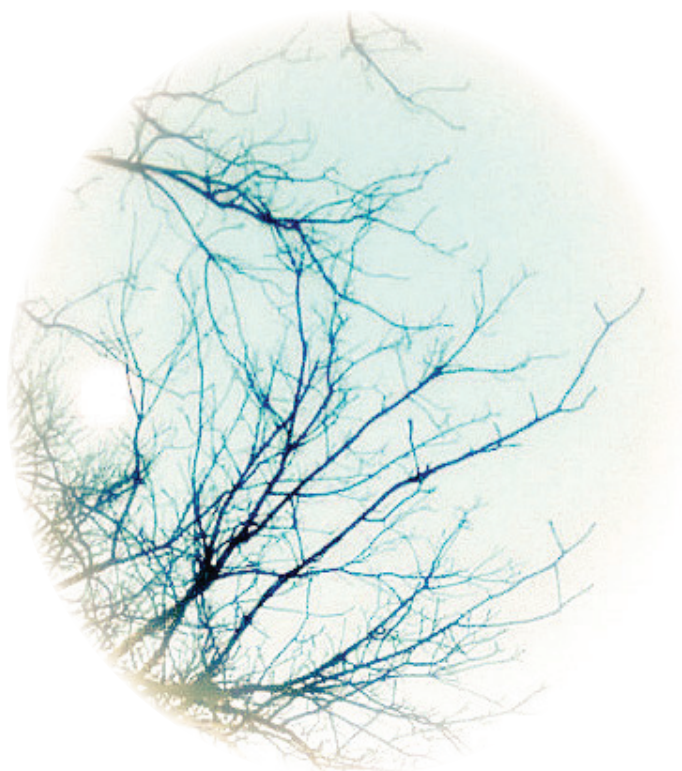


MINIMAL TALES



FERIT EDGÜ

TRANSLATED FROM THE TURKISH BY ARON AJI

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Translational Transactions



Writing Against Memory: Translating Ferit Edgü's Minimalist Prose

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A CANONICAL TURKISH AUTHOR, POET, AND VISUAL ARTIST, Ferit Edgü has been writing for more than sixty years. He is best known for his extremely spare narrative style and austere language. A master of distillation, Edgü is after the most elemental about the stories he tells, giving no extraneous exposition or description, relying mainly on dramatic monologues or dialogues, and packing voice, point of view, and tone with maximum narrative energy. It is possible to read the vignettes that comprise “Minimal Tales” as aphorism or parables, as prose poetry, or as flash fiction (albeit produced well before the genre had gained currency). However characterized, Edgü’s writing always seeks to tell the most in the sparest form, with the least verbal spectacle.

Edgü manages to weave complex, sociopolitically poignant human stories with startling lyricism. This is especially true of his several books, including *A Season in Hakkari*, *The Wounded Age*, and *Eastern Tales*, on the difficult political geography of eastern Turkey and its tragic cycles of ethnic strife. In the course of his returns to the region (both in person and in his narratives), Edgü’s writing chronicles the violence endured by the ethnic communities, especially the Kurds, whose cultural autonomy has long been anathema to the nationalist state. His narratives belong in the tradition of Milosz’s poetry of witness and — closer to home — of Nazim Hikmet’s *Human Vistas from My Country*, as Ferit Edgü imbues the local/historical particularities with almost archetypal resonance, in order to interrogate the human condition in the age of endless wars. Edgü’s style is an expression less of trust than of distrust in the power of words in a world where rhetoric constantly threatens poetry and truth-telling. Reading Edgü, I am often reminded of Milosz’s famous lines “And when people cease to believe that there is good and evil, / Only beauty will call to them and save them / So that they will know how to say: this is true and that is false.”

For Edgü, writing involves a paradoxical transaction between experience and memory. The experience being recalled wanes across time while its memory waxes since it is held through mental associations or personal or historical narratives of signification. Time seems to impoverish the experience while embellishing its memory, especially when fictionalized. What Edgü is after is not remembering but re-instancing: How to extract the most persistent aspects of the

original experience, how to re-instance its seed that germinates in(to) memory. A neologism by Edgü, *ansımak* cues us into this pursuit. In Turkish *anımsamak* means “to recall a memory” or “to remember.” Edgü’s *ansımak* combines “instance” and “recall.” Re-instancing, then, is a process of extraction to strip the memory of everything extraneous, everything that has been re-remembered by association or fictionalized, and to re-instance that which has persisted through time. In the story “Interview,” the old villager tells the narrator, “make our photograph,” later adding “no need for letters.”

