# Staying our Troubles

**Sadaf Halai**

In my childhood home, taped to the wall of our living room, was a poster of a brownish sky at dusk and a bird in mid-flight above the sea, its wings a dark V against the dimming sun. In the poster's right hand corner were printed the words *Follow Your Dream* in fancy yellow italics. I'd stare at the poster for long stretches of time, despite there being nothing remarkable about it—I didn't find the image particularly beautiful. Though I was barely ten, I possessed a preternatural cynicism and a vague understanding that the poster's injunction was easier said than done. It was my father's poster, and it was the kind of thing he said. The thing is, I would never put up a picture like that in my home today, not even to be ironic. Who says things like that anymore, unless they're alluding to something akin to fable? But because I grew up in a home where the idea of following one's dream was not a truism, but one's truth, I have found it hard to forget the poster or its lesson.

With time, memory dims; the happenstance of the everyday recedes farther into the past, until it loses shape and brightness and turns shadowy, difficult to locate in chronologies real and imaginary. It might start with the small things. I began to think about forgetting in earnest when my father passed away. In the weeks after his death, I was unprepared for the mysterious ways in which my memory worked, and did not work. For instance, I began to remember things I'd long forgotten: conversations with him from childhood which were almost always 'teachable moments,' a rushed goodbye at a bus stop in Boston when he came to visit in 1998, an afternoon chat over tea in 2010, the same year my daughter was born. Where had I relegated this flotsam before his passing, and why had it rushed back now, unabated, unannounced and uninvited? It was both devastating and exhilarating that I remembered as much as I did. And if these memories could return of their own accord, seemingly autonomous, could they disappear once again just as easily? I began to read about a particular kind of grief: the grief of a child mourning the death of a parent. In essays and fiction, I looked for comfort. If I found any, it was in knowing what I already knew: that loss makes paupers of us all. But the mystery of how grief affects memory remained confounding. When grief is mentioned, it is often in the same breath as the twin prospects of not wanting to forget and not being able to forget. Grief and memory are equally intangible. We talk about grief, but so much of what it is remains indescribable. In much the same way, how does one identify what one is forgetting? What stories can we tell about a past that is no longer accessible?

The longing to return to the past is often synonymous in literature with wishing for the lost home of childhood, to keep alive in memory those sensations that first defined our place in the world. To my mind, *V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is one of the finest examples of grief interwoven with that ancient yearning for the lost, near-mythical home of childhood, where one first learns the meaning of love. Whether that love was received or not, it can be dangerous to desire a return to Ithaca, to want to return to the forgotten. What will you find when you get there?

Naipaul did not want to return to the Caribbean once he left home as a young and bitter man. The grandson of indentured servants who came to Trinidad from India, he was known to be derisive, harsh and cruel, but his prose, despite his problematic politics and personal life, is deeply resonant:

> In a northern land, in a time of new separations and yearnings, in a library grown suddenly dark, the hailstones beating against the windows, the marbled endpaper of a dusty leather-bound book would disturb: and it would be the hot noisy week before Christmas in the Tulsi store: the marbled patterns of old-fashioned balloons powdered with a rubbery dust in a shallow white box that was not to be touched. So later, and very slowly, in securer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past.[1]

Arguably his finest novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is based on Naipaul's father who died at the age of forty-six when the author was twenty-one. This novel is an attempt by a young man to commit his father's life to memory, so that none of it would be forgotten: the trials, the small meanness and rancor, the noise, every rustle and whisper, the lull after a loud rain.

