



Darwish's act of Naming: Dehumanization and Subjectivity

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Abstract

If Darwish's writing were to be distilled into a single word, it would be resistance. The word appears in quiet refusals, in tenderness shaped by injury, in silence that gathers force, in dialogues that test the limits of identity. Naming becomes the pivot of these modes, a point where Darwish gathers the pressures of dispossession into a single act of articulation. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics, I trace how Darwish's poetics register the imposed atmosphere that strains Palestinian life and presses it toward a state engineered to diminish presence. I also draw on Paulo Freire's call to "name the world" and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphasis on relevance to trace the linguistic counter-pressure in Darwish's work. Through these frameworks, naming in Darwish's poetics departs from designation and becomes a practice that interrupts the forces producing dispossession. In this reading, naming becomes the site where linguistic practice unsettles necropolitical pressure and preserves the possibility of futures that the imposed atmosphere seeks to narrow, giving Darwish's poetry its distinct political and existential force. It brings into view the mechanisms that confine recognizability while shaping a discursive ground in which subjectivity sustains a presence that cannot be collapsed. Naming becomes the point where Darwish's language cuts through the necropolitical condition.

Keywords: colonialism, dehumanization, naming, necropolitics, resistance

Introduction

When the eminent Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, "The siege is a waiting game / Time held suspended on a ladder / leaning into the eye of a storm" (2010, p. 47), he captured an existence in which domination turns time into an attritional force. The colonial condition imposes a liminal state that binds the colonized to a spectral mode of living, where personhood

remains on the verge of erasure, and the grounds of agency are increasingly eroded. The colonial reach extends into consciousness, reshaping time into a closed loop of precarity that drains the foundations of being and nudges the colonized toward negation. The violence at work is sustained not only through overt brutality but through the steady remaking of reality, a process that restricts the colonized to identities authored by power. Their presence becomes tolerated as a diminished existence, monitored rather than acknowledged. This arrangement lies at the core of colonial rule, which preserves itself through claims over human worth. The colonizer determines whose life receives recognition and whose life is reduced to an object-state, rendered disposable. To inhabit this position is to live where suffering is expected. The pain of the colonized is not incidental; it is produced and circulated within narratives that cast their affliction as natural.

Darwish's lines above articulate a dispossessing colonial condition shared across contexts. Historical accounts of colonial rule show a comparable depiction of suspended being, one in which people were reduced to administratively managed bodies (Hochschild, 1999). This reduction generates a state of precarity in which life remains open to ongoing dispossession (Ferreira, 2024). Darwish's image of a ladder leaning into the eye of a storm captures that condition with spatial precision. The instability of this tilted structure reflects a fractured sense of orientation, a vertical unrest that mirrors the colonized self held between precarious ascent and imminent collapse.

Achille Mbembe (2019) illuminates this colonial logic by examining forms of governance that naturalize violence. In his account, oppressive systems produce subjects whose lives are organized around exposure to harm, creating what he calls "necropolitics" (p. 92), under which violence becomes rationalized as inevitable, sustained by manufactured threats that justify militarized control, a practice that extinguishes the subject's agency (Osterhammel, 2015; Verbeeck, 2020). This remains the case in contemporary forms of oppression, particularly regarding the Palestinian condition, where the exertion of power through "coercion or direct crude violence of killing" (Bashir, 2024, p. 126) is a stark reality. In occupied Palestine, the necropolitical logic manifests through the implementation of apartheid-like systems (Greenstein, 2020), acts of eradication (Pappe, 2016), the erection of physical and metaphorical walls (Barak, 2010), as well as the erasure of voice and presence (Natane, 2022). Israeli state discourse casts violence as a protective and historically necessary measure, embedding domination within a narrative of survival and moral restitution (Üngör, 2024). Aggression, thus, is rebranded as an act of warding off threats, and arbitrary policies are justified under the guise of security (Lentin, 2016). State narratives of ancestral reclamation further erase Palestinian histories, repositioning dispossession as restoration rather than domination. Simultaneously, the memory of Jewish victimhood is weaponized to silence dissent, positioning Zionists as perpetual victims whose actions are beyond reproach (Dana & Jarbawi, 2017). With this being the case, Palestinian resistance, whether armed or peaceful, is systematically dehumanized and delegitimized through labeling it as "terrorism" (Tatour & Tatour, 2023), reflecting the same colonial logic that would characterize the colonized condition as "barbarism" (Fanon, 2004).

