

 TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE 

Tahirih
Leah Kaminsky

I stand at the entrance to the waiting room. Tahirih looks up and smiles, waiting patiently for me, hands folded in her lap.

‘Come in, Tahirih,’ I say.

Tahirih smooths the creases from her tailored navy skirt. Her eyebrows sculpted, her greying hair scraped back into a neat bun, she wears a silk blouse and her pumps are white. Silhouetted against the sunlight bleeding in through the wooden shutters of the waiting room, she looks like she is wearing a damn halo.

‘I don’t mind waiting,’ she says. ‘You can take that man in before me. He is so distressed.’

She is talking about Evgeni.

‘Thank you, Tahirih, but let’s get started, shall we?’

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The morning they called Tahirih to the morgue in Teheran, she asked the caretaker if she could wash Fouad’s body. She told me that her husband had always been such a clean and elegant man and she could not stand to see him lying on a steel table, covered in blood and excrement. The caretaker brought her a bucket of water and an old rag. This was the body that belonged to her all those years; the body from which she had once been so shy.

Tahirih was seventeen when she first met Fouad. Her mother called her away from piano practice to introduce her to some visitors. She was annoyed at the interruption. When she walked into the living room, she saw him seated beside his mother. They were all sipping cherry juice, a delicacy served only on special occasions. It was a hot day and Tahirih was feeling a little faint as she stood before everyone.

‘Come sit with us,’ her mother said. ‘I want you to meet Mrs Faizi and her son Fouad. They are here visiting from Tehran for a short while.’ She sat down on the edge of an armchair.

‘Would you care for some fresh dates or figs?’ her mother asked, passing a tray of delicacies across to Mrs Faizi. Fouad stared at Tahirih. She looked away. Two red roses stood in a vase on the coffee table. Her mother had cut some of her prize flowers from the garden. That signalled that these visitors were very important. Tahirih had certainly heard of Mrs Faizi before. Her husband was a member of the Baha’i Spiritual Assembly in Tehran, but Tahirih had never known that they had a son.

‘Fouad is an engineer,’ her mother said. ‘He is visiting his parents for a few days and they have kindly come up to see us today.’

Tahirih nodded, thinking only about her piano exam the following week. Her mother handed her a plate of almonds to offer the guests. She smiled politely and

placed it on the table in front of Fouad. Their eyes met briefly again and this time he smiled. He had a dark moustache, streaked with grey, which made him look quite handsome.

‘I heard you playing before,’ he said. ‘Für Elise is one of my favourite pieces.’

Tahirih picked up her glass and brought it to her lips before realising that it was empty.

‘Would you play some more for me?’ he asked.

‘Oh, my...’ were the only words she could push past her tongue before her mother interrupted.

‘Of course she will.’

Tahirih could see that her mother was eager to please this man.

‘It would be an honour, wouldn’t it, Tahirih?’ She urged her daughter to get up, holding her hand out in the direction of the parlour.

Tahirih stood up and turned to go. At the same time Fouad rose from the sofa. She felt him following her as she walked slowly into the other room. He closed the curtain behind them and stood leaning against the wall. The music rose up, breaking the awkward silence. Minute after minute passed as her fingers pawed at the keys, the tune a muted drone in the background compared to her pounding heart. As she finished playing the last bars, the notes sank away into silence and Fouad sighed.

He walked over to where Tahirih was seated and stood behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She felt him kiss the back of her neck, his warm breath on her skin.

‘You are lovely,’ he whispered.

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Tahirih remembers the day her daughter Bahiya was born, how her tiny fingers curled around her mother’s thumb, her head tossing as she rooted around for the nipple. She once told me that they sent her a bill for the bullets the firing squad used to execute her husband. They came in the middle of the night and dragged him out of bed. The last time she saw him, a sliver of moonlight shone between the slats of the shutters onto his back. She remembers thinking that she should have mended the hole in his pyjama shirt. Her mind still clutches at that loose thread, as if it still ties their destiny together. It is as long as it needs to be, winding through her years like an intricate, silken web across the globe. She never thought then that it would lead her to Haifa.

She hid the account for the bullets in the hem of her dress when she was smuggled out of Tehran after Fouad was killed. She still keeps it in a special box in the top drawer of her bedside table, opening it from time to time, usually just before she goes to bed. She runs her fingers over the faded print. She has to touch it, to prove that it is real. Ten bullets fired into his chest. The bill was dated 21/4/1979 and sent by the Iranian Ministry of Finance, account payable in thirty days. She also received monthly bills for ‘food and accommodation’.

