

IF, I WOULD.

Rasha Ahmad Saffarini

Abstract

Designed and built by Zaki Saffarini in the 1930s, the house of Salah Al-din Amin Salah, the former mayor between 1930 and 1933 and head of the municipality of Tulkarem, was abandoned because of three events: British imperialism in the 1940s, Zionist invasions in 1948, and Salah Amin's permanent exile in 1959. In 2019, the house was purchased by the architect's grandson even though he was not able to use it.

In this piece, the house is documented in dialogues between first- and third-generation refugees to explore how memory is absorbed as well as the role of counter-memory in diasporic contexts. This piece is a diary of stories, poems, and images that narrate the recollections of the mayor's family and neighbours, collected through conversations with his son, daughter, daughter-in-law, and the architect's family. However, the narrative is situated within the author's diasporic sense of being Palestinian, which is acquired through the cultural practices she has cultivated from her ancestors to cling to the rights of ownership.

Therefore, the fragmented recollections captured are interrupted by the author's outlook in response to living under occupation yet also in exile, echoing the fraught relationships between the land, the distant native of Palestine, and the intrusive invader. As such, the narrative fluctuates between the past and present, while also gazing at the future of the house and the author's return. To do this, the diary is approached in four ways, expressed as: 'was', 'would have been', 'is', and 'would'. Two conditional verb tenses, 'was' and 'is', present a glimpse of the reality of the house. The other two describe an ambition for what home may be which can only be achieved in the unreal event of a post-occupation world.

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Keywords: diaspora, home, site-writing, Palestine, exile, recollections, oral heritage, storytelling

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Biographical note

Rasha Saffarini is an architect and researcher focusing on the role of critical and creative practice in understanding the social, political, and religious qualities of cultural heritage in the 'current yet not' Middle East, its ecologies and dwellers. She studied architecture at the American University of Sharjah and has gained her MA in Architecture and Historic Urban Environments at the Bartlett School of Architecture (University College London).

Banner image: Detail from a view of the studio at the Barbara Hepworth gallery in St Ives, Cornwall. (Photo: Ed Clews / Alamy Stock Photo)

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Approach

'If ____, I would ____.', my piece of writing, emerged during the interminable days of the epidemic in 2021. It was only then, as I went to sit every day on the same chair, in the same corner of my bedroom, next to the same window through which I hoped to add a hint of greenery to my routine, that I came to realize that perception of 'belonging' for the one living in diaspora can assume the status of an obsession. It is not only confined to the perception of home, but it seeps through what I was able to learn from my parents (and their parents) as they recollected their past in Palestine. The struggle to collect the memories I need to perceive home is fragmented since the disruption to everyday life brought by exile means that my ancestors forget certain memories and highlight extreme ones. All the same, I depend on the memories that my family chose to share, underlying that my sense of belonging is bound to suffer such inaccuracies.

Excerpts from 'If ____, I would ____.'

(1) I begin here, even though I should have begun there.

فأعذرني إن نطقت بلسان المستعمر.

'So, forgive me if I spoke in the tongue of the colonizer.'

**If I am italicized, I have more to say.*

**If I am grey, I should not be shared.*

**If I am blank, I fear revealing what I bear.*

(2) I repeatedly return to pictures of remnants that seem foreign yet familiar. A fragment of an age that seems utopian; impossible if I may say, but it could have been real.

Instead, it is a shadow of what *was* and what *would have been*. A mirror of what my life is and an excerpt from what it *would be*.

(3) As my family and I were conversing about the construct of home, my father showed us several photos of a house that was designed by his grandfather for the previous mayor of Tulkarem, Salah Al-din Amin Salah, between 1930 and 1935 (Salah, M., 2023). His political stance led to his exile, leaving his home amid turmoil. The house seems to stand, but barely. I listened to my family discussing the potential of restoring the house. The murmurs of hope this met with were intriguingly tragic. We all chose to ignore the realities of the house, in a way that Palestinians have acquired by habit, akin to

learning how to grow an olive tree in silky deserts.

This piece was meant to ignore the reality of diaspora and imagine returning home through the past owners' recollections. However, I confess that I failed to stay entirely loyal to the idea. I was torn between bitter reality and hopeful dream, meandering between the past, present, and future. Instead, I wrote this, for my memory fails to recall what I never experienced. My memory fails to live in the stories, proverbs, and tongues my parents have tried to pass on to me. It morphs them into fragments and becomes an imprint of their past; yet it sits in a dusty drawer, like a dancer in a windowless room.