Another transaction, darker yet equally significant, informs these stories: namely, individual experience and historical pattern, the enduring sameness of the cycles of violence, futility, and loss. “Minimal Tales” records not just what happens in time but also what repeats throughout time. Each minimal tale not only retrieves that which has occasioned it but also echoes through the other minimal tales, building an increasingly resonant ledger recording the tragic history of a specific place across time.

Reading these spare narratives is itself a transactional process: the less we are given, the more we imagine, yet the more we imagine, the less we trust what we imagine. Standing starkly before us, the minimal narratives remind us how little we know about what they describe, how much of a stranger we have remained to these historical circumstances, how little attention we have paid to the human toll that such a history has extracted.

Translating Edgü feels deceptively easy. His vernacular register, the photographic neutrality of the point of view, the terse and straightforward syntax, all seem to promise an effortless translation. Yet re-creating this simplicity has itself entailed a process of re-instantiation and self-absenting on my part. The dissimilar grammar and syntax of English and Turkish, especially evident in the polyvocal vernacular forms of the two languages, require, by necessity, that the translator exercise creative intervention. However, Edgü’s narratives — where every word serves to build only the quintessential minimum — offer very little space for creative intervention, and any such intervention must remain subtle, inconspicuous. In “Dark Winter,” for instance, Edgü’s speaker reacts to the untimely blizzard: “Göz gözü görmüyor Halit, bu ne mene bahar karı?,” which I translated as “Can’t see a thing, Halit, what a lot a spring snow this is!” The Turkish utterance contains an idiomatic expression, “Göz gözü görmüyor” (literally, “eye can’t see eye”), along with a sonic nonsensical word (*ne mene bahar karı*) that bears the emotional weight of the line. As much as idiomatic expressions can give the translator tantalizing opportunity for creative play, I decided to translate “Göz gözü görmüyor” plainly as “I can’t see a thing,” in order to earn my little bit of intervention in translating “ne mene.” My version, “what a lot a,” I find, is restrained, and subtler than, say, “whatalotta” or “whatamata,” which, while pushing the play closer to that in the Turkish, would have rendered the play too conspicuous and the translator too visible. A

HORSELESS

I also wanted to escape. But they didn't let me. In the end
I found myself among my captors, rather, those
who themselves couldn't escape.

You want my permission to leave?
What would I tell the others, if they asked?
But if you're set on leaving, that's another matter.
Let me come with you. Then we'd owe each other nothing.

No, I have no horse, we can't ride together.
I have a rifle, yes, but no horse.
Besides, if I had a horse, would I still...

INTERVIEW

You writing it down? asks the old villager who smells
like damp fleece.

Don't you see I am? Keep talking.

What nonsense!

Shall I write that?

Write this: My patience's run out

I write, My patience's run out, repeating it.

Not yours, my patience.

The same thing. What else shall I write?

Isn't that enough?

(I am puzzled, so he adds)

Make our photograph, if you want.

(He calls his daughters, sons, grandchildren, his sons'
brides, his wives.)

Here, like this. Make a nice picture, all of us together. You can
include it in your story.

This way, you won't forget us.

Send us the picture. No need to write letters.

THIS

What's this?

Snow.

Never seen snow like this.

Oh the things you'll get to see here.

What things?

Wolves, dogs.

What else?

Bears, foxes.

What else?

A human being, if you're lucky.

In this snow?

In this snow, if you can find your way. Or if he's lost his way.

Luck of the draw...

MY MOTHER AND ME

The village is gone.

(Even) the children are dead.

Of his family, only his mother is left. And him.

That's what he says.

What will you do? I ask, just to have said something.

He first asks, then answers.

Us? We'll also die soon. Both my mother and me.

Then why don't you leave? I ask.

Leave? he says (surprised). We've been everywhere. My mother and me. Where else's left besides here?