Here in Haifa, she tells me that people are kind to her. The Arab girl at the kiosk blesses her in Hebrew every day. The tiny Jewish lady in the apartment opposite greets her every morning as she beats a rug over the balcony rail.

‘Ah’lan!’ her neighbour shouts, ‘everything will be fine, God willing.’ *Tfoo, tfoo, tfoo*, the woman spits to ward off the evil eye.

She has a job in archives at the Baha'i World Centre. Baha'is visit from all over the world to work as volunteers, and each one has a tale to tell. They treat her well and look after her every need. She repays their kindness by working hard. Work is worship, she once told me.

She sees a lady in a fur coat step slowly off the bus every morning, carrying a mop in her hand. Winter, or summer she smiles at her and walks on. This land of contradictions is Tahirih's home now. Her friend Katya has thrown away her wedding ring. She told her she stood completely naked in front of the mirror one morning and felt that part of her had been born while another part had died. After throwing away the golden band that had been part of her body for twenty-five years, she felt free. And as Tahirih tells me this, I clutch onto my own wedding band, while Tahirih fiddles with the invisible thread tied to her ring, forever joined to Fouad. But somehow the more she tugs, the further the thread unravels. I can slide my ring on and off, but Tahirih remains married to a dead man.

Tahirih said they came in the night, knocked loudly, then kicked the door in just as she was about to get up. She was home alone. Fouad had already been in prison a month by then. The tall one was chewing sunflower seeds. He smiled at her and ran his fingers through his black, greasy hair. One of his front teeth was missing and through the gap he spat the cracked shells onto the Persian rug in the living room. He motioned with his right hand, to the guard who accompanied him. The young soldier left the room and went outside.

The ugly one stayed. He walked his huge hand over the spines of the books on the bookshelf, like a concert pianist practising his scales.

'It seems that you are very clever,' he laughed, pulling Bahiya's favourite book down from the shelf: *Little Red Riding Hood*. 'Is this one of your filthy infidel books?' he asked as he stroked the picture of the little girl on the cover.

The ugly one was still smiling as he slowly tore each page. He ripped Little Red Riding Hood to pieces and threw her severed head onto the floor. He ran his fingers along the spines of the books on the shelf again, and pulled one out, asking her to read him the title.

'Don't dare lie, you prostitute,' he said quietly, 'or I will kill you here and now.'

'God is my witness that I will not lie to you.'

'Shut up!' He shoved her to the ground. 'Don't mention the name of God with your filthy mouth.'

He lowered his black army boot onto her hair. He kneeled down and smiled at her, like someone had flicked a switch in his brain. He turned away, his attention wandering back to the bookshelves. He lifted the butt of his rifle this time and pointed to the Koran.

'Why is this on your shelf?'

'It is a Holy book,' she began, 'the Baha'is honour its wisdom and ...'

'Bow down to Allah and save your soul.'

She stared down at the rug. He continued looking through the books. That particular evening it was to be one of Fouad's textbooks. The guard pointed to a paragraph and sat down on the couch, patting the cushions and motioning for Tahirih to sit next to him.

She started to read out loud, just as if little Bahiya was seated by her side and they were reading a bedtime story. *The phenomenon called migratory crystallisation*

consists in the growth of large crystals in a group, at the expense of small ones. The response of the system to invasion by ice molecules determines the immediate and long-term effects of freezing.

'It is such a warm and pleasant night,' he said.

Her heart was pounding. He slowly tore out the page she had been reading and scrunched it up into a ball. He handed it to her and said:

'Eat it.'

She did not move.

'Go on. Eat some ice to cool you down.'

She took the paper from his outstretched hand. She was trembling so much that she accidentally dropped it on the floor.

'Pick it up.'

She bent down and he suddenly grabbed her wrist and forced her down onto her knees. His right hand held the back of her head firmly by the roots of her hair. He rose above her, unzipped the trousers of his dirty uniform and forced himself into her mouth thrusting as she gagged and choked. When he finished he threw her back onto the floor and she landed on top of a photo of Baha'u'llah. She vomited bile and semen onto his Holy face.

She looked up for a moment towards Bahiya's room and thought she saw a tiny shadow disappear back into the darkness of the hallway. The books on the shelf started to whirl around her head; the guard's laughter echoed in her ears.

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I ask Tahirih to lift her blouse and place my cold stethoscope on her skin. 'Breathe in,' I say automatically.