و على بال مين ياللي بترقص في العتمة

'And on whose mind is the person that dances in the dark.'

Regarding what 'was'



(4) Figure 3.1: Photos of the house and the beginning of the British invasion, showing the adjacent school filled with British tanks in the 1940s (top right). Image shared by Salah's son, 2021 (Salah Amin's family shared images with the author through WhatsApp to use as research material for 'If, I would' as part of the author's postgraduate studies).

(5) windows reaching skies
doors for *giants*
magnificent and mighty
trespassed by *Blighty*
sipping on my tea,
wryly
as it might be
a lesser sign

**Giants* refers to the grandness of the house when it was built. According to the son, the house was influenced by Ottoman and Egyptian architecture, standing out between the smaller houses in Tulkarem at the time.

**Blighty* seized the mukhtar's house as a residence for a British general in the 1940s. According to the daughter, Salah and his family were ejected by the British and Israeli militants without any notice to take their clothes. They resided with Al-Tamimi family until the British left in 1946 (R. Salah, 2021).

**Lesser signs* are the small signs preceding the final signs of the end of the world and the day of Judgement.

Regarding what 'would have been'



(6) Figure 3.2: A photograph of the son on one of the terraces. Shared by Salah's son, March 2021.

(7) Influenced by recollections of the son:

If *Churchills' hiccups* did not cut through a nation's cake, slicing tiers of land, stuffing those masquerading under modernity with a glass of waste, embellished with fizzles and crystal,

من بزا رخام ومن جوا سخام

'Marble on the surface and smut inside'

the British would not have travelled across the globe in the name of . They would not have trespassed, dragging the natives out, sleeping on their beds contently. They would not have *replaced children with tanks* in Madrasat AlFadilliyah, the school adjacent to home, doing away with education in Tulkarem. The house would not have been repainted to pastels to suit the colonizer's palette.

'The house was too beautiful, too grand, not to be taken by Brits' said the son in a short phone call.

Home would not have become a hideaway for Palestinians and a *shooting site* for the Jewish refugees. It would not have withered in silence as the *deprived native crawled in* to find their source of living, stealing wires and blankets. It would not have been abandoned and left to decay.

فالجنة بلا ناس ما بتنداس

'Paradise without its people is unapproachable.'

**Churchill's hiccups*, refers to scribbles the British drew on our maps, by which we came to be absurdly dominated, reducing us to the nothingness, as reflected in our abandoned homes and divorced nation.

*A *shooting site* refers to the Zionist attacks in 1948 that caused the families to separate from each other and from their home for safety (Salah, R., 2021).

**The deprived native crawled* into the mayor's house multiple times between the 1980s to 1990s, breaking the windows to steal furniture, wires, and kitchen and bathroom accessories (Salah, M., 2021).

**Paradise without its people* is a Palestinian saying that refers to home as a paradise that has no joy if it has no people.

(8) Influenced by recollections of the second daughter:

If we were not sold and made to settle for the *scattered crumbs* in enslaved greediness,

I could have spent my youth climbing that one bulky *eskadenya* (loquat) tree in the southern garden while my mother's yelling echoed from the kitchen, embarrassingly overshadowing *the speakers* of Al Rawda Mosque. I would have ignored her, picking the sour droplet-shaped fruit, running back to the kitchen, and sprinkling it with salt. I would have been fed each morning by the kind trees, an orange one day, a watery pomelo the other, or mulberries if I could have grabbed them before the season's end.

I left my grandmother's home after a late night of recollecting memories I have never encountered before. Yearning left me with a starving stuffed belly that day. My mother had left green and yellow *eskadenya* fruits on the counter that travelled from my uncle's garden in Amman to our rented residence, bruised in places yet flavourful and decadent in their freshness.

**Scattered crumbs* is the current map of the West Bank. We are trying to hold on to an absurd map of scattered circles that have long been sold by the East and West. The nation was broken from its state as an , then to portions, to scattered leftovers. Nonetheless, the cattle continue to settle for their condition in modern .

**The speakers* refer to regained religious freedom. I marked the first day of the holy month of Ramadan of 2020 from the news of yet another invasion as Israeli militants cut the cords of Al-Aqsa's speakers, forbidding Athan (call for prayer) and inhibiting the collective Iftar in the mosque.