I also turned to a very different kind of book, the best-selling memoir *Crying in H Mart* (2021), written by Korean-American Michelle Zauner, a musician with the indie band Japanese Breakfast. Zauner's memoir is as much about losing her mother as it is about losing her connection to place. She is ill-prepared for how her loss unhinges her sense of identity as a Korean woman. Much to her astonishment, in the weeks after her mother's death, she finds herself weeping inconsolably in the aisles of the Asian grocery store H Mart. In deft and deliberate prose, Zauner's memoir recounts how her grief is intertwined with her childhood memories of sharing food with her mother. ('What I never seem to forget is what my mother ate.'[2])

> My grief comes in waves and is usually triggered by something arbitrary. I can tell you with a straight face what it was like watching my mom's hair fall out in the bathtub, or about the five weeks I spent sleeping in hospitals, but catch me at H Mart when some kid runs up double-fisting plastic sleeves of *ppeong-twigi* and I'll just lose it. Those little rice-cake Frisbees were my childhood: a happier time, when Mom was there and we'd crunch away on the Styrofoam-like disks after school. Eating them was like splitting a packing peanut that dissolved like sugar on your tongue.[3]

In the aisles of H Mart, Zauner searches for the Korean flavours that once defined the vivid, muscular world of the living ('remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup').[4] She hopes this pilgrimage to the grocery store, in addition to offering some solace, will also free her from the horror of her mother's battle with cancer. I was reminded of my own experience, of the difficulty of bearing witness to a parent's illness, though the word 'difficulty' is a misnomer for what the experience entails. I don't have a word that can sum up all the parts: the stiff, starched hospital bed sheets, a tangle of spaghetti-like tubes dangling from the IV pole, the window that looked out on a pond. The solitary white duck that circled aimlessly on the water's surface. Zauner invokes the past to remember what is desirable, and forget what isn't.

> Within the past five years, I lost both my aunt and mother to cancer. So, when I go to H Mart, I'm not just on the hunt for cuttlefish and three bunches of scallions for a buck; I'm searching for their memory. I'm collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn't die when they did. In moments like this, H Mart is the bridge that guides me away from the memories that haunt me, of chemo head and skeletal bodies and logging milligrams of hydrocodone. It reminds me of who they were before: beautiful and full of life, wiggling Chang Gu honey-cracker rings on all ten of their fingers, showing me how to suck a Korean grape from its skin and spit out the seeds.[5]

'Sobbing near the dry goods,' she asks herself: 'Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?'[6] Her admission reminds us that after experiencing great loss, grief can make forgetting feel deleterious, if not unthinkable. There is an urgent, almost manic need to recount and retell.

And yet, the language of loss is inextricably tied to the language of forgetting. The memorials we fabricate for our dead; the ritual of the death anniversary, the *barsi*; the very words we use (gone but not forgotten, forever in our hearts) are all constructs in the service of not forgetting. 'My mother died on October 18, 2014, a date I'm always forgetting,' Zauner confesses. 'I don't know why exactly, if it's because I don't want to remember or if the actual date seems so unimportant in the grand scheme of what we endured.'[7] Willing oneself to remember is essential, yet it can keep much of the grief alive, long after some forgetting should have happened.

***

The litany of things we forget in the day-to-day is a mundane one: a name, items on a grocery list, the shred of a silly conversation one wants to rehash into a sparkling joke. And yet, the name of the old acquaintance escapes you, and you fake your way through the encounter like an impostor. The milk goes unbought. Two commitments overlap. The joke falters. No one laughs. And that grave quasi-philosophical question, tenacious in its capacity to awaken and annoy at odd hours of the night: if you've forgotten something—a memory exiled to a region from which it may never return—did it even happen?

My father sent me aerogrammes during my college years in America. For those unfamiliar with this near-extinct object—gone the way of endangered animals and the fax machine—the aerogramme is nondescript, its colour a washed-out blue, six inches wide and twelve inches long, with gummed flaps. Once folded into threes, it becomes—voila!—both letter and envelope. Everything has to be said succinctly. There's no space, quite literally, for wanton emotion.

