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Authors

Miraftabi, Morteza
Mirmotahari, Emad

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Translator's Preface

Emad Mirmotahari

Morteza Miraftebi is contemporary Iranian author and political activist now living in Los Angeles, California. Among his accomplishments are a doctorate from the Sorbonne (Paris) in Sociology and the Hellman/Hammett Human Rights Watch Award. He has published numerous volumes of poetry and collections of short stories. Miraftebi is an outspoken critic of censorship and the mistreatment of writers and journalists in Iran, and especially under the current Islamic Republic. He is currently the head and editor-in-chief of the Persian periodical Simorgh, which addresses the relationship between literature and politics.

I completed this translation of Morteza Miraftebi's short story 'Estranged' from the short-story collection *The Fortunate Couple*, while participating in Professor Michael Heim's translation workshop for graduate students at UCLA during the spring of 2003. Professor Heim insisted on the importance of the intelligibility, consistency, and fluidity of translated texts in the target language. While this did not mean that a good translation should conceal traces of its source language, it must not be grammatically and lexically awkward. The workshop consisted of fifteen graduate students conducting research in a variety of language and literature departments. There were translation projects from Romance languages, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Urdu, Serbo-Croatian, Old Irish, as well as Persian. Each week we would examine translations made by a selection of students working in a given language and offer input based on the principles highlighted above. While the rest of the class may not have been familiar with a given 'translated language', their instincts about linguistic choices helped each of us refine our translations into works that had literary currency in the English language.

I chose Morteza Miraftebi's work because he is an under-recognised (and scarcely translated) Persian writer. I chose to translate selections from *The Fortunate Couple* because they are aesthetically pleasing to read in the Persian and because they lack the pretentiousness of much twentieth century Persian prose. Miraftebi's activism against censorship has invoked punitive measures from both the Pahlavi monarchy as well as the present Islamic theocracy in Iran. His literary corpus is exceptional because of the

subtle ways it treats modern life in Iran and looks for the 'profound in the commonplace.' MirafTabi's writing resembles the 'less is more' philosophy that characterises Albert Camus' work. 'Estranged,' for example, captures a highly enigmatic psychic experience without explaining, framing, or embellishing. The reader is forced to concentrate purely on the character's experience as an 'effect.'

"Estranged" by Morteza MirafTabi

Translated by Emad Mirmotahari

He wanted to sing and shout from the bottom of his heart. He opened his mouth but no sound came out. He looked at his own reflection in the window and couldn't believe what he saw: a spent, unfamiliar, and sleepless countenance lingering in the depths of the glass.

He sat down on an easy chair and glanced over the portraits on the wall. He recognised none of them. He then looked over the bed he slept in and the table where he sat and occasionally wrote. It was as if he were staying in a traveler's lodge in an unknown city. He couldn't place anything.

Having nothing to do, he sat for an entire hour. He pondered what it would have been like if the incident hadn't happened. He stood up and went towards the books. He had read them all several times. He returned and sat on the chair and stared across the room. That entire afternoon he only wrote a letter. After having read it over once, he tore it up. He wondered what he ought to do. Nine hours had passed as he ruminated. It was then nine at night.

He turned on the tape recorder. The tape turned and groaned. He wanted to record something and spoke. He would reflect, speak, and fall silent, uttering incoherently, "It's not important. We all make mistakes..."

His finger was on the recorder button. He got up and went to the window and opened it. Pleasant fresh air filled the room but the fatigue of hours remained in his body. He walked back towards the tape recorder, but before he could cross the room, the lights went out. He remained motionless in the middle of the room, taking in the shrouding silence and darkness.

He decided to step out of his apartment and into the street. He spoke aloud to himself as if to another, "I'm just stepping out for a stroll. I'll be back."

As soon as he set out he realized that there was not much going on outside either. He wasn't sleepy. He recalled those several days and nights that he sleeplessly and aimlessly waited for the morning. He

walked down the stairs, opened the garden gate, stepped out into the street, and closed the gate behind him.

He looked over at his window and went and sat down over at the opposite doorstep. His gaze remained on his window while he thought about how depleted he was, how all is quickly forgotten, and how everybody became so indifferent to him.

The incident had happened a few days before. Until then, it was possible to speak to someone. Stupefied, he began staring at the ground, forgetting his ordeal. He thought he heard a voice. His own. He looked over at the window. Power had returned, flooding the window with light. He remembered that he had left the tape recorder on and decided to go and turn it off.

He stood up. He could hear himself, his own voice blaring clearly into the street. But the voice seemed strange and alien to him. He listened intently. He was speaking of several days ago and he didn't want to hear anymore. He headed towards the garden gate. He slid his hand in his pocket in search of his keys but they weren't there. He remembered that he had left the keys on the tabletop.

It was a couple of days ago that he was shaken out of sleep by voices in his dream.

The neighbour's doorstep might be a better place to pass the time, to wait, he thought. The old man may be home and open the door if he rings. Then he considered that the old man and his wife might be asleep. Left with no other options, he just sat down on the neighbour's doorstep. He knew that the tape was reaching its end and would go quiet. He watched the pine trees and the amber moonlight that shone through them.

Just then, the tape reached its end and stopped. Suddenly, he thought he saw a man in his window straightening his posture, as if to speak more clearly, and preparing the recorder. Astonished, he walked towards the door and pressed the doorbell, which resonated in his head. Then he heard a sound from his room. Someone responded, "Who is it?"

It was a familiar voice, like one he had heard a thousand times, but still couldn't remember. The ringing of the bell persisted. He wondered

whether the voice was coming from inside his apartment or if it was the old neighbour's.

He rang the doorbell a second time with urgency. The voice responded again, "Who is it?"

Stepping back from the door, he peered up into the window. He squinted, looking on in disbelief. Motionless, he stared on, questioning his eyes. He saw himself pressing his face against the bars on the window, gaping down at him. He was stunned for a whole minute. The same eyes, the same hair, the same plaintive expression. He continued staring at himself in the window, dumb-founded and astonished. Suddenly he heard his voice, "Are you looking for someone?"

It was unquestionably his own voice. But he was being questioned like a stranger. The same voice that he heard a hundred times from the tape recorder.

"I don't believe it," he said.

Suspiciously he locked his gaze with the eyes in the window. Again, he heard his own voice, "Do you need somebody?"

"I, I...keys...sir, I just wanted..."

Language had failed him. He reflected and stopped speaking. Again he heard his own voice from the face in the window asking him, "Has someone given you this address? Do you have business with someone who lives here?"

He froze, then said apologetically, "I am sorry. I have made a mistake."

He saw his own suppressed smile. It was his eyes that were smiling. He heard his own voice again, "It's not important sir. We all make mistakes."

Standing there in the street he felt that death had paid him a visit. Words froze in his mouth. He looked around the half-lit street and the unfamiliar and unsightly faces that surrounded him.

Again he saw himself up there, shaking his head and moving away from the window. He then heard someone starting the tape recorder. The hum of indistinct voices reached his ear and then went quiet. He heard the doorbell and his own voice.

"Are you looking for someone?"

It fell silent. The voice slowly faded out but stayed in his head. He could only hear his own footsteps.

"We all make mistakes...."

He set off down the narrow street towards the canal.