Resistance and Subjectivity

In anticolonial contexts, resistance has taken many forms—ranging from narrative reclamation (Wa Thiong'o, 1986) to critiques of colonial epistemologies (Bhabha, 1995) and challenges to imposed binaries (Jefferess, 2008). Other strategies include silence as refusal (Wagner, 2012), interdependence as resistance (Shahjahan, 2014), and the rejection of alienation (Memmi, 1974). Across these approaches, a recurring principle emerges: the act of naming. Paulo Freire's assertion that one must "name the world to change it" is particularly relevant here (2000, p. 88). In this sense, naming is not just about articulating one's existence but also about claiming one's place in history, persisting against forces of erasure, and resisting dehumanization. For the colonized, this becomes a process of "overthrowing [an] unlivable existence with the whole force of his oppressed personality," as Albert Memmi puts it (1974, p. 164). Freire contends that the struggle for "humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization" (2000, p. 43). Hence, the process of humanization can only occur when dehumanization is acknowledged and confronted. I should note here that "naming the condition" is not an act of giving words to one's suffering but a recognition of the structures that deny one's humanity. To name the condition is to confront the structures that enforce dehumanization—transforming experience into knowledge and knowledge into resistance.

The issue of whether naming can suffice when power dictates whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced remains pressing. Freire makes the point that "critical consciousness" begins with the act of naming one's oppression, converting suffering into an awareness that empowers resistance (2000, p. 174). Naming one's condition initiates a shift from unarticulated suffering to conscious recognition, which enables a form of political and psychological agency. This awareness emerges most visibly in cultural and literary expression. Scholars widely note that cultural expression provides a space in which suffering is transformed into resistance (Harlow, 2023; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, emphasizes the connection between literature, culture, and identity, focusing on the perspective from which the colonized should view the world. For Wa Thiong'o, this takes the form of what he calls "the quest for relevance"—a commitment to articulating experience from the standpoint of the colonized (1986, p. 88). Wa Thiong'o positions "the quest for relevance" as a crucial means of exposing the ideological foundations of subjugation. Literature, according to Andrea Timár, "has the potential to brush history against the grain and present a story from the point of view of the dehumanized" (2021, p. 215). In my reading of Darwish in the following pages, I take the notion of "the quest for relevance" to suggest "naming," since the power to name is also the power to relate.

Naming the dehumanizing condition

If Darwish's writing were to be distilled into a single word, it would be resistance. The word appears in quiet refusals, in tenderness shaped by injury, in silence that gathers force, in

dialogues that test the limits of identity. Naming becomes the pivot of these modes, a point where Darwish gathers the pressures of dispossession into a single act of articulation. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics, I trace how Darwish's poetics register the imposed atmosphere that strains Palestinian life and presses it toward a state engineered to diminish presence. I also draw on Paulo Freire's call to "name the world" and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphasis on relevance to trace the linguistic counter-pressure in Darwish's work. Through these frameworks, naming in Darwish's poetics departs from designation and becomes a practice that interrupts the forces producing dispossession. In this reading, naming becomes the site where linguistic practice unsettles necropolitical pressure and preserves the possibility of futures that the imposed atmosphere seeks to narrow, giving Darwish's poetry its distinct political and existential force. It brings into view the mechanisms that confine recognizability while shaping a discursive ground in which subjectivity sustains a presence that cannot be collapsed. Naming becomes the point where Darwish's language cuts through the necropolitical condition.