His aerogrammes, chock full of advice tempered with love, arrived with a regularity that was unappreciated by my nineteen-year-old self. His lolloping handwriting so strangely measured, and the assured capital letters of my address, the initials USA always written with a red ballpoint pen: the letters were consistent and timely, like a change of season. His sentences were pithy. In spite of their brevity, when I read them now (which I don't often) I'm reminded of who he was. Alongside his great capacity for feeling, his varied moods and his impassioned speech, he was a squarely practical man. 'Be good and happy,' he writes in one of the aerogramme letters, without a trace of irony. 'Write to me about something funny, or serious,' he asks in another. Funny or serious, indeed. I wonder what half-truths I scribbled back from my East Coast college, burnished by my own fragile sense of accomplishment, my weary indictment of things that irked me.

Because I find the experience of rereading his letters unbearable, I keep them safely stashed away, along with other things (photographs, his watch, more letters) in a sturdy box with a lid. Imagine my bemusement when I discovered that the dictionary defines an aerogramme as a 'lightweight' letter. Anyone who has received an aerogramme that was dispatched across an ocean from someone who loved them knows that there's nothing lightweight about it. Abujee's letters arrived in my mailbox full of stupendous possibility. It was news from home, even if the news was always the same. Email was a newfangled thing, and the three-minute telephone calls from Pakistan always felt like the beginning of a conversation that would never be completed. We did not have the luxury of time.



The aerogramme is my Proustian madeleine. I have no power over it; I will never be able to dismiss it by relegating it to the past; it blurs the line between what is and was. There is nothing lightweight about it. It will always sit heavy in my hand.

***

Why do we forget some things and not others? The most grievous kind of forgetting is the inevitable kind, tinged with shame and brought on by age. We now know that from an evolutionary point of view, we forget because we must. It happens actively: what's of little use to us is overwritten by knowledge that's needed for survival.

But necessity notwithstanding, what we forget and why is inexplicable. Throw into this mix a catalogue of life-long memories, and who is to say which ones will survive? In his posthumously published essay "The Strangeness of Grief" (2019), Naipaul describes the arduous process of coming to terms with his father's death. A brass vase—a present from his father—takes on a gruesome object permanence, a totemic place-marker for his father. 'I saw on a shelf what I felt sure was my father's brass vase,' he writes. Naipaul contemplates the urn, and remarks that 'the grief of which it once spoke so directly was rubbed away, like the grief itself, though that stayed with me so completely and for so long, waiting to be recalled.'[8] Grief waits with astonishing patience. To not forget a life is to somehow magically prolong the life itself, along with all its messy accoutrements.

So profound is his loss that he feels 'inoculated against grief' having 'drunk that bitterness to the dregs.' Thirty years go by. Naipaul is convinced he has forgotten that feeling, seemingly immune to despair. But then his younger brother Shiva dies, and the old feeling resurfaces, brand new and shameless in the force of its flagrant arrival. He cannot escape suffering; it catches him unawares when he least expects it. 'My sorrow lasted for two years,' Naipaul confesses. 'For two years I mentally dated everything, even the purchase of a book, by its distance from Shiva's death.'[9]

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is ostensibly about a father-son relationship, and its universal truths—the need to locate one's place in the world, to have a home and embody it—make it eminently readable. The Trinidadian characters are drawn in a voice that is often contemptuous: they are ill-tempered and unkempt, ridiculous in the exaggerated ways in which they suffer. 'History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies,'[10] Naipaul wrote in *The Middle Passage* (1962). It stands to reason that if you can diminish a people, and reduce them into grotesque miniature, you can forget they're

multidimensional. For one who leaves home forever, the hatred of a place necessitates an exaggeration of its flaws. It might be the only way to forget what goodness it offered, and to leave without looking back.

When Mr. Biswas moves into the titular house with his family, they are initially struck by its flaws ('the upper floor sagged'), but with surprising ease and speed they grow comfortable in it. The landscape and Biswas's various homes all possess this kind of mutability, a shoddy shape-shifting that maintains the ever-present threat to unhouse him ('Mr Biswas could never afterwards say exactly where his father's hut stood...the stream where he had watched the black fish had been dammed...the world carried no witness to Mr Biswas's birth and early years'[11]). Without even wanting it so, a once-familiar landscape is overwritten. I have seen this to be true. One may pass by a house for years on end, but the day after it's demolished, it's hard to say what it looked like. The trees and vegetation take over, weeds sprouting where pillars once stood.

