

# LETTERS OF TRANSIT

*Reflections on Exile, Identity,  
Language, and Loss*

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*Letters of Transit*

**Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss**

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Edited by Andre Aciman

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*Imagining Homelands* Bharati Mukherjee

*No Reconciliation Allowed* Edward W. Said

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# Foreword

## *Permanent Transients*

Andre Aciman

What does it mean to be an exile? How does exile alter someone? How does it reinvent one? What is exile? When does it go away? Does it ever go away? What is the difference between, say, a refugee and an expatriate, or between an immigrant and an emigrant, or between the uprooted and the unrooted, the displaced, the *depayses*, the evicted, the *emigres*?—people who didn't just lift themselves up with their roots but who may have no roots left at all? These are the issues each of the five authors gathered here has tried to address in these essays originally delivered in The New York Public Library's lecture series "Letters of Transit." Everyone's exile is different, and every writer has his or her own way of groping in the dark. Some have triumphed over exile. Others even found displacement exciting, invigorating. Others were able to don it and doff it, like a costume, while others have never been able to shake it off. But exile, however exiles deal with it, is never far behind, whether we're talking of a Yugoslavian in exile (Charles Simic), or a Bengali in exile (Bharati Mukherjee), or a Pole in exile (Eva Hoffman), or a Palestinian in exile (Edward Said), or an Alexandrian in exile (Andre Aciman). Each one of the writers here writes from overt, or, more frequently, covert homesickness—tales of memory, loss, fear, anger, inevitable acculturation, muffled irony in the face of self-pity, and final redemption in this strange and often sorely unnatural thing called naturalization. Having chosen careers in writing, each uses the written word as a way of fashioning a new home elsewhere, of revisiting, transposing, or perpetuating the old one on paper, of writing away the past the way one writes off bad debts, doing the one absurd thing all exiles do, which is to look for their homeland abroad, or to try to restore it abroad, or, more radical yet, to dispose of it abroad. However successful the endeavor is by the end of the day, the same perplexities, the same homesickness stirs to life again the next morning.

What makes exile the pernicious thing it is is not really the state of being away, as much as the impossibility of ever *not* being away—not just being absent, but never being able to redeem the absence. You look back on your life and find your exile announced everywhere, from events shaped as far back as the Congress of Vienna in 1815 down to the fact that, for some fortuitous reason, your parents decided to make certain you learned English as a child. Bewildered by narratives that pullulate everywhere he looks, an exile has yet to answer a far more fundamental question: in what language will he express his confused awareness of these intimate paradoxes?

Paradoxically enough, the answer in these five cases is English—the foreign tongue.

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Five voices, five tales, five worlds, five lives that might have little in common but for the fact that none of the foreign-born authors gathered in this volume is a native speaker of English. English, for all five, is an acquired language, a foreign idiom, and it remains, perhaps against their will and more than they care to own, alien, strange, distant. After many decades in the United States, or Canada, or England, most still speak English with an accent, as though an accent didn't betray just the body's inability to adapt or to square away the details of a naturalization that should have been finalized decades ago, but its reluctance to let go of things that are at once private and timeless, the way childhood and ritual and memory are private and timeless. Some of the writers still make out traces of an accent in their own prose, call it a particular cadence in a language that is never quite just English, but not anything else either. An accent is the tell-tale scar left by the unfinished struggle to acquire

new language. But it is much more.

It is an author's way of compromising with a world that is not his world and for which he was not and, in a strange sense, will never be prepared, torn as he'll always remain between a new, thoroughly functional here-and-now and an old, competing altogether-out-there that continues to exert a vestigial but enduring pull. An accent marks the lag between two cultures, two languages, the space where you let go of one identity, invent another, and end up being more than one person though never quite two.

Yet all five of these authors are so thoroughly at home—*rooted* might be the more appropriate, ironic, term—in English that it is difficult to remember they come from an entirely different hemisphere. English has become the language they speak at home. They write almost exclusively in English, and ultimately count, sing, cook, quarrel, and dream in English. Those of them who have children have tried to pass on the ur-language with varying degrees of success. But the ur-anything pales when it comes to report cards, baseball practice, television, college applications, career counseling. English is the everyday, nuts-and-bolts language. It may not be the language of the heart, the language of grief and gossip and good-night kisses; but all of these authors write in English when they write from the heart.

Every successful sentence they write reminds them that they've probably made it to safety. It is, after all, a source of no small satisfaction to be mistaken for a native speaker. Theirs, however, is the satisfaction that men like Demosthenes and Moses might have felt on telling their closest admirers that what turned them to public speaking was not the power of their beliefs but something as trivial as a speech defect. Foreigners frequently master the grammar of a language better than its native speakers, the better, perhaps, to hide their difference, their diffidence, which also explains why they are so tactful, almost ceremonial, when it comes to the language they adopt, bowing before its splendor, its arcane syntax, to say nothing of its slang, which they use sparingly, and somewhat stiffly, with the studied nonchalance of people who aren't confident enough to dress down when the need arises.

Eventually, of course, one does stop being an exile. But even a "reformed" exile will continue to practice the one thing exiles do almost as a matter of instinct: compulsive retrospection. With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing—or looking for—another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile, the point being that exile, like love, is not just a condition of pain, it's a condition of deceit.

Or put it another way: exiles can be supremely mobile, and they can be totally dislodged from their original orbit, but in this jittery state of transience, they are thoroughly stationary—no less stationary than those displaced Europeans perpetually awaiting letters of transit in the film *Casablanca*. They are never really in Casablanca, but they are not going anywhere either. They are in permanent transience.

Exiles see two or more places at the same time not just because they're addicted to a lost past. There is a very real, active component to seeing in this particularly heightened retrospective manner: an exile is continuously prospecting for a future home—forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become his. Except that he does not stop shopping for a home once he's acquired one or once he's finally divested himself of exile. He goes on prospecting, partly because he cannot have the home he remembers and partly because his new home bears no relationship to the old. Over and above these minor distinctions, however, his problem starts at home, with home. There isn't an end, and, in certain cases, wasn't—any.

The question our five writers ask is how do you—indeed, can you ever—rebuild a home? What kinds of shifts must take place for a person to acquire, let alone accept, a new identity, a new language? The answers are different, not just because their voices and concerns are different, but

because the psychological raw material which each author brings to the puzzle is different as well. Still, here, in this volume, all five authors have shown us how each, in his or her way, has tried to make a home and refashion a life. Let's bear in mind that the next time we read them they won't be forthcoming. Like friends who happened to open up one day only to withdraw afterwards, they'll be addressing a host of other issues, almost forgetting they showed us their deepest and most private side here.

Let's remember, then, that the words they'll be using won't just be English words jotted down in an effort to communicate with their English-speaking readers. Their words, despite their desire to appear so coolly collected and focused, are the priceless buoys with which they try to stay afloat both as professional thinkers and human beings.

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# Shadow Cities

Andre Aciman

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Why spurn my home when exile is your home?  
The Ithaca you want you'll have in not having.  
You'll walk her shores yet long to treat those very grounds,  
kill Penelope yet wish you half your wife instead,  
touch her flesh yet yearn for mine.  
Your home's in the rubblehouse of time now,  
and you're made thus, to yearn for what you lose.

from *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (1994)

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On a late spring morning in New York City almost two years ago, while walking on Broadway, suddenly noticed that something terrible had happened to Straus Park. The small park, located just where Broadway intersects West End Avenue on West 106th Street, was being fenced off. A group of workers, wearing orange reflector shins, were manning all kinds of equipment, and next to what must have been some sort of portable comfort station was a large electrical generator. Straus Park was being dismantled, demolished.

Not that Straus Park was such a wonderful place to begin with. Its wooden benches were dirt rotting, and perennially littered with pigeon droppings. You'd think twice before sitting, and if you did sit you'd want to leave immediately. It had also become a favorite hangout for the homeless, the drunk, and the addicted. Over the years the old cobblestone pavement had turned into an undulating terrain of dents and bulges, mostly cracked, with missing pieces sporadically replaced by tar and cement, the whole thing blanketed by a deep, drab, dirty gray. Finally, the emptied basin of what used to be a fountain had turned into something resembling a septic sandbox. Unlike the fountains of Rome, this one, like the park itself, was a down-and-out affair. Never a drop flowed from it. The fountain had been turned off decades ago.