In the poetry collection *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, Darwish renders dehumanization through recurrent images of distortion in the occupied space. The poem "The Land of the Stranger, the Serene Land" centers on the frailty of inhabiting a homeland "filled with you" (Darwish, 2003, p. 108), where the second-person pronoun names the occupier who displaces the space of belonging. The speaker stands between belonging and dispossession, and the line "It has two brief stays in the sky: summer and winter" (Darwish, 2003, p. 108) renders that instability at the level of temporal structure. By reducing the year to two "brief stays," the poem compresses time into a thin strip. Mbembe's description of occupied life as organized by excess and attrition directly parallels this compression: "The discipline of life and the necessities of hardship (trial by death) are marked by excess" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 91). Spring and autumn, traditionally seasons of transition, vanish from the cycle. This reduction mirrors Mbembe's description of necropolitical regimes in which the future is narrowed to bare survival and the colonized inhabit what Fanon calls a "zone of nonbeing" (1967, p. 2). Time no longer opens onto possibility; it oscillates between two exhausted states. These fleeting seasons invoke the brevity of the speaker's condition, while spring and autumn remain detached from the universal cycle. The claim to "interpret autumn as tired gold" subtly acknowledges a subjective relationship with time, when the occupation disrupts not only tangible ties to the place but also the metaphysical entanglement with temporality. In this condition, where life is rendered futile, "There is no name for what life should be, except what you did and what you do to my soul" (Darwish, 2003, p. 109). The syntax here is crucial. The clause "there is no name" alludes to a crisis of language; life appears only as an effect of what the addressee inflicts. The statement "what you did / what you do" ties past and present to a single dominating narrative. Mbembe's description of the occupied subject helps interpret this collapse of naming: "To live under late-modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of being in pain" (2019, p. 91). In this poem, Darwish dramatizes a core feature of the state of dehumanization Mbembe is describing: the subject's being is legible only as the object of another's action. Darwish's speaker occupies a position in which agency is confiscated and identity is reduced to what the colonial other does and continues to impose. The speaker's identity collapses into what the occupiers "did" and "do."

In Darwish's poetry, colonial necropolitics distorts not only the world of the oppressed but also the emotional and perceptual landscapes of those who enforce it. In a poem entitled "A

Soldier Dreaming of White Tulips,” the occupier is rendered through images that fracture tenderness and desire, exposing the internal contradictions. The Israeli soldier’s fragmented yearning for “white tulips,” “an olive branch,” and “her breasts in the evening blossom” momentarily evokes an image of peace and human tenderness, yet this vision is irreparably marred by his role as an occupier (Darwish, 2003, p. 165). Darwish binds the soldier’s identity to the machinery of violence: desire becomes inseparable from the structures that authorize his power. This split is dramatized in the metaphor of perceiving the land “as one sees a grocery store.” This comparison collapses geography into commodity; the homeland is rendered a surface of interchangeable items rather than a site of memory or belonging: “I don’t feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in the poems / Suddenly I saw the land as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers” (p.165). Wa Thiong’o describes this colonial logic as a process that “turns reality upside down” (1986, p. 28). Such logic embodies a key mechanism of dehumanization: the reduction of land and history to functional objects. Mbembe’s framework helps clarify this reduction as part of a necropolitical logic that reorganizes space around control (2019, p. 66). Here, commodification displaces spiritual and historical ties; the homeland becomes a utilitarian backdrop to military presence. The hollow claim, “I love it with my gun” (Darwish, 2003, p. 165), starkly embodies the paradox of a love mediated through violence, a love that fractures rather than heals, an embodiment of alienation rather than belonging. Timár identifies in representations of perpetrators a split consciousness in which the “inhuman” is presented as “human” (2021, p. 221). The occupier is trapped in what Mbembe names “unfreedom” (2019, p. 91)—compelled to relate to human desires only through structures that produce fear, and brutality. The soldier is trapped in this unfreedom: his emotional world is subordinated to a system that requires violence as the primary means of relating to space. Desire and rootedness become impossible; only the gun provides the means by which he feels attached. His presence, therefore, becomes both intimate and annihilating—a proximity structured by domination rather than belonging.

Darwish then widens the frame from the psychology of the occupiers to the landscape they distort. In the poem “The Night There,” darkness becomes the dominant figure through which the world is rendered deformed by occupation. The statement, “the night there is pitch black,” evokes not just physical obscurity but moral and existential fragmentation. The shift from “roses” to “roses fewer” registers a thinning of beauty. The comparative form “fewer” functions as a grammatical erosion: the world is not emptied at once but reduced incrementally, mimicking the slow attrition of life under occupation (Darwish, 2003, p. 23). The absence of light ushers to more than the end of vision; it is a collapse of ethical and ontological order, leaving existence itself fractured and unmoored. Mbembe argues that one of the aims of the colonial power is to render the colonized subject “foreign to his environment,” to separate him from reality (2019, p. 146). Darwish’s line “the road will fork even more than before” multiplies pathways to the point of disorientation, while “the valley splitting open” amplifies rupture into the landscape (Darwish, 2003, p. 23). These two movements—multiplication and fracture—externalize a spatial condition Fanon describes as inherent to colonial control. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he writes: “The colonial world is a world cut in two” (2004, p. 38). Darwish’s fissured space embodies exactly this severed order: space does not merely deteriorate; it is reorganized into compartments that mirror the colonized psyche under domination. The valley that “splits” and the road that proliferates into uncertainty map Fanon’s insight that the colonized inhabit a world marked off by “frontiers”, divided and made discontinuous (2004, p. 38). Darwish literalizes