A kind of fatigue permeates Biswas's childhood: he moves from home to home and feels mostly unloved. In his halfhearted quest for knowledge, he 'read folk tales from various lands: he read, and quickly forgot, how chocolate, matches, ships, buttons and many other things were made....'[12] In the backdrop of his quixotic pastimes is the ever-lengthening shadow of his father's tragic and pointless death by drowning. It could be argued that the young Biswas is always unconsciously engaged in some form of willful forgetting:

> Occasionally a nerve of memory would be touched—a puddle reflecting the blue sky after rain, a pack of thumbed cards, the fumbling of a shoelace, the smell of a new car, the sound of a stiff wind through the trees, the smells and colours of a toyshop, the taste of milk and prunes—and a fragment of forgotten experience would be dislodged, isolated, puzzling.[13]

In the Tulsi household, to which he belongs, the husbands move in with their wives' parents: 'their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis.'[14] This erasure of their past identity comes easy in the milieu of communal noise. Running parallel to this is Biswas's longing for 'otherness'—a different place, a better home—and his weariness with everything oppressive, and the perpetual threat of poverty. When he 'worked late into the night by the light of a gas lamp, excitement and the light transforming the hut (he was) able then to forget that ordinary morning would come and the sign would come and the sign would hang over a cluttered little shop with its doors open on to a hot dusty road.'[15] Biswas suspects that it would be easy for his sliver of an identity to disappear in a world content to carry on with its business. 'Suppose at one word,' he wonders, 'I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, a few books.'[16]



***

Zauner's journey comes full circle: after her mother's death she returns to Korea, a place both familiar and in large parts unknown. Her childhood visits to Korea with her mother form an indelible part of her memory. She goes back in an effort to 'find' her mother, to locate her somewhere in the language and topography that bewilder her, in the heady rush of sensation. She writes:

> These were the places my mother had wanted to visit before she died, the places she'd wanted to take me to before our last trip to Korea was quarantined to a hospital ward. The last memories my mother had wanted to share with me, the source of the things she raised me to love. The tastes she wanted me to remember. The feelings she wanted me to never forget.[17]

There are things I cannot forget from my childhood. My father, Dr. Tufail Ahmed Qureshi, drove me to primary school in Kano, Nigeria, where we lived in the 1980s. His car was a blue Peugeot. President Babangida was in power. For me, it was a simple time. On the drive to school, and on the drive back home from school, he told me a different story, one he'd make up on the spot, every day, like a magician conjuring a deft trick. He didn't have much of a choice in the matter. I demanded the stories and each had to be unique. Now that I am a parent myself, I have great sympathy for the unwavering patience this must have required. Children demand difficult things, and their parents will find a way to make them happy.

What's strange but perhaps unsurprising, is that I have forgotten every single story my father told me on those drives to and fro: this pains me because I cannot retrieve them now. There will be no retelling of those tales. What I cannot forget, for a reason as inexplicable as the nature of memory itself, is an obscure moment from one obscure morning during school drop-off. I must have been ten years old. My father drove into the dusty school parking lot and, no doubt at the conclusion of the morning storytelling, turned off the car's ignition. It was a hot day and I had placed my hands on the car AC's vent. With glee, I turned to him, announced 'Feel this!' and placed my hands on his face. He smiled, laughed, feigned great surprise at the cold. I knew he was hamming it up for my benefit, indulging a child in a child's game. That moment has stayed with me, but there is no good reason why. Why that, and not the fantastic stories he told me on the twenty-minute drive to school and back?

He passed away in January 2021. I visit that school drop-off memory so often that it plays like a film reel when I summon it. It is as tangible as the room I sit in while I type these words, as real as the window before me and the view beyond it, a listless, unchanging landscape.

