

# Fragments

Gilane Tawadros

I

*They called us naziheen, the displaced ones. Displacement is like death. One thinks it happens only to other people. From the summer of '67 I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else... He is the one whose relationship with places is distorted, he gets attached to them and repulsed by them at the same time. He is the one who cannot tell his story in a continuous narrative and lives hours in every moment. Every moment for him has its passing immortality. His memory resists ordering... He is despised for being a stranger, or sympathized with for being a stranger. The second is harder to bear than the first... But... the stranger can never go back to what he was. Even if he returns. It is over. A person gets 'displacement' as he gets asthma, and there is no cure for either. And a poet is worse off, because poetry itself is an estrangement.*

II

How did nostalgia come to mean a longing for the past? Nostalgia was once the word employed by soldiers far from their native lands to express their longing for home. If the past and home are interchangeable concepts, then yearning for home means yearning for the past, for something that one can never return to; at least, never return to in the same way. It puts home in a different time zone. Returning home thus becomes returning to a place that exists partially in one's imagination, a place that will have changed or altered irrevocably when one goes back. Introducing the dimension of time harshly places an unavoidable distance between you and home, which can never be satisfyingly bridged. It renders home as the memory of a distant place (not just a familiar physical location) which might be mis-remembered, half-forgotten, or difficult to recall in its minute details.

III

"Don't you remember what happened that summer?" She didn't remember and a shudder of panic rippled through her. If anything happened to her sister, how would she remember

anything about their childhood? Her memory was like a leaky boat, letting the water slowly seep in over time, weighing it down and gradually sinking her memories beneath the surface of the sea. Her sister kept the boat afloat, reminding her of their shared past, jogging her recollections, conjuring sounds and images that she had thought she'd lost forever. It was hard work trying to remember and she often felt like succumbing to the tide of forgetfulness sweeping over her, enabling her to live in the present unhindered by the disquieting intrusions of personal history. She wasn't like some people who seemed frozen in the past, perpetually re-visiting the things that had happened there. But neither was she stuck in the present, unable to connect her current life with what had taken place before. She moved between the past and the present, uncomfortable in both.

#### IV

VLADIMIR: Look at the tree.

ESTRAGON: It's never the same pus from one second to the next.

VLADIMIR: The tree, look at the tree.

[ESTRAGON *looks at the tree*]

ESTRAGON: Was it not there yesterday?

VLADIMIR: Yes, of course it was there. Do you not remember? We nearly hanged ourselves from it. But you wouldn't. Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: You dreamt it.<sup>2</sup>

#### V

She liked to play a game when she was listening to *Desert Island Discs* on the radio, choosing her own eight records to keep and listen to on her imaginary desert island. Her selection kept changing every time. It was difficult to choose the eight songs that would remind her of past experiences; the tunes that would transport her back to another moment, evoking that time in vivid, 3-D, saturated Technicolor. At the same time, she wanted to choose songs that reflected who she was, that were a kind of musical distillation of her identity up to that point. She also selected songs that invoked the person she aspired to be, the woman she was in the process of becoming. She took this game so seriously that she had even recorded her own version of *Desert Island Discs*, interviewing herself about her own life and memories, her journey to this particular place and to all the other places where she had felt

equally out of place. She couldn't imagine herself surviving for very long on a desert island. Apart from the fact that she hated the 'great outdoors' and would probably be eaten alive by mosquitoes, she wouldn't be able to survive the isolation and the complete absence of other people.

## VI

*... it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly to feel less comfortable with, "Edward", a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said... For years, and depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past "Edward" and emphasize "Said": at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear. The one thing I could not tolerate, but very often would have to endure, was the disbelieving, and hence undermining, reaction: Edward? Said?*

*... The travails of bearing such a name were compounded by an equally unsettling quandary when it came to language. I had never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt. What I do know, however, is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other.<sup>3</sup>*

## VII

She had completely lost interest in the day-to-day. She felt as though she existed in an airtight, vacuum-packed bubble, moving through the world without it having any impact upon her, removed from any physical sensation. She couldn't see, hear, smell, touch, taste anything beyond the confines of her immediate surroundings. She hadn't imagined that death would have this effect upon her. She stayed in this state of suspended animation for days, revisiting the day of her father's death over and over again. She tried to recall every minute detail of that day as though the banal sequence of events, much like any other, held some clue to his sudden, unexpected death. Her uncle, wanting to mine the seemingly unfathomable depths of her grief, jerked her back into consciousness. "I'll never forget," he remarked, anticipating her response attentively, "the time when your father stopped speaking to your sister. He didn't speak to her for an entire year, did he?" Nothing had prepared her for that. She had blocked that long, painful episode out of her mind

completely; she had, it would be true to say, forgotten it entirely, edited it out of her memory.

## VIII

How did nostalgia come to mean a longing for the past? How did it come to signify a sentimental longing to be anywhere but here? James Baldwin understood so perfectly that one can be a prisoner of one's past, static and immobile: "To be locked in the past means, in effect, that one has no past, since one can never assess it, or use it: and if one cannot use the past, one cannot function in the present, and so one can never be free."<sup>4</sup> What Baldwin proposes instead is a fluid, dynamic movement between the past and the present that weaves the past into the present, thus releasing new possibilities for the future. I imagine it as a sequence of movements, choreographed to re-trace the patterns and memories of the past but re-drawn and re-animated in the present to create something entirely new and different: a shimmering, golden dance that has never existed before.

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<sup>1</sup> Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, pp.3-4

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Waiting for Godot', *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p.56

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, London: Granta Books, 1999, pp.3-4.

<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin in James Baldwin and Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal*, New York: Atheneum, 1964, unpaginated.