

The Idea of Houses

Iman Mersal
University of Alberta, Canada

I remember staring at my first poem translated into French with great surprise. I recall the same feeling when I listened to my voice on an answering machine for the first time. Is this really my voice? Are these really my words, or the words of another language?

At first you put great effort into reviewing your work as translated into a language you know; there is a sense of guardianship, and tension: this sentence should be shorter than that; a sense of humor has been lost; is there an old religious word to play the role of the Quranic term in my poem so the irony between sacred and everyday language can be juxtaposed as in the original?

After a while you accept the fact that there is always something lost--perhaps music, syntax, visual memory--that has no reference in the translated culture. In my poem published here, there is a "gold market;" those who belong to Arab culture will see the image of a gleaming neighborhood devoted to selling gold. Many brides and grooms, with their families, are walking from store to store with joyful voices, selecting engagement items. Songs and ululations will break forth when the mission is accomplished. The gold market is a step toward legal love, family expansion, a memory of a glorious moment, or the beginning of a bad choice. There is no gold market in this sense in English; selling my earrings is ordinary in the translated poem.

To give up guardianship over your poems, allowing them to migrate to new languages, translators, and homes, is certainly a good decision, especially if you do not know the languages your poems are migrating to. You imagine that your voice is carried by the air to ears you do not see; it is impossible to determine how your voice will reach them. It may sound more elongated or softer than it really is; it might be grandly eloquent, as if you are an elite native speaker. The translator who selects my poem, and sits there struggling to put it in his or her own language, has the right to rewrite it. Between my poem and what you read from my poem are many steps, but my accented voice is surviving its journey to the destination.

When I am reading great poets' work in English or Arabic, coming to me from faraway languages, I don't ask about what might have been lost in translation, but rather celebrate what might have been gained.

فكرة البيوت

بعث أقرابي في محلّ الذهب لأشتري خاتماً من سوق الفضة. استبدلته بحبر قديم وكزاس أسود. حدث ذلك قبل أن أنسى الصفحات على مقعد قطار كان من المفروض أن يوصلني الى البيت. وكان كلما وصلتُ إلى مدينة بدا لي أن بيتي في مدينة أخرى.

تقول أولجا من دون أن أحكي لها ما سبق: "البيت لا يصبح بيتاً إلا لحظة بيعه، تكتشف احتمالات حديقته وغرفة الواسعة في عيون السمسار، تحتفظ بكوابيسك تحت السقف نفسه لنفسك، وسيكون عليك أن تخرج بها في حقيبة أو اثنتين على أحسن الفروض". أولجا تصمت فجأة ثم تبسّم، مثل ملكة تتبسط مع رعاياها، بين ماكينة القهوة في مطبخها وشبّاك يطل على زهور.

زوج أولجا لم يرَ مشهد الملكة، وربما لهذا لا يزال يظن أن البيت هو الصديق الوفيّ عندما يصبح أعمى، أركانه تحفظ خطواته وسلماته ستحميه برحمتها من السقوط في العتمة.

أبحث عن مفتاح يضيع دائماً في قعر الحقيبة، حيث لا تراني أولجا ولا زوجها، حيث أتدرب في الحقيقة حتى أتخلّى عن فكرة البيوت.

كل مرة تعود إليه وتراب العالم على أطراف أصابعك، تحشر ما استطعت حمّله في خزائنه. مع ذلك ترفض أن تُعرف البيت بأنه مستقبل الكراكيب، حيث أشياء مينة كانت قد بدت في لحظة ما تفاوضاً مع الأمل. ليكن البيت هو المكان الذي لا تلاحظ البتة إضاءته السيئة، جدار تتسع شروخه حتى تظنها يوماً بديلاً للأبواب.

إيمان مرسال

iman mersal

The Idea of Houses

I sold my earrings in a gold shop to buy a ring in the silver market, and then replaced it with old ink and a black notebook. This happened before I forgot the pages on the seat of a train that was supposed to take me home. Whenever I reached a city, it seemed that my house was in another.

Olga says, without my telling her all of the above, ‘A house only becomes home the moment it’s being sold. You discover the potential of the garden and the spacious rooms through the eyes of the realtor. You keep your nightmares under the same roof for yourself, and when you leave, you pack them in a suitcase or two at best’. Olga suddenly falls silent, then smiles like a queen mingling with her subjects, between the coffee machine in her kitchen and a window overlooking flowers.

Olga’s husband did not see the queen’s scene, and maybe that’s why he still thinks the house will be his trusted friend when he becomes blind. Its corners will recognise his steps and its stairs will mercifully protect him from falling in the dark.

I look for a key that always gets lost in the bottom of my handbag, while Olga and her husband cannot see me, and where in truth I practice giving up the idea of houses.

Every time you return to it with the dust of the world on your fingertips, you stuff what you’ve brought in its closets. Nonetheless, you refuse to recognise the house as the future of clutter, where dead things had seemed for a moment to be a negotiation with hope. Let a house be a place whose bad lighting you do not notice, a wall whose cracks widen until one day you begin to think of them as a substitute for doors.

Translated by Khaled Mattawa