RUINS

The village is in ruins. Everyone killed, horses, dogs.
These people, aren't they afraid of God? I shouted.
I waited.
My voice did not echo.
My God! What sort of place is this! I added.
What business would God have on this mountaintop?
said a villager whose name I didn't know. He added:
Around here, we settle our affairs among us.
We remained silent.
A dog barked in the distance.

FORTUNE

The one who stopped me this time was a woman in ragged clothes. She spoke my language quite well. Stranger, she said, come let me read your fortune. I smiled. My fortune's been read plenty of times. But not here, she said. Let me read it here this time. What do you use? I asked, still smiling. A mirror, she said. Then she held my hand and walked me to the poplars by the road. My hand still in her hand, she sat us down. She took a round hand mirror out of her bosom and held it out. Look in this mirror, she said. Look intently and try not to think of anything. Then give it back. I took the mirror that smelled of her sweat and looked. The mirror was cracked. I saw my face reflected in the tarnished fragments. Was this really my face or not? I couldn't tell. Over, she said and took the mirror back. Then she inspected the mirror slowly, carefully. As if the face, the eyes she saw in it weren't hers. Strange, she said. I see nothing. Either you didn't really look in the mirror, or you let thoughts cross your mind. But even your thoughts aren't visible. You mean my fortune came out empty? I asked. You shouldn't talk like that. That's the worst kind of bad luck, your fortune coming out empty. Maybe it's me that can't read your fortune. Or maybe it's because the mirror is cracked, I said. I've held this mirror in my bosom for years and never once took it out to see myself; it was bound to be broken. But I can't read fortunes with anything other than this mirror. Let's try it again, if you want. She held out the mirror. I pulled myself off the ground. No, I said, I don't want to see my face a second time in a cracked, tarnished mirror. Then look in my eyes, she said. I had played this game before. No, I said. One reading is plenty.

RECORD KEEPING

What's your job here? I asked.

To record every document received or sent, Mr. Inspector.

Do you read these documents? I asked.

No, sir, he said. My job is only to enter them in the records.

No one here is assigned to reading documents.

What are you doing right now?

My apologies, sir, he said (setting his pencil on his desk),

I forgot to tell you. I also write down everything spoken around here.

Will you write down our conversation too?

This is what I am doing right now, Mr. Inspector.

But I'm not an inspector.

Doesn't matter, sir. In the east, everyone performs their duties. No questions. No look and see. Especially no questions or look and see.

A CONVERSATION

What are you doing here? asked the watchman with a rifle who suddenly accosted me.

Taking a walk, I said.

Did you get the Bey's permission?

Which Bey? Is there a Bey of these mountains?

There sure is, he said, turning his rifle at me. Don't you know the Bey?

No, I don't, I said. I'm in transit here. Right now just walking around.

Your ID please.

What ID? I asked. I'm here for the census. I am a state clerk. If you need to see an ID, here's my ID.

I reached into my inside pocket and took out my official state-issued badge.

This ID is not valid here, he said, without even looking at it.

But I'm on duty, I said. I came here to count the people and the animals.

No one counts anything here without the Bey's permission, he said.

Then take me to your Bey, I said.

Our Bey is currently in the capital, he said. But since you traveled all the way here, permission or not, I can't let you go without offering you something to eat. It would dishonor our Bey and our customs.

He lowered his rifle. As if to say, Get in front of me, he pointed the way with its barrel.

COINCIDENCE

I'd like to rent a boat.

What for? he asked.

I've always enjoyed traveling, I said.

Have you killed a captain?

What an absurd question. I'm an honest man, I said.

You may be an honest man. But your request is no more absurd than my question. See here? We're on a mountaintop. A boat's not much use here. Anyone misguidedly looking for one, I'm guessing, would have to be a fugitive sailor who killed his captain. But if you really want to know, there are barges, not quite like boats but still used for moving loads, about 180 kilometers from here, on the Tigris.

Does the Tigris reach the sea? I asked.

So you're not a sailor and you know zero geography.

Are you here by mistake?

I must be. Or a coincidence.

As long as you know . . . , he started but must have read in my eyes that I didn't believe him; he walked away without finishing his sentence.

I looked.

It was snowing on the hills.

On the tallest hills.

