

Maria Terrone

## A Facebook Page in Iran

I was about to go through security at Kennedy Airport, and my heart was pounding. Had my literary friendship landed me on a U.S. terrorist list?

But all went smoothly. Not long before, the situation was reversed, and I was the one afraid that I'd become a terrorist target. It all began one Saturday night when my husband decided to Google me. On top of the search result was my photo—the same photo on the back of my first poetry collection—surrounded by Arabic writing. What was this? How long had I been under surveillance? And why me, an innocent in Queens, New York?

A click led to a site called *Manhia*, dense with text that could have been poetry—hard to know for sure because of the unrecognizable language and unfamiliar faces. When I came upon T.S. Eliot, it felt like an encounter with a long-lost friend on the street of a foreign city. My palpitations slowed.

I examined the writing next to my photo. Clearly the short lines were stanzas. Was I the author of whatever I was looking at, or could this be a list of reasons in verse of why I had to die?

The “Contact Us” link opened up a blank email to the editor. I dashed one off, asking how I had come to be in this strange land. Within hours, an Iranian ex-pat poet named Maryam Hoole responded from Sweden, explaining that she now edited this literary site in the Farsi language. Mohsen Fathezade, a college student, had translated one of my poems and sent it to her.

I knew no one in Iran and jumped at her offer to forward my email. Lightning-quick, Mohsen responded. He had stumbled on one of my poems on the web—a 9/11 poem, no less. This was all happening just two years after the attack and learning the subject of the translation wasn't exactly calming. Still, I was flattered that my poem about an imagined waiter in nearly deserted Chinatown had an impact on this stranger on the other side of the world. The fact that he was a resident of what George W. Bush had once called “The Axis of Evil” made the connection feel even more amazing to me.

And connect we did via frequent emails and snail-mailed letters. A native of Shiraz, Mohsen was about to graduate with a degree in engineering, a practical career choice, although his heart had always been with literature. His English—imperfect but completely understandable—was self-taught, and he and I often talked about our favorite authors. Although I was decades older than Mohsen, I felt that

we communicated like peers.

How could I not send my “translator”—I loved the very sound of the word—my own book of poetry? I was touched when Mohsen told me that he hoped to publish the poems in Farsi and began asking questions about the meaning of specific lines so that he could “get it right.”

Except for those writers asked to commemorate Presidential Inaugurations, poets are, let’s face it, invisible in America. In Iran, I learned, they’re revered and some are considered so influential, their writing can land them in jail. So it was a strangely surreal and very heady feeling for me to be interviewed by Mohsen and become the subject of an eight-page feature in *Hengam*, an independent literary supplement. The fact that I couldn’t read the Q&A or any of my own poems didn’t take away from the thrill.

When the exhilaration of being Iran’s literary bold-face-name-of-the-week subsided, I began to stress over the possible consequences. I thought about the foreign hikers who had accidentally crossed an unmarked border into Iran and been imprisoned—an innocent act compared to this flagrant promotion. Had my local post office alerted the Feds after observing the Iranian postmark on the bulky *Hengam* package with its stamps of grim-faced Ayatollahs, lined up in rows like troops? Were the emails between me and Mohsen being monitored in Iran? Were they being monitored in America? My smooth departure at Kennedy told me otherwise.

Mohsen and I continued to correspond over the ensuing years—through his required stint in the army, which he had dreaded; his marriage to his cousin Leila (wedding a cousin, I learned, is a strong tradition); his work building dams for an engineering company. He became a second brother to me. Did we talk politics? Sometimes. He was born after the 1979 Revolution that toppled the Shah and installed the oppressive theocracy still in power. Mohsen had experienced nothing else, but thanks to the Internet, he knew what he was missing.

