



Letter to Mahmoud Darwish

Amy Tighe

UMass and Boston College Alumni and Poet

artighe@aol.com

Abstract: The tradition of poets writing letters to other poets allows us to speak to each other in our own language. Amy Tighe, an emerging poet, responds to Mahmoud Darwish through a combination of her own experience of being friends with a Palestinian family, and her love of the intimacy of poetry.

March 31, 2009

Dear Mahmoud,

It's early spring March, and late in the afternoon, so the sunlight is sweetly desired, soft and decadent. Six o'clock, I feel as if the evening is still miles away, and sun beams stroke my keypad like a familiar cat. I have been trying to write to you for days, still thinking about what you said, how to reach you, how to reach me.

You are whole and dead, I am struggling, alive. This is the first time since I was a college kid that I have no money. The only resources are my words, and the paper I steal from the office. Twenty years ago, it was BIC pens, now it's access to the company printer and web mail. It solemnly me, this lack of external resources, this closeness to an edge I used to think belonged to others, and I push myself to be able to listen. There are many times I feel I belong nowhere, so that this edge confronting me

makes me pay attention. You have now passed away; what do you want of me, still sickly alive? Why are there poems calling me to listen, to write, to call them "work"?

When my ex-husband, a freedom fighter I had known for decades, left me, I needed a roommate and so I advertised. I received a one line inquiry: "I am from Palestine, do you have a room for me?" As a divorced woman, hounded by the IRS, daughter of a German Jew and Irish immigrant, abandoned by a man who loved war more than me, I thought "in for a penny, in for a pound" and welcomed Abu Nour to my humble home. That has been one of the most comforting decisions I have ever made.

Abu Nour came as a scholar, with credentials and backing from an internationally renowned foundation; but more importantly, he came with a photo of his two-year-old daughter. In it, she is held tenderly by her mother and father as she reaches out for the camera—after all, she is

Amy Tighe is an emerging poet who has also performed as a storyteller locally as well as nationally. She is recently published as a poet, and appears at open mikes. She has studied the power of the spoken word in healing, through a five-year program on the Kabbalah as well as Native healing circles. Tighe is an accomplished businesswoman, and was one the country's first LEED AP Realtors. She has been interviewed on NPR for her work as a green Realtor as well her work as a certified laughter coach. She loves the beach, and writing about how women heal war and how we can become more human through knowing the natural world. Tighe has a BA in Economics from UMass and MBA from Boston College.

two, and wants to hold it, and be the center there, too. At the precise moment when I accepted his security deposit, I was given an entirely a new vision, a grappling hook into a future we all can have, and one I never knew I would love so much.

To love someone from Palestine is to say to one's bones "do you mind changing your skeletal configuration, please?" The friends I always counted upon no longer liked me, my family thought I was staying depressed and traumatized from the divorce, and I no longer was asked to dinner. I have learned there are many hungers, and all of them demand their own deep questions. Your bones might reply, "We are not sure you are whole enough to ask this." And so your fundamental structure comes into war with itself.

Abu Nour cooks a dish called "upside down stew"—the closest thing to American food I can think of is Shepard's pie; but his is better and on cold New England nights, makes me wonder how anyone in the hot desolate desert of Palestine could dominate the winter so well. It even warms my nervous bones. This is a form of poetry, to me—comparing and sharing food.

In his first class in his Ph.D. program, a woman from Israel said "I did not come to America to sit next to the enemy." Abu Nour has spoken with respect to my cats, done the dishes twice without asking, never leaves the toilet seat up and I hate this woman immensely. Even woman to woman, I hate her. Eventually, however, she and Abu Nour become solid friends and teach others how to see each other as real beings, in a loving way. This is a form of poetry to me, when I can let it in, a new form of meeting through word.

It turns out, Mahmoud, that I am a person who knows war from the past. I guess this is different from knowing war from the present, and I am sorry, I don't understand that. But I know war and what it does to families, from the past. There are memories, and realities that have not settled in

the corners, not become annoying dust bunnies, or even rich ripe loam, from which a healthy future will flourish. They stay in the center, a blind elephant that I try to run from, to evenly escape all that I am, every day. When I visit Abu Nour's mother-in-law, the TV is chronically on, in Arabic, and the current catastrophes are parallel echoes I hear in my own memory.