THE WATCHMAN

What are you doing here? I asked.
I'm the watchman, he said.
What're you watching? I asked.
Can't tell you, he said.
Why, you don't know it yourself, I said.
You won't get a word out of me, he said.
I'm not trying to, fool. You and me, we're the only living
things left around here. Luck of the draw. Just you and
me and no one else. Keep that in your head and when
your watch is over (I hope you know when) come find
me so we can hit the road together.
I pointed at the ammunition depot ahead:
I'll be there. But you should know I won't be able to
wait too long.

COMPASS/LESS

Compass in hand, I ask:

Where are we headed, Ramazan?

The village.

But that's not the village road.

The village road's no more, Teacher. Buried in snow.

No village road until summer.

Then how do we get there?

By forging a new road. What we're doing now.

But you're forging it in the wrong direction.

Don't mind the compass, Teacher, just follow me.

But you're headed the wrong way, Ramazan.

Then leave me; follow the compass. Forge your own road yourself.

DARK WINTER

What a snow, Halit!

You haven't yet seen the worst, Teacher, it's still spring.

Spring? A spring winter?

Whatever you say.

Can't see a thing, Halit, what a lot a spring snow this is!

It'll clear out soon, Teacher.

Soon?

Then the wolves come down. Then it's winter again,
dark winter.

What do we do then?

Then we turn inward, Teacher.

VOICE

Who died? asked a voice.
Who killed? asked another voice.
How many dead? asked a third voice.
When did they kill? asked an unfamiliar voice.
The killers will also die, said a familiar voice.
Three were children, said a different voice.
And five women, said the same voice.
Where are we headed? asked an old voice.
Like you don't know, said a young voice.
He sure doesn't, said the dying voice.
Because with him, the mountain summit he beheld
before closing his eyes also died the window of his
house also died the barking dog also died the water
from the fountain also died the poplar swaying in the
wind also died the melting snow also died and last
the sun died.

WHO

No cure for him who sees these mountains, an old man once said.

I had taken it as the ravings of an aging man.

Years passed since.

I returned to the mountains.

There were no villages left, not even barking dogs.

I asked the first human I met,

Where did all the people go?

He stared at me vacantly.

My guide translated my question. The other (thankfully) opened his mouth, uttered a few words.

Then, as if our encounter was nothing unusual, he kept walking.

What did he say? I asked my guide.

They went where you came from.

WELCOME

Good to see you, the young man says, taking my suitcases as I get off the bus.
 Good to see you, I reply, puzzled.
 We've been waiting for you a long time, he says.
 He's walking, my suitcases in his hands.
 The trip was long, I say.
 Don't we know it? he says.
 We stop in front of the hotel.
 I can't go inside, he says. Get a good night's sleep and I'll fetch you here in the morning.
 What are we going to do? I ask.
 He smiles.
 We've a lot to do. Wait till tomorrow.

Morning.
 He is in front of the door.
 Did you sleep well?
 I did, I say.
 Let's go now and have breakfast, he says.
 Breakfast: hot steaming pita, herbed cheese, endless cups of tea.
 What now? I ask.
 Now? he says. I don't know. If you want, we can take a walk in the mountains. You can hunt and I'll watch, if you want. (He pauses briefly, then adds)
 If you're ready, I'll take you to them, he says.
 Them? I ask.
 Yes, haven't you been waiting?
 For whom? I ask.
 The mountains, he says, laughing.
 Then adds: These mountains, too, God made them.
 All of us, I say. You, me, all of us.
 No, he says, not all of us. Don't joke.
 Then who?
 These steep mountains, these barren mountains, these treeless mountains, he says.
 But he didn't make humans? I ask.
 No, he says. Humans made themselves.

KEREM

Will I also die before I grow up? Kerem asked.
Why would you die? I said.
Everyone's dying. Night comes and everyone dies.
Nothing will happen to you, I said.
Then take me along, he said. When I'm with you,
you'd be safe too.
But what about your mom, your dad, your siblings,
your sheep, your dogs?
They'll all die, he said. They'll all die anyway. Let me
come with you. You save me. And I'll save you.

WHAT

What are you looking for on that ungodly mountain?
asked a familiar voice.

I'm not looking for anything.

I'm just there, on the mountain.

Among its living and its dead. That's all.

That's what I said.

Don't speak like you're one of them. You, why are you there?

I don't know, I said. Maybe because I'm no longer one
of you but one of them.