Because of my deepening relationship with Mohsen, I found myself wanting to learn all I could about the history and heritage of his country. Keats had Italy, Shelley had Greece, and I was experiencing a romance with Persia. From our first exchanges, Mohsen spoke very proudly of his ancient heritage and its huge contributions to civilization in the arts, sciences, architecture, and, supreme irony, in human rights. (The Cyrus Cylinder, named after the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great, predates the Magna Carta by a millennium.)

When a gift from Mohsen unexpectedly arrived in the mail—a lavishly illustrated, hard-cover edition of the *Rubaiyat* by the 11th-century poet Omar Khayyam—I plunged into that exotic world. I also

read Azadeh Moaveni's hip *Lipstick Jihad* memoir and the wonderful *Strange Times, My Dear: The Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*. "No amount of pontificating on the ebb and flow of political events in Iran in the last two decades could even begin to account for the fevered mental activity of Iranian poets as they interpret their experiences and emotions . . ." wrote poetry editor Ahmad Karimi Hakkak in his introduction. I also attended lectures and sought out Iranian films both obscure and famous, such as the Oscar-winning *A Separation*.

In 2009, as concerns grew about Iran's possible development of nuclear weapons, I devoured every article and op-ed that I could find. The daily street protests began that year after the questionable reelection of their president—the biggest demonstrations since the Revolution. I worried about Mohsen's safety and was deeply affected by the images of wounded and dying protestors that had been Tweeted and You-Tubed around the world. We both hoped that dramatic political change would result, but the authorities cracked down hard.

On a personal level, social media is changing Mohsen's life through his embrace of Facebook, where our conversation now takes place (safer from prying eyes than email, he says). He has lost his job with the engineering company—the tougher Western sanctions are working, inflation is in the double-digits, and his employers no longer receive the government subsidies that paid his salary. With time on his hands, Mohsen now lives online. Mostly everything on his constantly updated pages is in Farsi. No matter—I can still view the newest photos and the occasional English posting outside of our exchanges, such as his pained lament the day Whitney Houston died.

Becoming immersed in Mohsen's virtual life inspired me to write a poem titled "A Facebook Page in Iran," that was subsequently published in *Atlanta Review's* annual international issue. Excerpt: It's raining Farsi here, so hard / I can't see my way // through a fog of curlicues. / I bump into Mohsen, trapped // there and he knows it. He knows / the official no-no's, too many to list, // but his page is Fort Defiance, / I'm guessing, each post a tinderbox // of revolution and rock 'n roll, mixed in // with pix of friends looking weird but smart, / rueful smiles from cafes. . . ." Without notice, I posted the entire poem on his Facebook page and waited to see what would happen.

Almost immediately, the conversational deluge began. "Oh my Ggggod. It was really surprising when I started to read, then I saw it's about me," Mohsen wrote. And a few hours later: "I was awake all night typing . . . I have too many words for this."

Then Mohsen's friends in Iran, Dubai, and Canada chimed in. Several sent congratulations. 286 "likes" were recorded. Via Facebook "friending," I introduced Mohsen to my colleague Roger Sedarat, an Iranian-American poet and translator, who had assured me earlier that

## *Kestrel*

Mohsen was a graceful translator of my work. I was pleased when the conversation took off about Roger's two Iran-inspired collections and couldn't help feeling that my caprice had led to an international literary salon in cyberspace.

Recently we moved to another stage and began to Skype. The picture is shaky and sometimes breaks down, which seems like a metaphor for his country, but Mohsen's voice is clear and surprisingly lively. "The Iranian people love America," he said earnestly the first time we Skyped. It's hard to ignore the wistfulness in his voice—or is it bravely concealed desperation?—when he says, "America is my dream."

Will we ever meet outside the Internet or a video monitor? In our last conversation, Mohsen told me that he's already inscribed an illustrated book of poetry by Hafez for me. "Hold it for the day we'll meet face to face," I suggested. With the recent presidential election of the moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani, Mohsen is optimistic but says, "If change is going to come, it must begin with the people." It's so hard to guess about the future. But in the meantime, I'm sure of one thing: these two friends will go on talking.