Straus Park was, like so many tiny, grubby parks one hardly ever notices on the Lower East Side, a relic of a past that wasn't ancient enough to have its blemishes forgiven or to feel nostalgic about. One could say the same of the Art Nouveau-style statue of what I took to be a reclining Greek nymph located in silent contemplation, looking inward, as it were, to avoid looking at what was around her. She looked very innocent, very Old World, and very out of place, almost pleading to be rescued from the ugly shrub that dubbed itself a park. In fact, the statue wasn't even there that day. She had disappeared, no doubt sold.

The thing I liked most about the square was gone, the way so many other things are gone today from around Straus Park: the Olympia Deli, the Blue Rose, Ideal Restaurant, Mr. Kay's Barbershop, the Pomander Bookshop, the Siam Spice Rack, Chelsea Two, and the old Olympia Theater, drawn and quartered, as all the theaters are these days, plus the liquor store that moved across the street but real

disappeared when it changed owners, the flower store that went high-tech, and La Rosita, which went from being down-and-out to up-and-coming.

Why should anybody care? And why should I, a foreigner, of all people care? This wasn't even my city. Yet I had come here, an exile from Alexandria, doing what all exiles do on impulse, which is to look for their homeland abroad, to bridge the things here to things there, to rewrite the present so as not to write off the past. I wanted to rescue things everywhere, as though by restoring them here I might restore them elsewhere as well. In seeing one Greek restaurant disappear or an old Italian cobbler's turn into a bodega, I was once again reminded that something was being taken away from the city and, therefore, from me—that even if I don't disappear from a place, places disappear from me.

I wanted everything to remain the same. Because this too is typical of people who have lost everything, including their roots or their ability to grow new ones. It is precisely because you have no roots that you don't budge, that you fear change, that you'll build on anything rather than look for land. An exile is not just someone who has lost his home; it is someone who can't find another, who can't think of another. Some no longer even know what home means. They reinvent the concept with what they've got, the way we reinvent love with what's left of it each time. Some people bring exile with them the way they bring it upon themselves wherever they go.

I hate it when stores change names, the way I hate any change of season, not because I like winter more than spring, or because I like old store X better than new store Y, but because, like all foreigners who settle here, and who always have the sense that their time warp is not perfectly aligned to the city's, and that they've docked, as it were, a few minutes ahead or a few minutes behind Earth time, any change reminds me of how imperfectly I've connected to it. It reminds me of the thing I fear most: that my feet are never quite solidly on the ground, but also that the soil under me is equally weak, that the graft didn't take. In the disappearance of small things, I read the tokens of my own dislocation, of my own transiency. An exile reads change the way he reads time, memory, self, love, fear, beauty: in the key of loss.

I remembered that on summer days many years earlier when I was doing research on my dissertation, I would sometimes leave the gloomy stacks of Butler Library at Columbia and walk out into the sun down to 106th Street, where I'd find a secluded, shaded bench away from the drunks and sit there a while, eat a sandwich, a pizza, occasionally smiling at some of the elderly ladies who sat not in the park, but along the benches outside, the way they did on Saturday afternoons around Vesey Square on 72nd Street and had probably learned to do on sunny, windy summer days in Central Europe, and as they still do in those mock-England spots in Paris that the French call *petits squares* where people chat while their children play. Some of these ladies spoke with thick accents. I pictured their homes to myself, lots of lace, many doilies, Old World silverware, mannered Austro-Hungarian everything, down to the old gramophone, the black-and-white pictures on the wall, and de rigueur schnapps and slivovitz. They made me think of old 1950s pictures of a New York where it seemed to grow darker much sooner in the evening than it does nowadays, where everyone wore long gray overcoats because winters were always colder then, and of a time when the Upper West Side teemed with people who had come from Europe before the war and then stayed on, building small, cluttered lives, turning this neighborhood into a reliquary of Frankfurt-am-Main—their Frankfurt-away-from-home, Frankfurt-on-the-Hudson, as the old joke goes, but not an inappropriate reference to a city which, in Germany today, dubs itself Mainhattan, and which is, ironically enough, a far stranger city to them, now that it imitates Manhattan, than their adopted Manhattan imitating old Frankfurt.

There I met old Mrs. Danziger with the tattoo on her arm. Eighty-three-year-old Kurt Appelbaum, a concert pianist in his day, was sitting on such a bench; we spoke; we became friendly; one night without my asking, he offered to play the Waldstein and the *Rhapsody in Blue* for me, "But do not

tape,” he said, perhaps because he wished I would, and now that I think of it, I wish I had, as I sat and listened on a broken chair he said had been given to him by Hannah Arendt, who had inherited it from an old German colleague at the New School who had since died as well.

That was the year I rediscovered the Busch Quartet’s 1930s recordings of Beethoven, and imagined its members playing everywhere in those Old World, prewar living rooms around Straus Park. And by force of visualizing them there, I projected them onto the park as well, so that its benches and the statue and the surrounding buildings and stores were, like holy men, stigmatized by Beethoven’s music as it was played by a group of exiles from Hitler’s Reich.

I would come every noon, for the statue mostly, because she was, like me, willing to stand by this halfway station called Straus Park. She reminded me of those statues one finds everywhere in Rome, springing on you from their niches in the evening when you least expect them.

It is difficult to explain what seclusion means when you find it on an island in the middle of Broadway, amid the roar of midday traffic. What I was looking for, and had indeed found quite by accident, was something that reminded me of an oasis—in the metaphorical sense, since this was a “dry” fountain—but an oasis of the soul, a place where, for no apparent reason, people stop on their various journeys elsewhere. Straus Park, it seemed, was created precisely for this, for contemplation and for restoration—in both its meanings—for retrospection, for finding oneself, for finding the center of things.

And, indeed, there was something physically central about Straus Park. This, after all, was where Broadway and West End Avenue intersected, and the park seemed almost like a raised hub on West End Avenue, 106th Street, leading to Riverside Park on one side and to Central Park on the other. Straus Park was not on one street but at the intersection of four. Suddenly, before

I knew why, I felt quite at home. I was in one place that had at least four addresses.

Here you could come, sit, and let your mind drift in four different directions: Broadway, which at this height had an unspecified Northern European cast; West End, decidedly Londonish; 107th, very quiet, very narrow, tucked away around the corner, reminded me of those deceptively humble alleys where one finds stately homes along the canals of Amsterdam. And 106th, as it descended toward Central Park, looked like the main alley of a small town on the Italian Riviera, where, after much trundling in the blinding light at noon as you take in the stagnant odor of fuel from the train station where you just got off, you finally approach a sort of cove, which you can’t make out yet but which you know is there, hidden behind a thick row of Mediterranean pines, over which, if you really strain your eyes, you’ll catch sight of the tops of striped beach umbrellas jutting beyond the trees, and beyond these, if you could just take a few steps closer, the sudden, spectacular blue of the sea.

To the west of Straus Park, however, the slice of Riverside and 106th had acquired a character that was strikingly Parisian, and with the fresh breeze which seemed to swell and subside all afternoon long, you sensed that behind the trees of Riverside Park, serene and silent flowed an elusive Seine, and beyond it, past the bridges that were to take you across, though you couldn’t see any of it yet, was not the Hudson, not New Jersey, but the Left Bank—not the end of Manhattan, but the beginning of a whole bustling city waiting beyond the trees—as it waited so many decades ago when, as a boy dreaming of Paris, I would go to the window, look out to the sea at night, and think that this was not North Africa at all, but the *lie de la Cite*. Perhaps what lay beyond the trees was not the end of Manhattan, or even Paris, but the beginnings of another, unknown city, the real city, the one that always beckons, the one we invent each time and may never see and fear we’ve begun to forget.

There were moments when, despite the buses and the trucks and the noise of people with boom boxes, the traffic light would change and everything came to a standstill and people weren’t speaking and the unrelenting sun beat strong on the pavement, and I would almost swear this was an early summer afternoon in Italy, and that what lay behind Riverside Park was not just my imaginary Seine



but the Tiber as well. What made me think of Rome was that everything here reminded me of the kind of place all tourists know well: that tiny, empty piazza with a little fountain, where, thirsty and tired with too much walking all day, you douse your face, then unbuckle your sandals, sit on the scalding marble edge of a Baroque fountain, and simply let your feet rest a while in what is always exquisitely clear, non-drinkable water.

