Dispatch: 'At last, the poem is going to kill me'

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Ebrahim Torbati was a poet--and a reluctant exile.

He stayed in his native Tehran long after many of his Jewish contemporaries had fled Iran, said his nephew Arman Mehrfar, 37, a New York criminal defense attorney. He stayed because he loved Persian culture and its tradition of poetry, and he was heartbroken at the prospect of leaving, his nephew said.

Only in 1990 did this intellectual who spoke five languages,had studied English literature and wrote books in Farsi, find himself reduced to peddling rugs in a tiny no-frills storefront called "Rug City" on Santee Street in Los Angeles, where he was killed by a robber Oct. 23 at the age of 71.

People, culture, and life--not material things--were what mattered to Torbati, Mehrfar said. Having flown to Los Angeles after his uncle's death, his nephew wasn't surprised to find that his uncle had not maintained the most basic documents to settle his affairs. Torbati simply didn't care about such things.

He lived in a little efficiency apartment in the Valley, did crossword puzzles all day at his desk in the shop and read constantly. He was on page 173 of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Love in the Time of Cholera" when he died.

"He was unique--exceptionally smart, exceptionally well-read," Mehrfar said. "He didn't care so much about rugs. It was just a way to make a modest living. He was a terrible businessman because he was a poet..He could barely tie his own shoes. He was one of those geniuses whose mental meanderings were beyond what most people experience their whole lives."

Mehrfar had the impression that Torbati's chief interest in his store was the opportunity it offered him to talk to people. He sometimes paid his only employee more than he took in. He didn't even have a cash register. The money his killer sought was kept in a drawer; it was still there when police arrived after his death.

As the nephew stood at his uncle's store two days after the murder, he was interrupted repeatedly by passersby who had come to pay their respects: A woman who said they spoke French together every day. A man who said Torbati had helped with his divorce. He liked to joke with his customers, flattering the female ones with impromptu proposals of marriage, said fellow merchant Fred Refa.

Torbati had always written poetry. But only recently had his family persuaded him to publish a book. The censors in Iran redacted the erotic parts.

Refa and Torbati's co-worker Abraham Rafy tried to translate a poem from Torbat's book in Farsi, but finally gave up. "It is very beautiful," Refa said, "but it cannot be translated."

Refa did, however, translate the title:
"At Last, the Poem is Going to Kill Me."

Torbati was shot at 840 Santee St. in Downtown L.A.'s garment district at about 4:15 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 23, said LAPD Central Det. Doug Pierce.

*(Right, items from Torbati's last moments: An almost empty cup of coffee, a calculator, and an open newspaper in Farsi, stained with his blood. Left, fellow merchant Refa (left) and co-worker Rafy.)*

The suspect (right), a black man 25 to 30 years old, slim, 5-foot-6, with a gray cap and shirt, shot him, then ran to a white Toyota Camry at 8th Street and Maple Avenue where two women were waiting for him. Detectives are at (213) 972-1254.

Translations of Torbati's poems--the first two courtesy of Elham Gheytanchi, professor of sociology at Santa Monica College, and the third by his family:

**Identifying the Poet's Corpse**

The black dressed
threw away his long black robe
recklessly,
Looked at the cold, dry skins
the brisk, frigid bodies
and whispered:
Some of them are still dangerous!
He ordered:
-Open it!
-Open the door of the morgue!
There,
laid the corpse of a sorcerer
who could turn the silence of the stone into a song.

**Autobiography**

I am from the long line of
a bewildered generation
I am that vanished Jew
whose scroll of existence
is nothing but
the sound of pendulum
on the way from the kitchen ... to the well
or on the way from the well... to the kitchen
from the first star of David
to the last swastika
from the first axe
that crashed an idol
to the crippled body of Ibrahim.

**The Childish Dream**

If the snow fell in colors, then
The tiny alleys and streets near our home would be,
Green or yellow,
Burgundy or blue.
The branches of trees would be like a rainbow,
The mountains, the desert and the pastures would be shiny sparkles.
If the snow fell in colors, then
The confined cages of classrooms would burst open, and
Like the joy and excitement of recess, would explode.
While the cold doors and walls of the prisons,
Would burst open with the sweet smell of freedom and liberty.
If the snow fell in colors, then
The black coat of the crows
Would be painted by fine lines and speckles of coordinated beauty,
Such that the peacock could not be as proud, and
And the parrot would not be as unique.
All would know that,
The sly fox and the disloyal cat have seven lives.
Fishes would now be more alert, and
The newly enlightened bird would seek the shelter and safety of the nest.
If the snow fell in colors, then
The merit of an angel and a demon would not be different.
The thief and the judge,
The drunken and the sober,
The believer and the infidel,
Would all be poets,
Would all become Hafez.
If the day was orange,
And the night was blue, then
The moon would slide down from the sky, and
A red rose would bloom in its place.
If feelings had colors, then
All my poems
Would be like a painted garden.