this division: space itself fissures under the pressure of occupation. The poem's shift to "emperors engraving their names on grains of wheat" distills domination into a miniature image: even the smallest elements of life—grain, sustenance, growth—become surfaces for imperial inscription (Darwish, 2003, p. 23). Writing itself becomes a violent act, a seizure of the material of survival. The emperor's engraving echoes dehumanization theory in its reduction of bodies and land to writable surfaces (Boucher, 2019). It dramatizes the colonial impulse to overwrite pre-existing meaning, replacing relational forms of life with imperial signatures.

Darwish had earlier in the collection interrogated the existential condition of wandering created by displacement. A poem entitled "We Journey Towards a Home" presents an odyssey to an unreachable ideal, where "chestnut trees," "rocks", and "pebbles" evoke estrangement rather than rootedness. The journey becomes a search for a belonging perpetually denied, where symbols of the homeland become laden with contradictions that nurture and reject in equal measure, as illustrated by the sea that is "for us" and "against us," and by symbols of bereavement like "mourning scarves" and "marble statues" (Darwish, 2003, p. 10), trapping the journey within a cycle of loss where the hope of arrival is eternally deferred. In this case, the "question of belonging remains unanswered," as Mbembe writes (2019, p. 63).

These representations of loss are paralleled in the collection *If I Were Another*. The poem entitled "A Music Sentence" (pp. 21-22) captures a central paradox of Palestinian life: the rhythm of existence persists, yet it remains constrained by dislocation. The repetition of "instead of me" throughout the poem invokes a sense of displacement, where the poet, the boy, the bird, the man, the lover, and the horseman are all replaced by others, with existence rendered a substitute for what should have been. The acts that these figures engage in—writing poetry, flying doves, carrying letters, and washing the moon—are symbolic of a past that has been violently interrupted. These acts no longer belong to the speaker's lived reality; they have shifted to the "other" who occupies the space. Each "why" emphasizes the discord between the persistence of beauty and the speaker's inability to partake in it, raising an existential inquiry into the futility of reconciling creation and loss and grounding alienation in a deeper metaphysical rupture.

Just as this rupture severs the speaker from beauty, "The Red Indian's Penultimate Speech to the White Man" invokes the experience of Native Americans to illuminate the struggle between belonging and exclusion, using it as a prism to reflect on the destructive forces of colonization. Material and spiritual losses inflicted upon the colonized are lamented. This is evident in the lines "the sky's color has changed, and the sea to the east has changed" (Darwish, 2009, p. 69), where natural elements become sites of estrangement. The poem reflects on the colonizer's power to overwrite histories, with the reduction of the colonized to abstractions highlighted through the figure of "Columbus the free," who "has the right to name our ghosts as pepper or Indian" (Darwish, 2009, p. 70). This dynamic speaks directly to Fanon's account of the colonized subject's dispossession. Fanon points out that the colonial world is not simply unequal but structurally arranged so that colonizers speak "the language of pure force," they are not willing to hide their domination (2004, p. 38). The reduction of identities to commodities yields over the very act of representation; the colonized are severed from the narratives that root them in history. This dehumanization is vividly captured in the occupier's boastful claim, "I am the master of time, I have come to inherit your earth" (Darwish, 2009, p. 72), which not

only claims ownership over space but also weaponizes time itself to cement the colonial grip on the past, present, and future.

The Subjectivities of the occupied

Despite the stark asymmetry of power, Darwish renders defiance through sharply declarative speech acts. Again in “The Red Indian’s Penultimate Speech to the White Man,” Darwish speaker addresses the colonizer: “I won’t sign my name to the peace treaty between the murdered and his killer” (Darwish, 2009, p. 74). Here, the language of refusal itself becomes a mode of resistance. The line “we will march to our doom” (Darwish, 2009, p. 75) transforms destruction into action; the future-tense verb “will march” repositions doom as movement chosen, not passively suffered. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Stephen Sheehi note that “resistance to settler-colonial state regimes and their non-state apparatuses mobilize counter-hegemonic notions of indigenous sovereignty and refusals” (2023, p. 136), and Darwish’s passage performs precisely such a mobilization. The dead, described as “sleep[ing] in rooms you will build ... [and] visit[ing] their past in places you demolish” (Darwish, 2009, p. 76), shift the significance again: these “rooms” and “places” reappear as locations where erasure falters. The presence of the dead saturates the built environment, turning the colonial project against itself by refusing disappearance in the very sites marked for obliteration.