Sometimes when I am examining a patient's chest, I forget to listen to what I am actually hearing. The air rushing in and out of healthy lungs sounds like waves washing up onto shore then receding. Today the gurgling rattle of Tahirih's lungs won't let my mind wander very far. I put down my stethoscope and scribble out a form for a chest X-ray.

'Always better to play it safe,' I say matter-of-factly, as she tucks in her blouse. I hand her the referral.

'Bless you, doctor for squeezing me in,' Tahirih says, reaching out and touching my hand lightly. 'I would be grateful if you would give me something for this cough meanwhile, just to help me sleep a little at night.'

I pull my hand away from hers just a little too quickly and try to cover up my embarrassment by scribbling out a prescription for some antibiotics.

'Thank you, doctor,' she says. She is so accepting.

Most patients nowadays ask me endless questions, pull out some crap they've printed off the internet, wanting to discuss the results of the latest trials of the inhibition of IM-9 leukocyte 3-hydroxy 3-methylglutaryl coenzyme, which I've never even heard of. They think their cyber-surfing gives them an instant medical degree. I just don't get it. Why are they so willing to swallow hocus-pocus herbs from some witch-doctor without giving it a second thought, yet demand that I explain all the side effects and possible risks of anything and everything I prescribe? A simple *thank you, doctor* once in a while comes as such a relief. They have lost their faith in the profession, so that life in this room usually boils down to plumbing and pills. I am

tired of listening. I am bloated with their stories. I have nowhere left to put them anymore. They spill out from me onto the pavement as I walk down the street, and I seem to be losing pieces of myself along the way.

I am beginning to forget myself lately as well. Maybe it's the pregnancy? More often than not, while a patient is in the midst of unfolding his life to me, I doodle on prescription pads, or prepare shopping lists, my mind edging slowly towards the door and out. I am always waiting for the opportunity to go to the bathroom while a patient undresses. I leave the room and escape from those voices that constantly beg *help me, mend me*. I stand there, staring into the mirror at a face I barely recognise anymore. And as I turn away from the sink, telling myself to get a grip and go back in to the patient waiting for me, I catch a glimpse of someone else walking off in the opposite direction, into the depths of the mirror. This doppelganger of mine is never coming back. The Mirror Woman peels off her white coat like dead skin and heads down to the sea. I go back in to my room and start searching for pathology.

Listen to me carrying on! I am supposed to dispense compassion and humanity along with the pills; be a healer, a listener, a therapist, a fixer, a priest, a mother, a confidante, a bloody miracle worker for all of them. The truth is I'm tired. I have been there for all the important milestones. I have stood beside freshly dug graves as they are buried, listening to the words of the *kaddish* over and over again. I have walked alone in cemeteries and wept for those I could not save, or for those I could have saved, should have saved but didn't. But the truth is I am secretly weeping for myself, for my own mortality.

I move over to the wash basin by the window. I rinse my hands with chlorhexidene disinfectant; a well-programmed robot, I wash slowly, thoroughly, rubbing my palms together in a circular motion, cleaning meticulously between the fingers with the scrubbing brush. A tiny, black louse is lodged under the nail of my right index finger. I quickly flick it out and it drops into the basin. I watch it swirl around in the opposite direction to what it would in Melbourne, and finally it disappears down the drain.

How can I know how to help Tahirih? She is filled with forgiveness and love and understanding for everyone, even for the very people who hated and abused her.

'I did not want to trouble you again today, dearest doctor,' she says. 'You are so busy with people who need your help far more than me. I am so sorry to bother you.'

She notices me shifting around on my chair.

'You are not comfortable?'

'I'm fine, Tahirih.' I hold a hand to my lower back and fend off her intrusion. 'It's just the pregnancy. I haven't been sleeping so well lately.'

'Doctor,' she says, 'I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you have been looking quite tired lately. I am a little worried.'

'I wish I was more like you,' I say. 'Where can I buy such patience and acceptance?'

She clutches at her necklace of freshwater pearls and I watch her mouth as it moves.

'Baha'u'llah says the actions of those that persecute us are born out of innocence.'

Something about her reminds me of an old wooden ventriloquist's doll I used to have as a child. Or maybe she reminds me of mother; they both surely went through hell. The difference is though, while Tahirih found God in the midst of that hell, mother lost him.

'It's always best,' she says, trying to stifle a cough, 'to kiss your killer's hand.'
I hope she won't notice as I reach up to scratch my scalp.



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