(9) Influenced by recollections of the second daughter:

If we had not turned our Qibla towards nothing but a sophisticated strain of a ,

I would have heard that the mulberries would be red and white, thin and sweet, shaped like baby fingers. The bush would have been growing by the short fence of the southern yard, creeping into Al-Fadiliyah school. I would have occasionally sprinted to the plants, only to find tinted red lips and mischievous smirks on the other side as the school bell rang. I would have ensured ever-lasting friendships with those children. We would have grown old together and never apart.

Envy swarmed my mind. I left my desk once more, seeking distractions. My *left side* reached for a dazzlingly inadequate *silver spoon*, honouring dishonour as I collected the grains of rice on my bowl with the spoon, forgetting my ways.

**Left side* refers to the diminished blessings as Muslims reach out for food with their left hand instead of their right, believing that the devil feasts from their plates alongside them.

**Silver spoon* refers to a Jordanian-Palestinian colloquial story between the British and Bedouins of Jordan, about the colonial Generals who were once invited by the to a traditional Bedouin feast with powerful Jordanian tribes in order to form political relations. Each side of the Majlis was divided linguistically and traditionally. One side had porcelain plates and silverware, while the other did not. The British stopped eating, repulsed by the Bedouins eating with their hands. The tribal leaders noticed, and one of them looked at the king and said, 'tell your friends that God removed the barrier between our hands and our food, as we are clean, while he placed a barrier between them and their food as they are not.'

Regarding what 'is'

(10) In this ever-lasting crisis, we tend to count the days, the months, the years. Commemorating digits remind us of the ongoing tragedies. Ruminating only to belong to the nothingness, circling back to Jahilliyyah. As Salahuddin Al Ayubi once said,

كيف أبتسم وبيت المقدس أسير؟ والله إني لأستحيي من الله أن أبتسم
وإخواني هناك يعذبون ويُقتلون

'How can I smile and eat while the Holy City is a prisoner and while my siblings are being tortured and killed there.'

Although my feasts are succulent, and my smirk has never been wider, loathing is driven by prohibition of home. Then again, faith is bliss.

ولقد خلقنا الإنسان في كيد

'And we have created man in *travail*' (The Quran, 9:13)

**Travail* refers to the tribulations a human is always occupied in overcoming, as Allah created us in that struggle.



(11) Figure 3.3: The current state of Salah Amin's previous house. Image shared by Eng. Adnan Saffarini Office, March 2021.

(12) I am East, held captive by West, claiming I am West, that I am theirs, that I was in despair, as I wait the day when the sun rises west and sets east.

‘فلا تقوم الساعة حتى تطلع الشمس من مغربها’

‘The Hour (of Judgement) will not occur before the sun rises from the west’, a hadith by Prophet Mohammad PBUH (Ibn Majah, 2014, 5:4068).



(13) Figure 3.4: The current state of the Majlis. Image shared by Eng. Adnan Saffarini Office, March 2021.

14. But home is now a stranger
stranger to its home
as its home is to me
nonetheless,
it would be home.



(15) Figure 3.5: The current state of one of the terraces. Image shared by Eng. Adnan Saffarini Office, March 2021.

Regarding what 'would'

(16) Influenced by recollections of the architect's grandson, the friend:

If we chop down the *Akkoub* and the European Pines, my days would be spent in the orchard. My ears would tune to the chirps and rustling leaves while I skip in and out of the metal gates, but in their silence a loud shriek. I would be embraced by a lush Mediterranean garden all around, shifting from one terrace to another each season. The playful branches would tickle the stone that cools the rooms that would shelter me during the peak of Tulkarem's summer. I would be welcomed by the shimmering specks of pollen floating along the central path to home. The aroma would cease to prickly my nostrils and would dive deep into my subconscious, as it should. My child would pick several roses and they would needle her little fingers in return. She would run straight to the kitchen with tears held back vigorously and a basket full of petals, asking for a refreshing glass of rose juice that would perfume the rooms and wake home.

فلا بد مع الورد من إبر الشوك

'And with a rose, *thorned needles must be accompanied*', an Arabic saying.

**Thorned needles must be accompanied* refers to the reward that must be preceded by difficulties.

(17) Influenced by recollections of the son's wife:

If we tasted the air we are meant to breathe, if we grew the *Akkoub* we are meant to eat, if we plucked out the blasphemous *Akkoub* tree we are not meant to grow, if we migrated through the borders we are not meant to accept,

rose and orange mist would flutter through my windows, perfuming the quiet rooms. Red and blue cripples of light from the stained windows would paint the ornamented tiles and the side of my face, waking me up to what could be another spring day. My stomach would rumble of ecstatic hunger from the aroma of political ownership. I would skip on the gritty limestone, tickling my naked feet, to pick some figs, lemons, and Yaffa oranges. The orange tree would lean over me, facing the sun, welcoming the cold breeze while greeting rays of warmth. As I would fight with the branches to steal their fruits, swirling grumbles would gather rabbits under the kind shade for another feast.