Even when bereavement insists, subjectivities persist. In the poem “I Will Slog Over This Road,” the recurrence of “endless road” creates a pulse that counters erasure. The “endless road,” repeatedly invoked, captures a paradoxical tension between the futility of a journey without resolution and the determined commitment to undertake it regardless of the outcome: “I will slog over this endless road to its end and my own” (Darwish, 2003, p. 3). The speaker’s journey hinges on the heavy verb “slog,” which materializes resistance as bodily strain. Mbembe’s description of occupation as a type of existence marked by excess, where “terror is a defining feature” (2019, p. 91) helps understand the heaviness of this “slog”: the poem figures a body that moves inside a grid that has been recalibrated to exhaust it, yet still insists on moving. Images such as “dust,” “what has died in me,” and “a row of palms pointing toward what vanishes” (Darwish, 2003, p. 3) mark the body’s depletion while turning the landscape itself into a witness to disappearance. The rejection of aestheticizing pain— “The wound does not need its poet to paint the blood of death like a pomegranate!” (Darwish, 2003, p. 3)—taps into raw truths as sites of rebirth where “cut[ting] thirty openings for meaning” speaks to a perpetual renewal of paths where “one trail” leads to “another” despite the disorientation of “The spinning wind” (Darwish, 2003, p. 3). The road is not linear but fractal—each step opens new fissures, with the path forward found not through compromise but through the continual act of pushing forward against the weight of negation itself. It is in this context that the argument of Chela Sandoval, in her discussion of the methodology of the oppressed, becomes illuminating: she considers oppositional consciousness as an apparatus that slices “through the grammars of supremacy” and reworks them into a methodology directed toward “emancipation” (2000, p. 2). Darwish’s poem does not simply endure the colonial grid; it presses against its edges, forcing fractures where meaning can multiply. The “endless road” becomes less a sign of despair than

the point at which a subjectivity threatened with erasure reorganizes its resources toward an emancipatory stance.

To push forward is also to persist even in the quiet gestures of survival. In a poem entitled “On This Earth,” simple images like “April’s hesitation,” “the aroma of bread at dawn,” and “the hour of sunlight in prison” register identity in ordinary symbols, turning naming into a radical reterritorialization, where beauty itself becomes a form of resilience, exemplified in the mythic invocation of “the Lady of Earth,” Palestine, portrayed as the “mother of all beginnings and ends” that “was called Palestine. Her name later became Palestine” (Darwish, 2003, p. 6). In the subsequent poem “I Belong There,” Darwish brings forth a tableau of personal elements—“a mother, a house with many windows, brothers, friends, and a prison cell”—to convey the unbroken thread of identity that remains resistant to the alienating forces of displacement (Darwish, 2003, p. 7). Each element invokes a space where belonging is not defined by physical boundaries but by the continuity of human relationships and experiences. The imagery of “a house with many windows,” for instance, implies a space of openness, where connections to the world and others are sustained despite the forces of separation. Even the inclusion of “a prison cell” offers a poignant irony—within the confinement of physical space, there exists personal autonomy. The crescendo of the poem, culminating in the single word “home,” roots belonging and defies disconnection (Darwish, 2003, p. 7).

Persistence gathers force in the body as well, an impulse that finds expression in a poem entitled “Earth Presses Against Us.” The poem opens with a world that tightens around the speaker—“Earth is pressing against us, trapping us in the final passage”(Darwish, 2003, p. 9). This pressure narrows existence until movement itself becomes an act of damage: “To pass through, we pull off our limbs” (Darwish, 2003, p. 9). The body must diminish to advance. Violence thickens around this constriction as the poem turns to faces “in their final battle for the soul,” then to those “who would throw our children out of the windows of this last space” (Darwish, 2003, p. 9). The phrase “last space” conveys total spatial depletion; there is nowhere left to withdraw, and the future is assaulted inside the single remaining enclosure. These images gather into a portrait of life crushed between earth and annihilation, a reminder of Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sheehi’s account on “killability and death as a modus operandi of the settler state” (2023, p. 134).