Abu Nour reminds me of my first brother who died. He believes in the sanctity of life, the tender promise that actually breaking bread between two people can bring. Abu Nour is devout with his pita bread; my brother was an alter boy. I notice this in my roommate and I write for the first time in years—a rocky poem decrying a woman I don't know and hate. I mention bread as covenant and am unsure why.

Abu Nour focuses on his studies and his family. He seems to have one goal: love everyone enough to get his family here. In less than a month, he succeeds and rises to the top of his academic class, secures a place for his child and wife to live with him. They leave my home and start their own. I am proud and devastated. I take a poetry class for refuge. The teacher needs three poems to show I can write, and I throw whatever I have at her. She accepts me into her class and I am taken under the wings of baby boomers and early retirees. I have no money, a crazy job as a real estate agent and one grappling hook—this poetry class. And so I write.

Khalti, Abu Nour's mother-in-law, makes baba ganoosh, and to me it is an Iliad, complex and generous. She adds pomegranate seeds to her recipe, which I interpret as the blood of Christ in flesh that has been smoked by hand, and my poetry class blanches. Christ and eggplant are apparently not congruous with Cambridge poets. Two of my classmates are upper class women from minority backgrounds, and I think that surely they will network with me, a working class woman, a real estate agent, and help me get "THAT MILLION

DOLLAR SALE” which will give me the comfort to write more. But they don’t. In class, they squabble over my use of words “*she spreads her branched thighs, against the barbed wire Israelis.*” They leave me unanointed, unknown. I am not a peer, just a poet and they tell me I could be another Wallace Stevens, but don’t hire me or refer me to their friends. I guess that is a compliment, or insult, I just can’t tell. I feel left out.

Poetry is intimacy. It is an intimate act to write, to ask your senses to reveal their selves to you, to ask your self to listen to yourself and trust what your fingers are saying, what your calves are hearing, what your pancreas sighs over. It is an intimate act to ask someone to read what you have written, will they hear, will they dissolve the way you do when you write? Are your readers capable of osmosis? Are you? Am I?

I know you have passed away, Mahmoud; but tell me, just how is the death of the body? I still don’t love all of my own body; but now that you have lost yours, do you miss it? That’s presumptuous of me, maybe you do have access to your full body, loving, sensual, heavenly and kind and you just don’t want to tell us—if so, we’d all want to die, then, eh?

There isn’t, to me, a way that poetry enters me and ends there, just remaining inside of me. It reverberates; they bounce around—the words, images, scents of what I write, of what others write, the jumble of it all. The structure of one poem, like a strand of futuristic DNA, can actually compel some of my cells to grow in new ways. My brain cells, my liver cells, my job cells, my social life cells...have all responded to a poem, at one time or another. Poetic phrases, singular sentences, have fed muscles in my diaphragm, the fascia in my torso, replenished the arteries in my shoulders and led me to march against nuclear arms.

My Palestinian friends unknowingly opened me to the poetry in their journey. The food they share, the family life I partic-

ipate in, the horrors and revulsion I am given when I mention their nationality to my old family and friends, are living poems. I believe that poetry doesn’t change anything, poetry touches everything, allows everything to be touched. Poetry allows the violent memories of war, which have been handed down to my eyes, to touch the violence my good friends are changing by studying peace here in the U.S. Poems tether longing to connection, intimacy to intimacy, they dovetail desire with satisfaction. One of the fundamentals of creation is that everything wants to be touched. In its simplicity, variety, complex patience, poetry touches everything, and poets are created to be capillaries.

I don’t agree, Mahmoud, that “poetry only changes the poet.” I believe that poetry is the beat of the deep heart as well as the living chambers of a heart that hears her own beat, and knows her rhythm joins the world.

In Peace,

Amy R. Tighe