My stomach turned and my throat parched, so I left my script to quench an ever-aching longing. As I sipped on a glass of desalinated tap water, four concrete walls confined me, twisting my tongue in mockery. Rubbing the sulk off my face, I spotted clotted residues of ink on the palms of my hands. There it was, *Kufur*, written on everyone's forehead, accompanying me through a time I cannot call religion and a place I detest calling home.

**Akkoub* is a wild cactus that is heavily popular in Palestinian cuisine as well as medicine. However, it is banned by the Israeli project from being picked for food amongst Palestinians.

**Gritty limestone* was imported from Haifa, a nearby city of Palestine (Salah R., 2021).

**Kufur* [Kuh-fuhr], refers to infidelity.

(18) Influenced by recollections of the second daughter:

If the sky soothed to deep blue, if flocks hovered freely, if the true anti-Semite war industry hushed, we could finally learn the sounds of rustling *vines*. In the western garden, the bulky trunk of the cypress tree would extend beyond the pigeon tower and over the little pool, sheltering my children from the sun and sprinkling them with parts of it, motherly, as the citrus scent would linger on their healthy skin. Our friends from Shuweikeh and Dar Azzomar would walk up the hill to the garden as the smell of grilled tomatoes and cumin invited them. Across the pool, the damp stone of the summer patio would shelter us with a glass of hot tea with freshly picked sage while the wind blew each warm and breezy summer day. We would collect the green almonds and sprinkle them with salt for our cousins visiting from Demashq. The hinges would not rest, creaking whilst visitors walked in and out of the patina gates. I would naturally leave the five doors open every evening. We would share our fresh produce from the lush trees with our neighbours. As Arabs say,

نولك أي ف عرز نو ان لك أف اوعرز

'They plant for us to eat, and we *plant for them to eat*.'

Until then, the sage, olives, olive oil, and salted white cheese cubes travel in large golden tins across the notorious Allenby Bridge, slightly souring, slightly bittering.

*Vines can no longer be heard or seen as Israeli destructions shapeshift to seize all aspects of life. Citrus trees and vineyards in Tulkarem fall ill and cease to produce. Women and men fall chronically ill and healthy reproduction is reduced as an Israeli pesticide company is located close by the remains of the Palestinian neighbourhood (Abusarhan & Qumsiyeh, 2000).

*We plant for them to eat colloquially refers to the values of hospitality in Arabs.

(19) Influenced by recollections of the second daughter:

If the 'green-washed' forest shuddered its mountains, if tree trunks grew through the foreign concrete that buried them, if they demolished them and their dams, the hills would bathe its rocks with runoffs, flowing to the sides, to the plains, and to the valleys, ending the drought. Collective footfalls would echo from the stairs of the tower, anticipating rain. The pigeons would slumber in their little holes as we grab our brooms to clean the roof and onion well, waving to Dar Al-Ashkar as they dust their crowns. Rain would fall heavily to sustain Palestine's hill people. In a blink, large droplets would tap on our ceilings in various tempos and eventually flood down embedded stone pipes to quench the underground chamber. Yet, the divine would overflow the garden with the staple of life. We would gather in the kitchen quietly, humbled by the thunders and showers. My father would open the remaining pomegranates, generously hurling each half for each grandchild before he fed himself. The trees, and birds would live in the luxury of bathing in the freshest water sent from paradise until the next winter, and the next, and the next. As the prophet (PBUH) once said to Bilal Bin Rabah,

أنفق ولا تخافن من ذي العرش إقلالا

'Spend and don't fear the lessening the value of your throne.'

Until then, we all seem to be drowning in a sea of our sins, occupied with temporary frills as the sun gets closer and crueller.

*Spend and don't fear refers to the culture of generosity and hospitality amongst Muslims and Arabs.

*Closer and crueller is the sun on doomsday.

Closing

(20) I end here,

وإلا بروح وراء الشمس

'Or I would banish behind the sun'.

*'Or I would banish behind the sun' is a colloquial statement about the consequences of speaking what should not be spoken of.

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