Alongside this brutality, Darwish threads images that recast endings as beginnings. “If only we were its wheat, we might die and yet live” (Darwish, 2003, p. 9) imagines a death that transforms rather than extinguishes, echoing Mbembe’s remark that in colonial contexts “death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven” (2019, p. 91). Wheat embodies a cycle that power cannot fully seize. The lines wishing for earth-as-mother (“temper us with mercy”) and for stone-like endurance (“pictures of rocks held... like mirrors”) shift the poem toward altered forms of persistence—maternal shelter longed for, mineral hardness imagined, reflection held inside dream (Darwish, 2003, p. 9). These desires culminate in the poem’s bodily inscription: “We write our names with crimson mist!” (Darwish, 2003, p. 9). Blood turns into script, asserting presence where erasure intensifies. The stark claim “We end the hymn with our flesh” (Darwish, 2003, p. 9) seals this movement; the hymn descends into the body rather than rising above it. The final promise—“our blood will plant olive trees”—offers rootedness inside the very site of dying (Darwish, 2003, p. 9). The olive tree grows from spilled blood, not despite it: even at the limit of pressure, something takes hold that domination cannot uproot.

In an untitled poem that begins the poetry collection *If I Were Another*, we encounter a comparable interplay of dispersal and inwardness, most evidently in Darwish's exploration of elemental memory and temporal pressure, but also in his treatment of space. The lines enact a meditation in which the natural world becomes a medium for reading endurance under conditions of rupture:

As I look behind me in this night,
into the tree leaves and the leaves of life,
as I stare into the water's memory and the memory of sand,
I do not see in this night
other than the end of this night (Darwish, 2009, p. 3).

In this opening scene, the gaze directed “behind” approaches a space where memory is neither sentimental retrieval nor restorative longing; it is embedded in matter itself, distributed across surfaces that retain the impressions of what has moved through them. The pairing of “tree leaves and the leaves of life” aligns human presence with the vegetal, suggesting a fragile attachment to whatever remains in the living world. The speaker's turn to “the water's memory and the memory of sand” deepens this movement into the elemental. Water and sand hold memory through mutable patterns that endure without settling into fixed shapes. They do not store the past; they reshape it. They alter, then alter again. This instability becomes the condition through which memory persists when other pathways close.

Darwish extends this inquiry into subjectivity in the poem that follows. “Quatrains” unfolds as a meditation in which vision and displacement intersect under the pressure of a self attempting to reassemble coherence in the wake of estrangement:

I see what I want of the night. I see
the end of this long corridor by some city's gates.
I'll toss my notebook on the sidewalk of cafés, and seat this absence
on a chair aboard one of the ships (Darwish, 2009, p. 4).

The poem situates the speaker within a corridor whose length figures both temporal distance and psychic recession. The “city's gates” mark a threshold to a world from which he has been barred, yet they remain visible—an architectural promise of entry withheld but not abolished. The gesture of throwing the notebook “on the sidewalk of cafés” ruptures the solitude that exile imposes. Writing, previously confined to a private page, is thrust into a public thoroughfare, where the sidewalk becomes a site of shared presence. The poet transforms interior reflection into communal visibility, refusing the silencing that accompanies displacement. Even more striking is the placement of “absence” on a ship's chair. Absence is treated as if it were a passenger to be dispatched, a condition that might be sent out to sea rather than borne by the self. This imaginative staging recasts exile as a scene in which the speaker holds authority over what would otherwise dominate him. To persist is, thus, not just to endure but to possess choice. The resolve to move continues as the poet turns to desire:

I see what I want of love . . . I see
horses making the meadow dance, fifty guitars sighing, and a swarm
of bees suckling the wild berries, and I close my eyes
until I see our shadow behind this dispossessed place (Darwish, 2009, p. 6).

Horses set the meadow into motion; guitars breathe through sound; bees gather sweetness from untended fruit. These images reassemble a world momentarily freed from constraint, and through them, the poem retrieves "our shadow," a lingering presence projected behind a dispossessed landscape. The shadow affirms a bond that survives displacement, a trace that defies disappearance. It is an ontological remainder: diminished, perhaps, yet undeniable.

In the course of the poem, Darwish's speaker turns toward the lives of others, where the everyday becomes a register of resilience:

I see what I want of people: their desire to long
for anything, their lateness in getting to work,
and their hurry to return to their folk,
and their need to say: "Good Morning" (p. 8).