Depending on where I sat, or on which corner I moved to within the park, I could be in any of four or five countries and never for a second be in the one I couldn't avoid hearing, seeing, and smelling. This, I think, is when I started to love, if love is the word for it, New York. I would return to Straus Park every day, because returning was itself now part of the ritual of remembering the shadow city hidden there—so that I, who had put myself there, the way squatters put themselves somewhere and start to build on nothing, with nothing, would return for no reason other than perhaps to run into my own footprints. This became my habit, and ultimately my habitat. Sometimes finding that you are lost where you were lost last year can be oddly reassuring, almost familiar. You may never find yourself, but you do remember looking for yourself. That too can be reassuring, comforting.

On a hot summer day I came looking for water in a place where no water exists, the way dowsers do when they search for trapped, underground places, seeking out the ghost of water, its remanence. But the kind of water I was really looking for was not fountain water at all, Roman or otherwise. I remembered my disappointment in Rome years ago when, dunking my feet in the turde fountain early one afternoon, it occurred to me that these surreptitious footbaths in the middle of an emptied Roman city in August and all this yearning for sunlight, heat, and water amounted to nothing more than a poor man's simulated swim at the beaches of childhood, where water was indeed plentiful, and where all of the body could bathe, not just the toes.

At Straus Park, I had discovered the memory of water. Here I would come to remember not so much the beauty of the past as the beauty of remembering, realizing that just because we love to look back doesn't mean we love the things we look back on.

There is a large fountain in Rome at Piazza Navona, where four rivers of the world are represented: the Ganges, the Nile, the Plate, and the Danube. I knew it well, because it stood not far from a small bookstore where, years ago, as a teenager, I would go to purchase one Penguin book each week—a small, muggy, and sultry shop, from which I recall the sense of bliss on first coming out into the sun with a new book in my hand. As I surveyed these four rivers, which, was the question, do splash my face in?

There is no frigate like a book, says Emily Dickinson. There is nothing I have loved more than to take a good book and sit somewhere in a quiet open spot in Rome with so many old things around me, open up to any page, and begin traveling back, sometimes, as when I read Lawrence Durrell and Cavafy, thinking of time—of all that retrospection, to quote Whitman—or eagerly looking forward to the New World, as when I learned to love Eliot and Pound. Does a place become one's home because this is where one read the greatest number of books about other places? Can I long for Rome when I am finally standing where I yearned to stand when I was once a young man in Rome?

All this, if it hadn't already, began to acquire absurd proportions when I realized that, during the dissertation summer of many years ago, I had applied for and gotten a job teaching in an American high school in Rome. So as I sat here in Straus Park, going through my usual pickup-sticks and cat-in-a-cradle of memories, I discovered something rather unique: I didn't want to go to Rome, not for a year, not for half a year, not even for a month, because it finally dawned on me that I didn't very much like Rome, nor did I really want to be in France, or Egypt for that matter—and though I certainly did not like New York any better, I rather enjoyed my Straus-Park-Italy and my Straus-Park-Paris much more. The way sometimes I like postcards and travel books better than the places they remind me of, and books better than paintings, recordings better than live performances, and fantasies more than the

people I fantasize about— some of whom are not only destined to disappoint, but can't even be forgiven for standing in the way of the pictures we originally had of them. Once in Rome, I would most certainly long to be in Straus Park remembering the Rome where I'd once remembered the beaches of my childhood. Italy was just my way of grafting myself onto New York.

I could never understand or appreciate New York unless I could make it the mirror—call it the mnemonic correlate—of other cities I've known or imagined. No Mediterranean can look at a sunset in Manhattan and not think of another sunset thousands of miles away. No Mediterranean can look at the tiny lights speckling the New Jersey cliffs at night and not remember a galaxy of little fishing boats that go out to sea at night, dotting the water with their tiny lights until dawn, when they come back to shore. It is not New Jersey I see when I watch the sun set from Riverside Drive.

The real New York I never see either. I see only the New York that either sits in for other places or helps me summon them up. New York is the stand-in, the ersatz of all the things I can remember and cannot have, and may not even want, much less love, but continue to look for, because finding parallels can be more compelling than finding a home, because without parallels, there can't be home, even if in the end it is the comparing that we like, not the objects we compare. Outside comparing, we cannot feel. One may falsify New York to make it more habitable; but by making more habitable in that way one also makes certain that it remains a falsehood, a figment.

New York is my home precisely because it is a place from which I can begin to be elsewhere—a analogue city, a surrogate city, a shadow city that allows me to naturalize and neutralize the terrifying, devastating, unlivable megalopolis by letting me think it is something else, somewhere else, that it is indeed far smaller, quainter than I feared, the way certain cities on the Mediterranean are forever small and quaint, with just about the right number of places where people can go, sit, and like Narcissus leaning over a pool of water, find themselves at every bend, every store window, every facade. Straus Park allowed me to place more than one film over the entire city of New York, the way certain guidebooks to Rome do. Along with each photograph of an ancient ruin comes a series of colored transparencies. When you place a transparency over the picture of the ruin, the missing fallen parts suddenly reappear, showing you how the Forum and the Coliseum must have looked in their heyday, or how Rome looked in the Middle Ages, and then in the late Renaissance, and so on. But when you lift all the plastic sheets, all you see are today's ruins.

I didn't want to see the real New York. I'd go backward in time and uncover an older New York, though New York, like so many other cities on the Mediterranean, had an ancient side that was less menacing, that was not so difficult to restore, that had more past than present, and that corresponded to the old-fashioned world I think I come from. Hence, my obsession with things that are old and defunct and that seep through like ancient cobblestones and buried rails from under renewed coats of asphalt and tar. Sealed-off ancient firehouses, ancient stables turned into garages, ghost buildings awaiting demolition, old movie theaters converted into Baptist churches, old marketplaces that are now lost, subway stops that are ghost stations today—these are the ruins I dream of restoring, if only to date the whole world back a bit to my time, the way Herr Appelbaum and Frau Danziger belonged to my time. Going to Straus Park was like traveling elsewhere in time. How frugal is the chariot that bears the human soul.

How uncannily appropriate, therefore, to find out fifteen years later that the statue that helped me step back in time was not that of a nymph, but of Memory herself. In Greek, her name is Mnemosyne, Zeus's mistress, mother of the Muses. I had, without knowing it, been coming to the right place after all. This is why I was so disturbed by the imminent demolition of the park: my house of memory would become a ghost park. If part of the city goes, part of us dies as well.

Of course, I had panicked too soon. Straus Park was marvelously restored. After spending more than a year in a foundry, a resurrected statue of Memory remembered her appointed place in the park.

and resumed her old position. Her fountain is the joy of children and of all the people who lean over splash their faces on a warm summer day. I go there very often, sometimes to have coffee in the morning after dropping my children off at school. I have now forgotten what the old Straus Park looked like. I do not miss it, but somehow part of me is locked there too, so that I come here sometimes to remember my summer of many years ago as well, though I am glad those days are gone.

My repeated returns to Straus Park make of New York not only the shadow city of so many other cities I've known, but a shadow city of itself, reminding me of an earlier New York in my own life and before that of a New York which existed before I was born and which has nothing to do with me but which I need to see—in old photographs, for example—because, as an exile without a past, I like to peek at others' foundations to imagine what mine might look like had I been born here, where mine might be if I were to build here. I like to know that Straus Park was once called Schuyler Square, and before that Bloomingdale Square, and that these are places where everything about me and the city claims a long, continuous, call it a common, ancestral, imaginary past, where nothing ever bolts in sudden being, but where nothing ever disappears, not those I love today, nor those I've loved in the past, that Old World people like Herr Appelbaum, who played Gershwin for me on 105th Street one night when he could have played Schubert instead, and Mrs. Danziger, who never escaped the Nazis but brought them with her in her dreams at night, might still sit side by side with Ida Straus, who refused to board the lifeboats when the *Titanic* sank and stayed on with her husband—that all the people and all these layers upon layers of histories, warmed-over memories, and overdrawn fantasies should forever go into letting my Straus Park, with its Parisian Frankfurts and Roman London remain forever a tiny, artificial speck on the map of the world that is my center of gravity, from which radiates every road I've traveled, and to which I always long to return when I am away.