I am here but simultaneously it is 1988, in northern Nigeria, and I can feel the cold and damp draft of the air conditioner. The icy blue Peugeot. And always, my father's smile, and its shadow that lingered long after it was gone, like the refrain from Tony Bennet's 'The Shadow of Your Smile,' a song he loved to sing. I recall this incident to memorize it, the way children repeat passages of school text-books to learn them by heart. After all, writing an essay (or a story or poem) is a kind of arsenal, however poor, against time.

Ultimately, the tragedy of forgetting is that it erases even the shadow of what's already gone. Or the memory may simply become partial. You remember that your hands were cold but forget the car was blue. The autobiography frays, turns partly fictive. In *A Grief Observed* (1963), C. S. Lewis contemplates what it means to remember his dead wife. 'I cannot even see her face distinctly in my imagination,' he admits. The protagonist of the short story 'Funes the Memorious' (1942) by Jorge Luis Borges is cursed in that he cannot forget anything: 'He knew that at the hour of his death he would scarcely have finished classifying even all the memories of his childhood.'[18] Borges, who started to go blind as a young man, committed long passages of literature to memory.

In thinking about my father, I can attempt a respectable facsimile on the page of what my heart harbours, but words will never do the trick. Grief is a funny thing that way. It shape-shifts and defies description. It is its own language. I am reminded of how, many years ago, I borrowed a book of Dylan Thomas's collected poems from a local recreational club where our family was out having dinner. I must have been fifteen. The book with its damaged cover intrigued me. It featured a photograph of Thomas wearing a scratchy looking jacket, slumped across a chair in a casual pose. He did not have the gaunt Romantic look of a Shelley or Keats, the poets I had to study in school. Thomas, instead, was portly and unassuming, with alarmingly round eyes, more professor than poet.

I returned with the book to the dinner table to join my parents and siblings. It was the kind of evening that constituted a family outing: we were all acutely conscious of ourselves and each other, wearing our good clothes, freed from the tedium of our home routine and the unspoken familial rules that made joyful spontaneity feel like incorrect punctuation. Abujee rifled through its pages, as if searching for something, and then, triumphant, in his quietly giddy way, having found what he was looking for, pushed the book back across the table toward me, and recited a poem he knew by heart. It was an incongruous setting: the screeching of children out with their families, liberated by the outdoor spaces of the club, our barbequed dinner growing cold on the table, the flurry of black-vested waiters who appeared both busy and unoccupied at the same time. It was the poem 'Was there a Time' (1936). Reading it felt visceral, a punch to the stomach. I could not say what its meaning was, but I felt I understood it.



> Was there a time when dancers with their fiddles
> In children's circuses could stay their troubles?
> There was a time they could cry over books,
> But time has set its maggot on their track.
> Under the arc of the sky they are unsafe.
> What's never known is safest in this life.
> Under the skysigns they who have no arms
> Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost
> Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees best.

It's hard to believe that, once, there was a time when the world was young enough for me to receive wisdom as simple and abundant as this: 'Be good, and happy.' But I remember hearing those words. They have become indelible now, freed from the constraints of tense, a talisman for both the past and the uncertain future. They will not be forgotten.

## Notes

1. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, 443.
2. Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 16.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Ibid., 14.
6. Ibid., 8.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Naipaul, "The Strangeness of Grief."
9. Ibid.
10. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 22.
11. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, 40.
12. Ibid., 60.
13. Ibid., 556.
14. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, 92.
15. Ibid., 59.
16. Ibid.,125.
17. Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 188.
18. Borges, "Funes," 144.

Borges, Jorge Luis. "Funes, the Memorious." In *Ficciones*. Translated by Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1962. https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Borges_FunesTheMemorious.pdf

Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002.

Naipaul, V.S. "The Strangeness of Grief." *New Yorker*, Dec 30, 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/06/the-strangeness-of-grief

Zauner, Michelle. *Crying in H Mart*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023.