The smallest life gestures that appear in ordinary scenes—the tardy arrival, the urgent return home, the greeting that opens a day—insist that human life continues to pulse despite pressures that fracture it. The ordinary retains its capacity to anchor belonging when larger structures fail. This insistence on presence finds an explicit expression in the poem "From Now On, You Are You:"

I am here. Anything more than that is rumor and slander.
Oh time! Healer of the sentimental, transforming wounds into scars, and
scars into sesame seeds. I look back and see myself running in the rain.
Here, and here, and here (*A River Dies of Thirst*, p. 151).

Darwish's statement "I am here" reduces existence to its most irreducible fact. The appeal to time that follows mobilizes a striking sequence of images: time transforms wounds into scars, then scars into sesame seeds, compressing pain into smaller and smaller forms without nullifying its trace. The shift from the bodily mark of a scar to the grain-like seed casts injury as something that can be carried, even planted—an altered remnant rather than an extinguished memory. The final pulse—"Here, and here, and here"—scatters presence across space, multiplying the points where presence is affirmed. The repetition turns presence into a rhythm, a series of impacts through which the poet's speaker refuses disappearance.

The gradual process, where trauma becomes less acute but is never fully erased, echoes in the poem "Truce with the Mongols."¹ The repeated imagery of the "Mongols" as invaders and the resilience of the "holm oak" speaks to both oppression and resistance. The movement from dehumanization to rootedness taps into an ongoing process of survival: "Everything points to the absurdity of the wind, yet we don't rise in vain / Maybe this morning is not as heavy upon us as yesterday" (Darwish, 2009, p. 16). The wind is cast absurd in its ceaseless movement, yet it is through this very absurdity that life persists. Each morning, "less heavy" than the last, captures a subtle process of transformation where suffering, though never fully erased, becomes less acute, its intensity is muted with each passing day. The weight of "yesterday" persists, but it does not define the present, allowing space for the possibility of change, however small.

¹ The Mongols—initially viewed as devastating invaders in the Muslim world, particularly with their sack of Baghdad in 1258, which marked the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate—came to embody forces of destruction within Islamic history.

In much the same way, in a poem entitled “I Have Behind the Sky a Sky,” the poet creates a relationship between the immediate reality—the “metal of this place”—and the distant, intangible promise of a return to a past that may never be fully reclaimed. The opening line, “I have behind the sky a sky,” sets the tone for a reflection on exile, where the poet exists in a liminal space defined by the juxtaposition of memory and displacement (Darwish, 2009, p. 59). This liminality, represented by two skies, is an expression of a fractured self, suspended between what is and what could have been, and unable to find a permanent foothold in either. Acknowledging the fleeting nature of time, Darwish’s speaker concedes that it will not “be [his] ally twice,” which invokes the urgency of the search for subjectivities within an alien reality (Darwish, 2009, p. 59), which eventually renders him a wanderer, severed from his roots yet determined to reflect on historical identity through symbols like the “almond trees” and “olive tree,” which evoke continuity. The visceral terms— “I will exit all of my skin”—starkly acknowledge an existential dispossession (Darwish, 2009, p. 59). The shedding of skin is a painful transformation that retains belongings— “keys,” “minarets,” and “lanterns”— (Darwish, 2009, p. 59). These objects are traces of the self: the keys symbolize a return potential, the minarets echo a cultural presence, and the lanterns represent guidance through the night of exile.

In the epic poem “Mural,” a similar meditation on the persistence of identity in the face of mortality unfolds. The interrogation of self’s tenacity is observed in the opening lines: “This is your name / a woman said / and disappeared in the spiraling corridor” (Darwish, 2009, p. 101). The “spiraling corridor” evokes the labyrinthine disorientation that mirrors the poet’s relationship with time and space, where the linearity of life gives way to a cyclical oscillation of presence and absence. Naming, invoked by the nurse’s command to “remember it well,” grounds identity in oscillation, but one that eventually transforms into liberation. The recurrence of vanishing points, corridors, and memory-laden landscapes constructs a liminal space in which the self is suspended between persistence and dissolution. Yet, rather than yielding to finality, Darwish embraces a form of becoming: “One day, I will be what I want to be” (Darwish, 2009, p. 102). Similarly, the meditation, “One day I will become a bird and unsheathe my existence / out of my void,” reframes nothingness as a threshold for recreation, an opportunity to remold the self beyond historical forces. The bird’s rise renders resurrection not as a finality but as an ongoing cycle, as expressed in the paradox of being “the heavenly and the expelled” (Darwish, 2009, p. 103). In this paradox, resurrection is not a return to a former state but a continual process of self-actualization. This resonates with Wa Thiong’o’s argument on “the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe” (1986, p. 87).