But perhaps I should spell the mystery out and say what lies at the bottom of all this. Straus Park at this crossroads of the world, this capital of memory, this place where the four fountains of the world and the four quarters within me meet one another, is not Paris, is not Rome, could not be London or Amsterdam, Frankfurt or New York. It is, of course, Alexandria.

I come to Straus Park to remember Alexandria, albeit an unreal Alexandria, an Alexandria that does not exist, that I've invented, or learned to cultivate in Rome as in Paris, so that in the end the Paris and the Rome I retrieve here are really the shadow of the shadow of Alexandria, versions of Alexandria, the remanence of Alexandria, infusing Straus Park itself now, reminding me of something that is not just elsewhere but that is perhaps more in me than it was ever out there, that it is, after all, perhaps just me, a me that is no less a figment of time than this city is a figment of space.

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# The New Nomads

Eva Hoffman

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In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov makes the poetic, or the playful, speculation that Russian children before the Revolution—and his exile—were blessed with a surfeit of sensual impressions compensate them for what was to come. Of course, fate doesn't play such premonitory games, but memory can perform retrospective maneuvers to compensate for fate. Loss is a magical preservative.

FROM *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989)

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"Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." Thus Genesis, of humankind's first exiles. Since then, is there anyone who does not—in some way, on some level—feel that they are in exile? We feel ejected from our first homes and landscapes, from our first family romance, from our authentic self. We feel there is an ideal sense of belonging, of community, of attunement with others and at-homeness with ourselves, that keeps eluding us. The tree of life is barred to us by a flaming sword, turning this way and that to confound us and make the task of approaching it harder.

On one level, exile is a universal experience. But, of course, exile also refers to a specific social and political condition—although even in that sense, it was never a unitary category, and we tend to compress too many situations under its heading. The different circumstances surrounding individual migration, and the wider political or cultural contexts within which it takes place, can have enormous practical and psychic repercussions, reflected in the various words we use for those who leave one country for another. There are refugees, emigres, emigrants, and expatriates, designations that point to distinct kinds of social, but also internal, experience. It matters enormously, for starters, whether you choose to leave or are forced to; it matters also whether you're coming to a new land unprotected and unprovided for or whether you can expect, or transport, some kind of safety net. When my family came from Poland to Canada, we were immigrants, a term that has connotations of social class—lower than emigres, higher perhaps than refugees—and degree of choice—more than is given to refugees, less than to expatriates.

Historically, too, the symbolic meaning and therefore the experience of exile has changed. In medieval Europe, exile was the worst punishment that could be inflicted. This was because one's identity was defined by one's role and place in society; to lose that was to lose a large portion of one's self. After being banished from Florence, Dante lived less than a hundred miles from his city-state—and yet he felt that his expulsion was a kind of psychic and social death, and his dream was either of return or of revenge (which he certainly executed very effectively in the *Inferno*). Real life, for Dante, was in Florence; it could not exist fully anywhere else. Joseph Conrad's father wrote to his infant son, who had been born during a time when Poland was erased from the map, "Tell yourself that you are without land, without love, without Fatherland, without humanity—as long as Poland, our Mother, is enslaved." In other words, for a patriot of an occupied nation, it was possible to feel radically exiled.

within that country, as long as it did not possess the crucial aspect of national sovereignty.

All of these forms of exile implied a highly charged concept of home—although that home was not necessarily coeval with one's birthplace. For the medieval clerics and church functionaries who traveled from monastery to monastery, the center of gravity was the city that housed the papal seat. The Jews have had the most prolonged historical experience of collective exile; but they survived the Diaspora—in the sense of preserving and maintaining their identity—by nurturing a powerful idea of home. That home existed on two levels: there were the real communities that Jews inhabited in various countries; but on the symbolic and perhaps the more important plane, home consisted of the entity "Israel," which increasingly became less a geographic and more a spiritual territory, with Jerusalem at its heart. While living in dispersion, Jews oriented themselves toward this imaginative center of the world, from which they derived their essential identity.

In our own century, the two great totalitarianisms, Nazi and Soviet, produced the most potent forms of exile, although the Soviet expulsions proved more permanent. The refugees from Nazi Germany, with their bright galaxy of artists and intellectuals—Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others—were pushed from their country by a vile regime, but once the war was over, they could go back, and some chose to do so. The exiles from Eastern Europe—Vladimir Nabokov, Czeslaw Milosz, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky, and others—thought that their banishment was for life, though history reversed it for some of them in the end.

But in recent years, in Europe most markedly, great tectonic shifts in the political and social landscape have taken place, which I think are affecting the very notion of exile—and of home. For what is happening today is that cross-cultural movement has become the norm rather than the exception, which in turn means that leaving one's native country is simply not as dramatic or traumatic as it used to be. The ease of travel and communication, combined with the loosening of borders following the changes of 1989, give rise to endless crisscrossing streams of wanderers and guest workers, nomadic adventurers and international drifters. Many are driven by hard circumstance, but the element of voluntarism, of choice, is there for most. The people who leave the former Soviet Union nowadays are likely to be economic migrants or mafia tax dodgers buying up elegant real estate in London rather than dissidents expelled by ruthless state power. In one Bengali village, for example, there is a tradition of long seasonal migration, or sojourning. Many of the village's men leave for several years or even decades, but always with the intention of returning. These are hardly privileged emigres or expatriates, but neither are they powerless victims of globalization. Instead, they are people with agency and intentionality, playing the system. Smart young men choose different countries for the timely economic advantages they offer—better wages, better interest rates. Almost all go back, a bit richer and a bit more important in the eyes of the fellow villagers. Theirs are migrations divested of tragedy if not of adversity.

Of course, there are still parts of the world, South America or Southeast Asia, where political dissidents are expelled by demagogic dictatorships and cannot return while those dictatorships endure. There are still refugees from Bosnia whose return is barred by the sword of violence. I do not mean to underestimate for a moment their hardships, but I would think that even in their case, the vast increased mobility and communicative possibilities of our world change the premises of the banishment: friends can visit or phone; they know that if the government of their country changes—and political arrangements, along with everything else, have become susceptible to quicker change—they can go back, or travel back and forth.

The *Herald Tribune* recently characterized the increasing numbers of American expatriates in Europe: "They are the Americans abroad, and their number is soaring in a time when travel is unblinkingly routine, communications easy and instant, and telecommuting a serious option. They are abroad in a world where they can watch the Super Bowl live from a Moscow sports bar or send an

mail from an Internet cafe in Prague.”

Well, exactly. We all recognize these basic features of our new, fast-changing social landscape. Whether we have left or not, we know how easy it is to leave. We know that we live in a global village, although the village is very virtual indeed—a village dependent not on locality or the soil but on what some theorists call deterritorialization—that is, the detachment of knowledge, action, information, and identity from specific place or physical source. We have become less space-bound, not yet free of time.

Simultaneously there has grown up a vast body of commentary and theory that is rethinking and revising the concept of exile and the related contrapuntal concept of home. The basic revision has been to attach a positive sign to exile and the cluster of mental and emotional experiences associated with it. Exile used to be thought of as a difficult condition. It involves dislocation, disorientation, self-division. But today, at least within the framework of postmodern theory, we have come to value exactly those qualities of experience that exile demands—uncertainty, displacement, the fragmented identity. Within this conceptual framework, exile becomes, well, sexy, glamorous, interesting. Nomadism and diasporism have become fashionable terms in intellectual discourse. What is at stake is not only, or not even primarily, actual exile but our preferred psychic positioning, so to speak, how we situate ourselves in the world. And these days we think the exilic position has precisely the virtues of instability, marginality, absence, and outsidership. This privileging of exile compresses two things: first, a real description of our world, which indeed has become more decentered, fragmented, and unstable, and second, an approbation of these qualities, which is more problematic, because it underestimates the sheer human cost of actual exile as well as some of its psychic implications, and perhaps even lessons.

My emigration took place during the Cold War, though not in the worst Stalinist years. My parents chose to leave, though that choice was so overdetermined that it could hardly have been called “free.” But I happened to be a young and unwilling emigrant, yanked from my childhood, which I had believed to be happy. Therefore, I felt the loss of my first homeland acutely, fueled by the sense (though certain knowledge, it seemed then) that this departure was irrevocable. Poland was abruptly sundered from me by an unbridgeable gap; it was suddenly elsewhere, unreachable, on the other side, and I felt, indeed, as if I were being taken out of life itself.

