

***Let's start with the obvious
Where were you born and
raised?***

I'm proud to say I was born in Tehran. My family left when I was one, and after living in London for a year, my parents immigrated to Canada. I've been living in Toronto for most of my life, and was in the UK for a few years after completing my Masters there.

***How and where did you grow
up? What were your parents
like, what did they expect of
you professionally?***

I grew up in suburban Toronto. My father is an engineer and architect by profession, and my mother has a master in communications, but upon moving to Canada, they had to seek opportunities elsewhere as they had no 'Canadian experience'. They both worked very late hours as financial advisers, and between the ages of six and twelve, I was raised by my maternal grandparents, who moved from London for me.

My parents are incredibly open-minded people and, while they pushed me to excel in school, they never once imposed their beliefs and ideals on me, and there was never the pressure to choose a particular career path. They only provided their advice and counsel, and were always there to support me – on all levels – no matter what I chose to do.

***If applicable when did you
leave Iran or have you ever
visited Iran?***

I try to visit Iran as often as I can. As a student, I used to travel there every summer. The last time I was there, however, was in 2014. I'm planning on going to Tehran this October, and can't wait to see my beautiful city again.

***What was your relationship
to Iranian culture growing up
and what was it like for you
growing up in the diaspora?
Was travel to Iran part of
your history or did you always
experience Iran from afar?***

As a child the only exposure I had to my culture was through my grandparents, first and foremost, and other Iranians around me, such as friends and rela-

An Interview with

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tives. I was also sent to Persian classes on Friday nights. I was taught to love my Iranian heritage when I was growing up, but it wasn't something I really thought about or was as passionate about as I am now. I rediscovered my culture when I was around sixteen, which is when I first visited the country. But yes; my experience has largely been from afar, and will always be. Even in Iran, I look at things differently as a result of my upbringing and surroundings.

***What is your favorite memory
about Iran or what is it that
fascinates and inspires you
about Iran and Iranian people
AND what is it that upsets
you?***

There isn't one particular memory that stands out; everything about Iran is beautiful to me. When I think of Iran, though, my mind turns to the conversations I'd have with my friends over 'French coffee' in the cafes of the Sayeh complex in Tehran (opposite the Mellat Park), the sight of the mountains, the romantic Paykan taxicabs, the smell of burn-

ing *esfand* in traffic jams, the way even the most ordinary of back streets would turn into a thing of breathtaking beauty at sundown ... I could go on forever.

Iran – to me – is the most fascinating and magical place on earth. It really is the 'navel of the world', as my dear friend Hushidar has written in the introduction to my new book of essays and stories, *With My Head in the Clouds and Stars in My Eyes*. Iran's role in humanity and civilization is monumental, and I can't even begin to describe it; suffice it to say that the very name leaves me in awe.

Iranians are incredibly talented, refined, and cultured people. That being said, there are many I know outside the country who are ashamed of their Iranian identity, and resort to such measures as denying it, changing their names, and avoiding questions about their roots, amongst others. There are also, unfortunately, many pseudo-intellectuals I've encountered – not in Iran, but abroad, again – who deem Iranian pride to be passé and naïve, question the very things that make us Iranian and dismiss them as fairytales, and look at nationalism and the term 'Aryan' (the meaning of which many of them don't even under-

stand) as dirty words. On the same note, I know politicians of Iranian origin who routinely call for sanctions on, and armed aggression towards Iran, and look forward to the day when Americans and Israelis will bring ‘democracy’ to Iran. But then again, I don’t even consider such individuals to be worthy of being called Iranian.

What are your perceptions of art / music / culture being produced there?

Iranians always blow my mind. I sometimes think, sitting here in Toronto and reading my books, that I know a thing or two, but when I speak with Iranian artists, writers, and other creatives there, I soon realize I know nothing at all. What my Iranian compatriots are doing there, in all fields, is mind-blowing. Their talent, more than anything else, is what so many others see as a threat. We are not a mere nation of consumers and order-takers; we’ve shown the world that in spite of their sanctions, imposed wars, and ostracism, we can stand on our own two feet and thrive. How long can countries like the UK and France survive in such isolation? That’s some food for thought. In an enemy, our self-sufficiency and drive are indeed things to be feared.

Tell us about your educational background schooling

I received my BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) from the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto, and my MS. in Management from City University London’s Cass Business School. I consider my real education to be all the literature, films, and music I devoured on the side, though.

At what age did you find art/music/literature --what were the early influences -- and what early impact did they have on you?

Music was my first love. I fell in love with rock and roll after my father bought me my first record, the Rolling Stones’ *Bridges to Babylon*. I’ve also been playing the guitar since I was thirteen. Literature came later, after discovering the poetry of the Persian Sufis. More than anything else, it was a love for Iran and the desire to learn everything I could that impelled me to read. Visual art was last, and again,

my passion for it was dictated by my love affair with Iran.

Tell us about Reorient: what is it, when and why did you start it?

Reorient is a non-political, non-religious, and non-ideological publication celebrating the contemporary arts and culture of Iran and the Middle East. I founded it in 2012 out of a desire to shine a light on the brilliance of not only Iran, but the other countries and cultures comprising – for lack of a better term – the ‘Middle East’. I serve as the Editor, and am supported by an amazing network of contributors based around the world. While our focus is on the contemporary, many of our pieces have historical elements to them, too. Visual art, film, music, and literature are the main subjects we deal with in the form of articles, essays, interviews, and podcasts.

Do you have the support of your family in your endeavors?

Oh, definitely. Without the support of my parents, I wouldn’t be where I am now. I owe them everything. I’d be lying through my teeth if I said I’d made it on my own.

