

Morani Kornberg-Weiss

Preview of Forthcoming new book: a poem from Dear Darwish

Dear Mahmoud,

I want to write poems about Israel and Palestine but I am at loss. What language can I use?

Jack Spicer wrote letters to the late Federico Garcia Lorca and once explained that their correspondence would enable them to “use up” their rhetoric so it would not appear in their poetry. He writes, “Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in it.” I decided to write to you in hopes of leaving “it” aside.

Mahmoud, did you know that poets today are writing conceptual poems about Israel and Palestine? My friend R.B. told me the other day (and I’m trying to quote faithfully): “concepts are ideas and every poem is a fucking idea so all poems are conceptual.” I cannot help and wonder about the concept of “conflict” or “Israel” or “Palestine.” How can writers, for instance, extract words or phrases or even entire sentences from the news or the bible and place them into a space called a “poem.” Here’s a “line” or two that I recently read “written” by a poet:

how many Arabs for each

Israeli

Mahmoud, there was another prisoner swap. A young Israeli soldier held “captive” for five years was recently “released” in “exchange” for 1,027 “prisoners.” There were images of Palestinians who “literally” had blood on their hands and then I met J.H. and he asked me if G.S. also had blood on his hands and wondered how many people died while G.S. was in a tank. I imagined poor, young, frightened G.S. in a noisy tank following dumb orders dumbly. We all saw pictures of Aziz Salha with blood on his hands but nobody thought about the blood on G.S.’s hands, myself included.

That's one difference between Israelis and Palestinians: so many Israelis walk around with blood on their hands, hands soaked in red, red hands shaking, exchanging blood, patting a bloody hand on one's shoulder, leaving a trace of a hand, a hand running through one's hair, scratching a nose, leaving creases of liquid clotted and dried up on the cheekbones, taking a bath and then running a hand over one's arms, arm pits, breasts then thighs, genitals, feet all covered with blood, blood trying to wash itself but it's a blood so ordinary you cannot even see it.

I'm writing this letter and start to notice the red fingerprints smeared on the page.

Mahmoud, the IDF prefers that women keep their gentle hands clean but we are dirty.

Mahmoud, Spicer spoke of tradition as “generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation – but, of course, never really losing anything.”

Mahmoud, if I am an Israeli woman living in Buffalo and you reside in Israel Palestine on my bookshelf, and I read and transform your poems, are we still telling the same story? Mahmoud, do I have the right to use your words and place them into what I would call a “poem”?

Mahmoud, would you grant me permission to do this? Can we work together to define what “this” is and what its possibilities are?

האם אתה מדבר עברית כעת? האם היא תהיה השפה המשותפת שלנו?

Or should we use English instead?

Let me try:

“You ask: ‘Who Am I, Without Exile?’”

(This is the title of my transformation.)

~~You are a stranger on the riverbank, like the water... river the water that binds me to your name.~~

~~Nothing carries me or makes me carry an idea.~~

~~Water/binds me/ to your name.~~

~~There's nothing left of me but you, and nothing left of you but me, the stranger massaging his stranger's thigh.~~

(I tried stealing this from you.)

Let me try again:

“In Time of Plague”

(I am now borrowing from Spicer.)

It “took us and the land from under us”
it soiled our hands like water:
Red stained cracks leaving fingerprints
layered with handshakes. Red stained
handles on the door of a bus designed
to be grasped in order to move
from the ground upwards. Red stained
water escalating like the bricks
of demolished houses. We’ve been planting
signs on the side of the road like one thousand
bulbs under fresh earth stolen by neighborhood
squirrels. They eat our red-stained seeds digest
the preborn and run up trees.

You ask, “Who Am I, Without Exile?” I
answer: You are the bulb of the pregrown
plant carried in the stomach
of a squirrel. You ask: Who Are You,
Without Exile? I answer: I am
wondering exile seeping my roots
in our land. You are now

the squirrel eating our bulbs, snapping
water lines lifting sidewalks and we both
share the blood on our hands while I
wash them obsessively using soap and water
and more soap and bleach and I scrub I
scrub I scrub them hard until my
skin peels until I scratch the skin off
and I am scrubbing my muscles and I
scrub I scrub I scrub and scrub my
bones and I scrub peel the red
peel the red peel the red until this body
becomes nothing.

I am a skeleton walking among poets who steal words.

Mahmoud, please teach me how to li(v)e with these stains.

Love,

Morani

Morani Kornberg-Weiss moved from Tel Aviv, Israel to NY in order to pursue a Ph.D. in English at SUNY Buffalo's Poetics Program. Her poems appear in *Omnia Vanitas Review*, *Voices Israel*, *Re-Vision*, *Papilio*, *Genius Floored*, *The Last Stanza*, *kadar koli*, and *eccolinguistics*. Morani's translation of *Miracles & More*, written by Israeli poet Karen Alkalay-Gut, was recently published by Keshev. In addition, she is completing two manuscripts entitled *Folding into Her Self* and *Dear Darwish*. She lives in Buffalo with her husband, dog, two cats, and her sad-doll collection.