This kind of abrupt rupture breeds its own set of symptoms and syndromes. It is, first of all, a powerful narrative shaper; it creates chiaroscuro contrasts, a stark sense of biographical drama. The stories that emerged from the Cold War are legion, but one certain outcome of exile that takes place in a bipolar world is the creation of a bipolar personal world. Spatially, the world becomes riven into two parts, divided by an uncrossable barrier. Temporally, the past is all of a sudden on one side of a divide, the present on the other.

Flash-forward to 1994, and a rather ordinary trip I took to Krakow that year with an English friend. The Westernization of my native town was everywhere evident. Where previously there had been no market, there was now commerce. Where before there was the great Eastern European *nada*, now there were boutiques, Krups coffee machines, Armani suits. It was perhaps the presence of my Western friend, who kept saying that Krakow looked like any small European city with a well-preserved historical center, that made me realize palpably what I had known in principle: that the differences between East and West were blurring pretty completely and that simultaneously the various divisions and oppositions I had set up in my inner landscape were shifting and blurring, too. When I came upon a lone shopwindow featuring a display familiar from the days of yore—a dry loaf of bread, an apple, and a desultory can of Coke—I pointed it out to my friend excitedly. Look! This was how it used to be! But this was not the way things were now. The dusty little vitrine was a trace, a remaining mark of a world that, for all its misery, had the appeal of familiarity and, most saliently, of clarity. Now

would have to live in a world in which the bipolar structure was gone, in which everything intermingled and no site is more privileged—either in its deprivation or in its pleasures—than anywhere else. I would have to change my narrative.

At this vanishing of contrasts I confess that I felt not only relief but regret. It was a regret undoubtedly perverse, for the waning of clarity. But I also felt the loss of the very sense of loss I had experienced on my emigration. For the paroxysm I experienced on leaving Poland was, for all the pain, an index of the significance I attached to what I left behind.

Still, what had I mourned in 1959? What was it that stood for home? Though I was too young to know it, the fervor of my feelings was produced by the Cold War. And yet my response had nothing to do with geopolitics about it. As a bare adolescent, I was too politically innocent to be a budding nationalist; in any case, as a daughter of Jewish parents recently transplanted from the Ukraine and not fully engaged in the body politic, I was in a poor position to become a patriot. So it was not the nation I felt exiled from, not Conrad's father's Poland; my homeland was made of something much earlier, more primary than ideology. Landscapes, certainly, and cityscapes, a sense of place. I was lucky enough to grow up in a city that really is quite enchanting and that escaped the ravages of the war. There was the webwork of friendships and other relationships, for example with my teachers. But there were also elements less palpable that nevertheless constituted my psychic home.

For the great first lessons of my uprooting were in the enormous importance of language and culture. My first recognition, as I was prized out of familiar speech and social environment, was that these entities are not luxuries or even external necessities but the medium in which we live, the stuff of which we are made. In other words, they constitute us in a way of which we perhaps remain unconscious if we stay safely ensconced within one culture.

For a while, like so many emigrants, I was in effect without language, and from the bleakness of that condition, I understood how much our inner existence, our sense of self, depends on having living speech within us. To lose an internal language is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves; to lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid. And yet the richness of articulation gives the hues of subtlety and nuance to our perceptions and thought. To me, one of the most moving passages in Nabokov's writing is his invocation of Russian at the end of *Lolita*. There he summons not only the melodiousness and euphony of Russian sounds, compelling though these may be, but the depth and wholeness with which the original language exists within us. It is that relationship to language, rather than any mere superficial mastery, that is so difficult to duplicate in languages one learns subsequently.

In more religious times, certain languages were considered sacred; that is, they were thought, in the words of a wonderful social historian, Benedict Anderson, to have "ontological reality inseparable from a single system of representation." Arabic, for example, was considered to be the only language in which the Koran could be written; the sacred texts could not be translated into any other language. So with Latin for the medieval Catholic church and Hebrew for Orthodox Jews. Some premodern people today still have the sense that their language is the true language, that it corresponds to reality in a way other languages don't. And it may be that one's first language has, for the child, this aura of sacrality. Because we learn it unconsciously, at the same time as we are learning the world, the words in one's first language seem to be equivalent to the things they name. They seem to express us and the world directly. When we learn a language in adulthood, we know that the words in it "stand for" the things they describe; that the signs on the page are only signs—arbitrary, replaceable by others. It takes time before a new language begins to inhabit us deeply, to enter the fabric of the psyche and express who we are.

As with language, so with culture: what the period of first, radical dislocation brought home was how much we are creatures of culture, how much we are constructed and shaped by it—and how much

incoherence we risk if we fall out of its matrix. We know that cultures differ in customs, food, religions, social arrangements. What takes longer to understand is that each culture has subliminal values, predispositions, and beliefs that inform our most intimate assumptions and perceptions, our sense of beauty, for example, or of acceptable distances between people or notions of pleasure and pain. On that fundamental level, a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in the psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives. We could hardly acquire a human identity outside it, just as we could hardly think or perceive outside language. In a way, we are nothing more—or less—than an encoded memory of our heritage.

It is because these things go so deep, because they are not only passed on to us but *are* us, that one's original home is a potent structure and force and that being uprooted from it is so painful. Real dislocation, the loss of all familiar external and internal parameters, is not glamorous, and it is not cool. It is a matter not of willful psychic positioning but of an upheaval in the deep material of the self.

Is it then all pain and no gain? Of course not.

Being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing. It brings you up against certain questions that otherwise could easily remain unasked and quiescent, and brings to the fore fundamental problems that might otherwise simmer inaudibly in the background. This perhaps is the great advantage, for a writer, of exile, the compensation for the loss and the formal bonus—that it gives you a perspective, a vantage point.

The distancing from the past, combined with the sense of loss and yearning, can be a wonderful stimulus to writing. Joyce Carol Oates, in a striking formulation, has written that “for most novelists the art of writing might be defined as the use to which we put our homesickness. So powerful is the instinct to memorialize in prose—one's region, one's family, one's past—that many writers, shorn of such subjects, would be rendered paralyzed and mute.” In exile, the impulse to memorialize is magnified, and much glorious literature has emerged from it. *Native Realm* by Milosz or Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, some of Brodsky's essays in *Less Than One*, or even Kundera's much cooler take on transplantation in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*—these are works of lyrical commemoration informed by a tenderness for what is lost and by the need, even the obligation, to remember.

But the perspective one gains from dislocation is, of course, not only retrospective but prospective. Exile places one at an oblique angle to one's new world and makes every emigrant, willy-nilly, into an anthropologist and relativist; for to have a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute—it is to discover that even the most interstitial and seemingly natural aspects of our identities and social reality are constructed rather than given and that they could be arranged, shaped, articulated in quite another way.

For this reason, too, exile can be a great impetus to thought and to creativity, which is why so many artists have actively chosen it: James Joyce, with his motto of “Silence, exile, and cunning,” Samuel Beckett with his decision to write in French rather than English, precisely for the advantage of defamiliarization. And for the nonwriter, too, biculturalism can have its bracing pleasures—the relish of sharpened insight, the sawiness of skepticism—which can become positively addictive.

But I have come to believe that these virtues have their serious defects, that in the long term, the addiction may be too seductive, that as a psychological choice, the exilic position may become not only too arduous but too easy. Perhaps the chief risk of privileging the exilic narrative is a psychic split—living in a story in which one's past becomes radically different from the present and in which the lost homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only “another country” but a space of projections and fantasies. Some people decide to abandon the past, never to look back. For others



the great lure is nostalgia—an excess of memory. One of the most extreme examples of “living in the past” I’ve come across is the history of Polish refugee camps in England, which had been set up during World War II for people who had come there with the Polish army. These camps remained until the late 1950s, their inhabitants existing in virtual isolation, many never learning English and always hoping that the magic moment of redemption—the moment of return—was around the corner. But the actual Poland was no longer the one they remembered; it had changed in ways they would surely have found unpalatable, or at least highly perplexing, had they actually been able to go back.

