid our fires farewell, we don't return the greeting ...
 Don't write the decrees of the new god, the iron god, upon us, and don't ask the dead for a peace treaty, none of them remain
 to promise you peace with the self and others, we had
 longevity here, before England's rifles, before French wine
 and influenza, we used to live as we should live, companions of the gazelle.
 We memorized our oral history, we used to promise you innocence and daisies,
 you have your god and we have ours, you have your past and we have ours,
 and time is a river, when we stare into the river time wells up within us ...
 Will you not memorize a bit of poetry to halt the slaughter?
 Were you not born of women? Did you not suckle as we did
 the milk of longing for mothers? Did you not wear wings as we did
 to join the swallows? We used to announce spring to you
 so don't draw your weapons! We can exchange some gifts and some songs.
 My nation was here. My nation died here. Here the chestnut trees
 hide my nation's souls. My nation will return as air and light and water,
 so take my mother's land by sword, I won't sign my name
 to the peace treaty between the murdered and his killer, I won't sign my name
 to the purchase of a single hand's breadth of thorn around the cornfields,
 I know that I bid the last sun farewell, and that I wrap myself with my name
 to fall into the river, I know I will come back to my mother's heart for you
 to enter, master of white ones, your age ... Raise, then, above
 my corpse the freedom statutes that do not return the greeting, and chisel
 the iron cross on my rocky shadow, I will ascend in a little while the summits
 of song, the song of group suicides that parade their history to the far,
 and I will release the voices of our birds into them: right here
 the strangers conquered salt, the sea merged with clouds, and the strangers
 conquered the wheat chaff in us, laid out lines for lightning and electricity,
 here the eagle died depressed in suicide, here the strangers conquered
 us. And nothing remains for us in the new time.
 Here our bodies evaporate, cloud by cloud, into space.
 Here our souls glitter, star by star, in the space of song!

6.

A long time will pass for our present to become a past like us.
 But first, we will march to our doom, we will defend the trees we wear
 and defend the bell of the night, and a moon we desire over our huts.

We will defend the imprudence of our gazelles, the clay of our pots
 and our feathers in the wings of the final songs. In a little while
 you will erect your world upon our world: from our cemeteries
 you will open the road to the satellite moon. This is the age of industry. This
 is the age of minerals, and out of coal the champagne of the strong will dawn ...
 There are dead and settlements, dead and bulldozers, dead
 and hospitals, dead and radar screens that capture the dead
 who die more than once in life, screens that capture the dead
 who live after death, and the dead who breed the beast of civilization as death,
 and the dead who die to carry the earth after the relics ...
 Where, master of white ones, do you take my people ... and your people?
 To what abyss does this robot loaded with planes and plane carriers
 take the earth, to what spacious abyss do you ascend?
 You have what you desire: the new Rome, the Sparta of technology
 and the ideology
 of madness,
 but as for us, we will escape from an age we haven't yet prepared our anxieties for.
 We will move to the land of birds as a flock of previous humans
 and look upon our land through its pebbles, through holes in the clouds,
 look upon our land through the speech of stars
 and through the air of the lakes, through the fragile corn fuzz
 and the tomb's flower, through poplar leaves, through everything
 that besieges you, white ones, we will look, as dying dead, as dead
 who live, dead who return, who disclose the secrets,
 so grant the earth respite until it tells the truth, all the truth,
 about you
 and us ...

7.

There are dead who sleep in rooms you will build
 there are dead who visit their past in places you demolish
 there are dead who pass over bridges you will construct
 there are dead who illuminate the night of butterflies, dead
 who come by dawn to drink their tea with you, as peaceful
 as your rifles left them, so leave, you guests of the place,
 some vacant seats for your hosts ... they will read you
 the terms of peace ... with the dead!