Your most recent endeavor is The Robaiyat. Can you tell us about that?

My translation of the *Robaiyat* of Omar Khayyam was the first book I published! I authored it in 2012, and only decided in 2016 to do something with it. My affinity for Khayyam and the kinship I feel with him aside, I thought it was essential to provide a new translation. Unfortunately, the most well known English version of the *Robaiyat* is Edward FitzGerald’s, which is at best a very loose translation; rather than try to translate the words *Robaiyat* as accurately as possible, FitzGerald strove to capture what he felt to be the ‘spirit’ of Khayyam. Many of the poems are actually his own compositions, and the author of his *Robaiyat* is often referred to as ‘FitzOmar’. On the other hand, there are wonderful scholarly translations that are incredibly accurate, but that lack the poetic qualities and sensibilities of the original Persian poems. I strove to combine both approaches – that is, to be as faithful as possible to each and



every word, while also remembering to retain the spirit and rhyme of the poems. Of course, no translation is every going to be 100% accurate, or flawlessly convey all the nuances of the work in its original language; translations are by definition flawed. But what other alternative do we have? I’d love for everyone to learn Persian and read the originals, but I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon!

In the Iran Inside out show in 2009 (which opened right during the 2009 protests and got a lot of attention) - there was a tendency to frame the Diaspora artists as being heavily influenced by Persian art whereas the artists working in Iran were perceived as more outward-looking and not “limited” by their Persian influences. In marveling at the sophistication of the Iranian artists, there was a kind of backhand dismissal of the Diaspora artists, as if Persian influences were limiting or else not authentic for those in the Diaspora.

What are your thoughts on Iranian artists i the Diaspora speaking to their Iranian influences, how do you contextualize that? Is it possible to characterize “Iranian contemporary art” in general, or is this all too simplistic an aim?



There's certainly a difference between the art produced by artists living and working in Iran, and those in the diaspora. I've actually found it to be the opposite; many Iranian artists in the diaspora I follow look to their Iranian heritage for inspiration, but haven't limited themselves to it whatsoever. Living and working outside the country, they've naturally been exposed to the oeuvre of a plethora of non-Iranian artists, and in many cases are just as German, French, English, etc. as they are Iranian.

It would be absolutely impossible not to have other influences! I'd say the difference lies in the ways in which Iran and Iranian culture impact their work. For instance, I, as someone who's lived in the West all my life, am going to write about Iran differently than a writer who was born and raised there. The works of all Iranian artists, whether at home or abroad, are valid and credible. The problem arises when baseless claims are made. I've never said or intimated that I represent Iranian youth, and don't go around calling for Iranians to take to the streets. Who am I to do such things?

Do you think the travel ban is having or going to have some big impact on Iranian artists, in Iran and in the Diaspora?

It's already been having a huge impact. As I said in my interview with PRI's Marco Werman, Trump might just be the best thing to have happened to Iranian culture in recent years. Earlier this year, the Guggenheim in New York replaced works by European masters with those by Iranian artists like Parviz Tanavoli, while

the Davis Museum at Wellesley College took down all works created or loaned by immigrant artists (including an Iranian one) in protest. And, while I love Asghar Farhadi (whose latest film London's mayor screened in Trafalgar Square), I think many would agree that there was a bit of politics involved in his second Oscar win. Celebrating Iranian culture in the States and abroad is now being seen as an act of defiance, and Trump, of course, is the person everyone loves to hate at the moment. In terms of arts and culture, he's only had a positive impact.

Do you think it is possible through journalism, writing, and art itself to change the impressions of those who hold on to stereotypical notions about Iran?

If I didn't I wouldn't be doing what I do. So many friends of mine have written to me expressing a burning desire to visit Iran, and not few of them have even gone all around the country! We're our own worst enemy. For every one Iranian patriot, there are five others waiting to sabotage all his or her efforts. We rarely receive any negative comments on our Iran-related Facebook posts from non-Iranians; the overwhelming majority come from our own 'compatriots', unfortunately. As I said earlier, putting Iran down is in vogue nowadays. To celebrate and champion Iranian culture is naive and delusional.

What are your future plans?

I'm about to release two new books:

With *My Head in the Clouds and Stars in My Eyes*, a collection of Iran-related essays and stories, and *Lovers of Light*, a poetry book with the ancient Iranian deity Mitra at its heart. As well, I've nearly finished the first draft of a new novel, which has to do with Toronto's Iranian community.

Do you have any words of wisdom and inspiration for the future generation of Iranian – Americans?

Say the beautiful name of Iran with pride – always. For God's sake, don't change your name from Pedram to Pete, and don't refer to yourself as 'Persian' out of shame and embarrassment. If people can't pronounce your lovely name, that's their problem. Never forget that you come from one of the most glorious cultures and civilisations the world has ever known, and that it is a *privilege* to have been born Iranian. Read about your illustrious history so that you'll never be anyone's fool, and when you've done that, read even more. There's more to being Iranian than *gahr-kardan* and *chelo kabab*. If you wear a *farvahar* and call yourself a Zoroastrian and child of Cyrus, do not do so in ignorance, but with full knowledge and appreciation of the glory of your heritage. Have respect for everyone, and never elevate Iranian culture at the expense of other ones, but be steadfast and defiant in your well-merited pride, and never sell yourselves to the many who despise and fear us for our greatness. Love your ancient homeland, your people, and your culture, with every bit of your being.

The Symbol of Isfahan fortune in the Iranian traditional astrology (located in the north side of The Naqsh-e Jahaan squire-Isfahan-Iran)



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