For Jews in their long Diaspora, the need to preserve the symbolic center in an indifferent world—to keep intact a vision of a lost paradise and a promised land—often led them to insulate themselves from their surroundings, to retreat to their community as a place of refuge and spiritual fortress. I have written a book about the history of a shtetl in Poland, a small town whose population was half Jewish, half-Polish.<sup>1</sup> The shtetl, for Eastern European Jews, was home in its most secure—internal, secure, that is—form. In these small, rural enclaves, everyone knew everyone else, and everyone followed the same rules of behavior and spiritual life. No one was allowed to fall out of the communal net; no one needed to suffer from the modern malaise of uncertainty and alienation. The shtetl was a highly resilient, highly organized micro-society, and for many of its members, its strict codes and protective arrangements provided the satisfactions of warmth, safety, and certainty. But for others, the regulation of everyday life became oppressive, the avoidance of the larger world stifling.

Even before World War II, the metaphoric walls of the shtetl were beginning to break down. Many of its inhabitants, for various reasons, chose to leave literally; others began to question the structure of belief, causing heated conflicts within the shtetl itself.

Of course, the insulation of the shtetl was not only self-inflicted. But my point is that exile, and the pain of radical change, do not necessarily lead to a more radical personality structure or greater openness to the world. On the contrary, upheaval and dislocation can sometimes produce some rather more conservative impulses of self-defense and self-preservation. My own tendency was certainly nostalgia and idealization—perhaps because I was ejected before my loss of innocence, before I could develop more considered opinions and preferences or revise my feelings about the place I came from. And once you leave, such revisions become very difficult.

In the later phases, the potential rigidity of the exilic posture may inhere not so much in a fixation on the past as in habitual detachment from the present. Such detachment can of course be a psychic, even moral, luxury—but it comes at a price. In his fascinating, provocative essay “Exile as a Neurotic Solution,”<sup>2</sup> A. B. Yehoshua, a leading Israeli writer, makes the startling observation that during the eighteen hundred years of the Diaspora, there were many intervals when Jews could have settled in Palestine easily, or more easily, than in the countries where they chose to live, but that in fact Palestine was the one place they consistently avoided. It was as if, he suggests, they were afraid precisely of reaching their promised land and the responsibilities and conflicts involved in turning the mythical Israel into an actual, ordinary home. Life in Diaspora had its enormous difficulties; but it offered the benefit of turning conflict outward, against a hostile or uncomprehending world, and thus avoiding the internal conflicts within the Jewish polity—conflicts that have certainly become evident since the founding of Israel (as they are in any functioning society).

Whatever the historical accuracy of Yehoshua’s thesis, it does remind us of certain hazardous syndromes of the exiled stance: that this posture, if maintained too long, allows people to conceive of themselves as perpetually Other, and therefore unimplicated in the mundane, compromised, conflict-ridden locality that they inhabit; it allows them to imagine the sources and causes of predicaments located outside, in a hostile or oppressive environment, rather than within.

In our current, habitually diasporic, habitually nomadic world, the oppositional, bipolar model no longer holds. The goalposts have shifted—indeed, the whole playing field has changed—in ways that

remain elusive and hard to define. When all borders are crossable and all boundaries permeable, it is harder to project conflict outward, to imagine an idyllic realm or a permanent enemy. This is initially confusing, but it is surely to the good. Indeed, the merits of the new situation are easily discernible. They are the benefits available to those American expatriates who can leave America without ever really leaving. We move not only between places but between cultures with more grace and ease. We are less shocked by the varied assumptions prevailing among different peoples, less prone to absolutist assertions of our rightness. We have become tangibly aware of the plurality of values that such liberal thinkers as Isaiah Berlin have tried to teach us. In the political sphere, the ease of movement across borders should surely work to counter dogmatic or fanatical nationalism, although given the rise of national conflicts, this result may not be self-evident. But for those who move freely among countries and cultures, it becomes difficult to maintain the notion of any one nation's superiority or special destiny. The literature of this new nomadism or diasporism, of which Salman Rushdie is perhaps the most prominent representative, is a transnational literature in which multiple cultural references collide and collude and in which their interplay is seen as exactly that—robust and vital play. This is a vision of exile, if it can still be called that, as comedy, rather than despair.

Is it then, in this blithe new world, all gain and no pain? I don't quite think so.

The new nomadism is different from other Diasporas. It exists in a decentered world, one in which the wanderers no longer trace and retrace a given territory or look to any one symbolic locus for meaning. If we take such radical decentering as a metaphor for a way of being and of selfhood, if we rewrite displacement as the favored position (which it holds in postmodern theory), then the model is not without its own, sometimes high, costs. In the Bengali village people have a suggestive way of talking about this: they say that their land has lost some of its strength because its inhabitants are dispersed—as if the land draws power from the loyalty and attachment of the humans who live on it. But I wonder if, in our world of easy come, easy go, of traveling light and sliding among places and meanings without alighting on any of them for long, we don't risk a dispersion of internal focus and perhaps even of certain strengths—strengths that come from the gathering of experiences so that they add up to memories, from the accumulation of understanding, from placing ourselves squarely where we are and living in a framework shared with others. I wonder if, in trying to exist in liminal space or conceiving of experience as movement between discrete dots on a horizontal map, we don't risk what Kundera calls the “unbearable lightness of being,” the illness that comes upon people unanchored in any place or structure, the Don Juans of experience who travel perpetually to new moments and sensations and to whom no internal site—of attachment, need, desire—is more important than any other.

In the “bipolar” mentality, the idea of home may become too dramatized or sentimentalized. In the “nomadic” configuration, exile loses its charge, since there is no place from which one can be expelled, no powerful notion of home. Indeed, these days we are wont to say not so much that a fiction is homesickness as that all homesickness is fiction—that home never was what it was cracked up to be, the haven of safety and affection we dream of and imagine. Instead, home is conceived mostly as a conservative site of enclosure and closure, of narrow-mindedness, patriarchal attitudes, and dissemination of nationalism. And, indeed, the notion of “home” may have been, in recent times, peculiarly overcharged, as the concepts of “country” and “nation” have been superimposed on each other with a seeming inevitability. “France,” for the French, is both *la belle France* and *la patrie*. Such overlapping is not a necessary one. We have seen, for example, in the unhappy case of the former Yugoslavia, that a geographic territory can abruptly change its national identity. But the nostalgia of exiles for their birthplace has undoubtedly often been augmented by this conjunction of geographic and patriotic longing.

The transports of patriotism, narrowness of provincial perspectives, and confinements of parochial

traditions are not plausible solutions to the dilemmas of our time. And yet continual dislocation, dispersion, is both facile and, in the long run, arid. Can anything be rescued from the notion of home or at-homeness, that is sufficient to our condition?

One of the most interesting and subtle meditations on home I know of is found in V. S. Naipaul's autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*. The place at which he was trying to arrive was a small cottage attached to a large house on a historic estate in England. For Naipaul, this entails multiple ironies; he grew up in an Indian community in Trinidad and understands all too well that his very presence on the estate is the end result of long imperial relations. He also knows that the cottage, the manor, the ancient plain, correspond for him to some fantasy of England that he developed precisely when growing up in Trinidad and that included some dream of permanence, dignity, beauty. It takes some time while before Naipaul squares these preconceptions with the realities of the place where he lives—realities that include change, modernization, conflict. Slowly he begins to see the landscape before him through other eyes. He imagines how the estate looks to the temporary workers, to whom the cottage with a thatched roof is simply temporary shelter, not a home, "a place to which you could not transfer (or risk transferring) emotion or hopes." He begins to imagine how the estate looks and feels to its owner, who suffers from *accidie*, a melancholic withdrawal from the world; Naipaul interprets this malaise as a symptom of the landlord's excessive at-homeness, a security that has become stasis. He understands that the power relations of today are complex enough to confer on him some advantages unavailable to his aristocratic landlord—the advantages of dynamism, of ambition, even of need. Slowly Naipaul learns to read the landscape in a less romantic and more complex way. He comes to love the place from the position not of fantasy but of knowledge.

The slowness of this process is crucial; in Naipaul's book, that ruminative leisureliness makes the act of creating a home akin to the process of writing. It is through gradual accretion of details, knowledge, of relationships that he comes to imaginative possession of the place, as he comes to imaginative possession of his subject.