The ongoing struggle against alienation develops into a confrontation with precarity that exposes the very nature of proof and selfhood within a context of external interrogation and invalidation:

How are you to prove the obvious when proof thirsts to loot self-evidence like a pirate thirsting for a lost ship? The obvious is defenseless like a gazelle stabbed by safety, like you. Like you in this field wide open to armed archaeologists who never cease to interrogate you: “Who are you?” You check all your body parts and say: “I am myself.” They say: “Where is the proof?” You say: “I am.” They say: “This is not enough. We need lack.” So you say: “I am both perfection and lack” (Darwish, 2011, p. 3).

The demand to “prove the obvious” is absurd, as self-evidence is “looted like a pirate thirsting for a lost ship,” with even the most basic aspects of identity forced into precarity. The self is pressed with the relentless question—“Who are you?”—and the simple affirmation “I am myself” is dismissed by the reply, “This is not enough. We need lack.” Validation becomes unattainable because the interrogators’ logic refuses to accept being as proof. Their insistence on “lack” as the precondition for recognition signals a dehumanizing framework that requires a subject to be present and absent at once, trapping the person questioned in an impossible cycle. Darwish’s reply—“I am both perfection and lack”—turns this demand against itself, folding the imposed category into his own naming and unsettling the authority behind the interrogation. Freire’s remark that the oppressed must “speak their word” to reclaim humanity (2000, p. 88) sharpens this moment. In this scene, something quieter begins to glimmer: a subject under inspection is pushed toward an almost metaphysical edge where the request for evidence grows strangely weightless. The repetition of demands reveals an instability within the frame that issues them, not within the self they target. What emerges is an inversion in which the assaulted “I” discloses the fragility of the apparatus that questions it. The paradox Darwish offers does not mend the injury, yet it disrupts the presumption that recognition must arrive from beyond the self. In this shift, the field of precarity opens into a different register, where being whispers its own affirmation even under ongoing pressure, and where naming casts a resistant shimmer that refuses to fade.

Conclusion

A reader of Darwish begins to sense that the Palestinian condition presses upon language in ways both immediate and unnervingly metaphysical. Under a prolonged regime of dispossession, the reduction of a people from presence to non-presence becomes an ontological violence that seeks to unmake the life of the occupied Palestinian. In this case, humanity must be asserted repeatedly against forces that aim to fold it into silence. Darwish, attuned to the fragile border between being and its negation, writes from a position where each word must defend its right to exist. His poems insist on presence—presence that must be spoken and at times wrested back from the edge of effacement. Darwish’s aesthetics labor toward a reclamation of speech twisted by power. He reanimates words handled by the machinery of domination, returning them to those who must rely on them to announce their continued existence. In this sense, utterance becomes an act of repossession. The poems refuse disappearance not through heroic proclamation but through the smallest signs of life, the slight inflections by which a subject insists on its right to stand in the world. Here the stakes of naming become unmistakable. To name is not to assign definition but to keep a place open—to resist becoming a figure spoken by others and to move toward the difficult task of speaking oneself back into being.

Darwish’s work creates a space—call it a counter-reality or a poetic clearing—where Palestinians return to themselves through the slow reassertion of their stories and their claim to the real. In a political order designed to strip them of their bearings, his act of naming unsettles the intended arrangement of things and interrupts the script of diminishment. If this naming

carries an aura of reclamation, it is because Darwish recognizes that without such acts, the world risks settling into a configuration in which an entire people are spoken of only in the past tense. He does not leave us with triumph but with vigilance. His poetics reveal, with a clarity both painful and dignified, that the struggle over identity in Palestine is inseparable from the struggle over the words through which identity is articulated. Where the Israeli occupation attempts to thin those words into ghosts, Darwish thickens them once more. The result is an ongoing negotiation of presence within a landscape that continually pressures presence toward its vanishing point. In returning Palestinians to the fullness of their naming, Darwish presents the difficult, unending work of sustaining the right to exist, even when existence is forced to teeter at the threshold of its undoing.

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