Naipaul's understated allegory suggests that there are two kinds of homes: the home of our childhood and origin, which is a given, a fate, for better or for worse, and the home of our adulthood which is achieved only through an act of possession, hard-earned, patient, imbued with time, a possession made of our choice, agency, the labor of understanding, and gradual arrival.

The experience of enforced exile paradoxically accentuates the potency of what is given, of the forces that have shaped us before we could shape ourselves. This is what Brodsky says about the magnetic pull of one's parental home and the exile's dilemma of having wandered away—or having been forced to wander—too far:

For a while, he is absorbed with new vistas, absorbed with building his own nest, with manufacturing his own reality. Then one day, when the new reality is mastered, when his own terms are implemented, he suddenly learns that his old nest is gone, that those who gave him life are dead. On that day he feels like an effect suddenly without a cause. . . . What he can't blame on nature is the discovery that his achievement, the reality of his own manufacture, is less valid than the reality of his abandoned nest.

That if there ever was any-thing real in his life, it was precisely that nest, oppressive and suffocating, from which he so badly wanted to flee. He knows how willful, how intended and premeditated everything that he has manufactured is. How, in the end, all of it is provisional.<sup>3</sup>

I agree and sympathize, even empathize, with this almost entirely. The acute loss I felt on emigrating was commensurate with the depth of my attachment—and there is something about that that I don't want to disavow, and which can be a source of later perceptions and affections. After leaving Russia, Nabokov wrote in several languages masterfully, but he was transposing the love of his first language to his subsequent ones. We need to develop a model in which the force of our first

legacy can be transposed or brought into dialogue with our later experiences, in which we can build new meanings as valid as the first ones. This can be done only through a deepening investigation through familiarization. It is fine, and illuminating, to see all the structures that construct us for what they are and to see through them; but we must acknowledge the need for frameworks that contain us for sites that are more than temporary shelters. And we need to see that in our world it may be insufficient to define ourselves as Other in opposition to some archetypal oppressor or hypothetical insider. Our societies are too fragmented to have an easily discernible inside or permanent centers of power. At the same time, we need a conception of a shared world, a world in which we exist by virtue of shared interests rather than mutual alienation, to which we can bring our chosen commitments and hopes.

There is a Hasidic parable about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. In the parable, thieves come to the Baal Shem Tov and tell him of a network of underground corridors and tunnels that leads directly from Poland to Palestine. They offer to take him there, and he agrees. They walk through the tunnels with great difficulty. At one point, they come to a murky bog, which almost stops them. But they persist. They get more than halfway to their destination. Then, suddenly, the Baal Shem Tov sees before him “a flaming sword, turning this way and that,” and decides to go no farther. He turns back to the place from which he started.

The psychological or mythological meaning of this parable has had many interpretations. Perhaps on one level it says something about the Baal Shem Tov’s ambivalence about going to Palestine, his own neurotic solution. But I think that the parable’s unconscious, compressed message may be that you can’t steal into paradise. You can’t approach the tree of life by a shortcut. Of course, the parable also suggests something about the fearsomeness of approaching our object of desire and finding ourselves in paradise—which may then turn out to be an ordinary garden, needing weeding, tilling, and watering.

To be sure, in our human condition, it takes long, strenuous work to find the wished-for terrains of safety or significance or love. And it may often be easier to live in exile with a fantasy of paradise than to suffer the inevitable ambiguities and compromises of cultivating actual, earthly places. And yet, without some move of creating homing structures for ourselves, we risk a condition of exile that we do not even recognize as banishment. And paradoxically, if we do not acknowledge the possibility and the real pain of expulsion, then we will not know that somewhere there is a tree of life that, if we labor hard enough to approach it, can yield fruits of meaning after all.

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# Imagining Homelands

Bharati Mukherjee

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My life, I now realize, falls into three disproportionate parts. Till the age of eight I lived in the typical joint family, indistinguishable from my twenty cousins, indistinguishable, in fact, from a eternity of Bengali Brahmin girls. From eight till twenty-one we lived as a single family, enjoying for a time wealth and confidence. And since twenty-one I have lived in the West. Each phase required a repudiation of all previous avatars; an almost total rebirth.

FROM *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977)

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This essay is about four narratives, those of expatriation, exile, immigration, and repatriation. From those subnarratives, I hope to weave a revisionist theory for contemporary residency and citizenship, or at least to suggest new terms in the unresolved debate that threatens to grow louder and more rancorous in years to come.

The question, as always, is, What is America? Is it a place or an idea, is it a patchwork of diverse communities, or a nuanced, accented, multicolored myth of shared values? Are we heading, in the final years of the millennium, toward the ancient dream of unity through diversity—*e pluribus unum*—or have we already taken the first steps down the long slope to chaos? Far from unity, we cannot seem to find consensus on anything these days, not on affirmative action, on national education standards, on needle exchanges, on family values, a drug policy, a trade policy, Most-Favored-Nation status for China, environmental protection, medical care, bilingual education, or even the designated hitter rule.

Both tendencies, chaos and unity, have attended our history. We are both a liberal experiment and a bulwark of reaction. De Tocqueville saw both tendencies, as did Lincoln, Faulkner, Melville and Emerson, and W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

I'm not a historian, only a fiction writer born and raised on a different continent who did not even become an American citizen until a dozen years ago. My work is set almost entirely within "immigrant communities," as they are so designated, although seen from the inside there is little that is communal about them, and only a minority of their inhabitants are even immigrants. Nevertheless, it is the reality of transplantation and psychological metamorphosis that is my material, not the world I left behind. I call myself an American writer, not an Indian one. I do not do this for material advantage (as Indian critics often assume), for there is far more commercial interest in the West in the India of tropical languor, dowry-death, and caste-strife than in scraped-knuckled, bruised-elbow immigration. I do it because I see in the process of immigration (in its widest sense, including at least three stages that have very little to do with changing citizenship) the stage, and the battleground, for the most exciting dramas of our time. A neighborhood like Jackson Heights, Queens, is on a par with Renaissance Venice for its richness of character and depth of intrigue. The same is true of my current home of San Francisco, my teaching campus of Berkeley, of Miami and Brooklyn, San Antonio and Detroit.

The national myth of immigration, the heart-warming saga of babushka-clad refugees climbing the deck of the tramp steamer for a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty ("Look, Mama, just like the

pictures we saw in Minsk, or Abruzzi, or Crete”), is just that, an image out of aging newspapers or other collective pop-memory banks. Today’s arrivals are more likely to be discharged on a beach and told to swim ashore, or dropped in a desert and told to run, if they survive at all. Immigration, as I experience it, is made up of several conflicting parts. For my purposes here, “immigration” refers to the act of adopting new citizenship, of going the full nine yards of transformation. As such, it is but one option to be exercised by noncitizens living in this country.

Definitions seem to be in order. *Expatriation* is an act of sustained self-removal from one’s native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. The motives for expatriation are as numerous as the expatriates themselves: aesthetic and intellectual affinity, a better job, a more interesting or less hassled life, greater freedom or simple tax relief, just as the motives for nonintegration may range from principle, to nostalgia, to laziness or fear. The roster of notable expatriates in the realm of literature alone is immensely long, rich in honors and deep in respect. Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, V. S. Naipaul (before their formal acceptance of British citizenship), Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Paul Bowles, Mavis Gallant, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Witold Gombrowicz, Anthony Burgess, Graham Greene, Derek Walcott, Malcolm Lowry, Wilson Harris—names, even with a few glaring omissions that any literate audience can fill in, that we’d all agree rise to the top of any listing of the twentieth century’s most notable literary achievements.

They are, in fact, our great voices of modernism as well as a few of postmodernism; their works are encyclopedic, their visions ironic and penetrating, their analyses detached and scrupulous, their styles experimental yet crystalline. If the ultimate goal of literature is to achieve universality and a kind of god-like omniscience, expatriation—the escape from small-mindedness, from nagging irritations—might well be a contributing factor.

The expatriate is the ultimate self-made artist, even the chooser of a language in which to operate. As Conrad, Beckett, Kundera, and Nabokov testify, an almost literal exponent of Joyce’s dream of self-forging in the smithy of his soul. It is possible, in expatriation, to step out of the constraints in which one has been born and to exercise to the fullest the dual vision of the detached outsider. The expatriate Hungarian, Czech, or Pole of an earlier era, or today’s Yugoslav or Bangladeshi, Algerian or Palestinian expatriate, asks only that the host culture permit him or her to retain an alien core that will not be compromised or surrendered. The bargain is thus struck: I will be a model resident. In return for your tolerance and noninterference, I will not attack the fundamental flaws of your society with anything like the zeal I bring to the dissection of my own people. I will imagine a new homeland built on reclaimed land.

I confess it is an attractive bargain, one which I entertained myself, many years ago.

In the case of *exile*, the comparative luxury of selfremoval is replaced by harsh compulsion. The spectrum of choice is gravely narrowed; the alternatives may be no more subtle than death, imprisonment, or a one-way ticket to oblivion. We all cheered the arrival of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in America, thinking we would gain a new voice in our literature as we did with Auden and Isherwood, a new superstar as we have with so many singers and actors, or sensational tennis players. The list of twentieth-century exiles is an alternate Who’s Who of Nobel listings in the sciences and literature, as well as an honor roll of world-class painters, dancers, performers, and composers. In some cases, the urgency of exile may, in time, blend into the serendipity of expatriation—Milan Kundera in Paris, Picasso in Arles, Chaplin in Switzerland—but for the most part, the exile does not achieve the same Olympian detachment enjoyed by the expatriate. The exile is still tied to a mother country and a major cause that are the source of his wounding, and he may or may not choose, or have the option of choosing, to translate his passions or his words. The United States at present is home to dozens of exiles writing in their native Spanish and Russian and Arabic, in Chinese and Burmese, in Tamil and

Aramaic, publishing in their own form of *samizdat* or exile presses, interviewed on ethnic radio and reviewed in the ethnic press, and few of us will ever have the good fortune to read their work or know of their existence. Similar, if not larger, populations cluster in Paris, Toronto, and London, in Berlin and Mexico City, in Amsterdam and Barcelona.<sup>1</sup>

[1. Exile may become the subject of great literature, but it does not encourage the conditions for its production. For every Solzhenitsyn or Thomas Mann, every Freud, Kundera, or Skvorecky, even Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Wole Soyinka, every Liu Binyan, there are still today's Isaac Babels trapped behind the lines of their own despotisms. Read the heartbreaking reports of Amnesty International or of PEN's Freedom to Write committee and you will learn that the free world is still comparatively blind and deaf to the fate of Algerian, Turkish, Iranian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Cuban, Chinese, Burmese, Sierra Leonean, Nigerian, Egyptian, Cambodian, Tamil, and Sinhalese dissidents. Their names are not known, their causes are not sexy, their languages are not in wide distribution in the West, and for these reasons, along with those of trade and political influence, their lives, their bravery, and their work go unvalidated.

It makes you wonder, sometimes, if anyone stays at home. Is some sort of major disruption essential for great writing? Of course that's not the truth, as even a moment's reflection can show, but the list of expatriate and exiled writers is nevertheless a daunting one to contemplate. It might be truer to say that all writers are expatriates to one degree or another, or they are internal exiles—certainly William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, Bernard Malamud or Cynthia Ozick, hail from a country without a passport.]

Exile lacks the grandeur, the majesty, of expatriation. The expatriate, at least, is validated by the host culture which extends the hospitality, and he often returns it in civic dutifulness. But the exile is a petitioner. He brings with him the guilty reminders of suffering, his stay is provisional and easily revoked, and he is often consigned to the underworld of ethnic intrigue, outside the purview of the law or of the press. If expatriation is the route of cool detachment, exile is for some that of furious engagement.

I must confess my own years of furious engagement, not in this country, but in my husband's Canada. When we lived in the Greek neighborhoods of Montreal, we were brought into daily contact with the passions of pro- and anti-“Colonels” Greek immigrants, the threats of arson by pro-junta Greeks on anti-junta businesses. In Toronto and Vancouver, the early years of the Punjab civil war were playing themselves out on the streets of various Little Indias. In all cases, police responses, despite appeals for protection by what are called in Canada “visible minorities,” and by simple Canadian citizens such as myself, harassed on the streets and in public transportation by white youth, was a variant of “It's not our [meaning white, Canadian] problem. You guys”—or more likely, *you little people*—“settle it among yourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

[2.1 should add that it very much was a “white, Canadian” problem. The eventual outcome of such racist smugness was the bloodiest terrorist act of modern times, the blowing up, by a small group of Sikh extremists, of an Air-India 747 over the coast of Ireland, with the loss of 329 Canadian lives. If you can find a copy of the book, *The Sorrow and the Terror*, which my husband and I co-authored in 1987, you'll understand some of the urgency that has motivated both of our writings since that tragic event.]

In November 1996, *The New York Times* asked me to contribute an op-ed piece inspired by the so-called immigration debate that was then raging on both sides during the election battle. Are we “a nation of immigrants,” as the pietistic national myth would have it, therefore duty-bound to support immigration as an apple pie or motherhood issue, or are most new immigrants cheats and rip-off artists, as many nativists seem to believe?



I chose to write of my older sister and myself, two Calcutta-born women from identical backgrounds with the same Cambridge-tested accent, the same convent education, who have been in the United States for over thirty-five years. My sister married an Indian student in Detroit and has remained in the same job and the same house, wearing saris, cooking familiar food, guarding the accent, for the past thirty years. She holds the much-valued U.S. green card but feels her home is still India, where she intends to retire in the next few years. I, too, married a fellow student in the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, an American of Canadian parentage, and we have lived in Canada and in several parts of the United States, moving at least twenty times, and have often been obliged by professional circumstances to live many years apart. I am a U.S. citizen and could not imagine returning to India for other than family visits and relaxed vacations. My accent is an amalgam of the places I've lived, my wardrobe is a similar hodgepodge, and so is our daily menu.

The question I meant to raise was simply this: which one of us is the freak? Someone who retains the food, the clothes, the accent of expatriation, or her T-shirted, blue-jeaned sister? The answer is by no means clear.

That little article, anecdotal in nature, aroused more passions than many of my novels. When I give readings or interviews in India, it becomes a lead-question (the article was reprinted in several Indian newspapers), and the questioners are often anything but cordial. Conversely, the article has been celebrated by the liberal mainstream in this country as a bold statement of faith in the American experiment, warts and all. Neither reaction is entirely satisfactory.

Among some Indian intellectuals it is read as a polarizing document, an implicit rejection of the worth of hundreds of thousands of law-abiding, tax-paying, communally and religiously conservative contributing Indian nationals, like my sister, working and residing overseas. At its fringes, the interpretation tends to bracket my pro-immigration, let-it-go stance with those of some unsavory company, English-only, "America First"-ers of a stripe with Enoch Powell or the current crop of French and Austrian race-baiters who even propose cleansing the various European motherlands of Turks, Gypsies, North Africans, Kurds, and Bosnian/Kosovo refugees. We all know the end-point of such appeals to purity, especially in Europe.

Given my presumed respectability in the United States as a member of a prominent minority community, and my access to mainstream media, I try at every opportunity to distinguish my position from those of ill-disposed, anti-immigrant Americans as well as of instinctive Americaphobes, a large number of whom, unfortunately, can be found among India-born academics in American universities. I know I'm not the only person from a minority community who weighs American promise against American history on a daily basis and who still finds a positive balance, but it still seems necessary to emphasize my basic position. I am an integrationist and, to use a deliberately ugly word, mongrelizer. My sister, like most expatriates or exiles, is not. Mongrels lose a lot of prestige and pedigree in their travels, they're not as classically proportioned or predictably behaved as purebred and, more to the point, their presence creates a third, unpredictable, sometimes undesirable and often untrainable mutt. Because I am here, I am changed totally by you and by my commitment to this country and its problems, but so are you. You are now implicated in my life, you probably entrust your health, or aspects of it, to Indian doctors or dentists, you can now eat my food in nearly any town, run India-designed software on your India-designed computer. I'm just as mainstream as anyone else. I am also a proud India-born, Bengali-speaking Hindu. These positions need not be antithetical.

Like my academic colleagues with whom I have conducted many public quarrels, I too grew up in a British-centered universe in India. As a college student I too would have snickered at the pretense of an American culture, of an American literature. To declare my Americanness, and not to retain the genteel expatriation of an upper-class Bengali Brahmin, is, in their minds, to be linked with and share the historical guilt of slavery, segregation, extermination of Native Americans, the CIA



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