

# Pretender

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**A**ndré Aciman knows he is lying. He knows that his words drift farther away from their object with each turning page, that the bridge between language and memory is feeble at best, that “Uncle So-and-so’s house, the old school, the old haunts, the smell of the dirty wooden banister” is slowly fading from his mind, constantly eroded by time (“Alexandria” 3). Yet Aciman persists. Again and again, he guides us from action to thought, image to contemplation. He is perpetually looking inward, grappling with the disarrayed collection of memories that comprises his life’s journey through Alexandria, Rome, Paris, and eventually, New York City. He reflects, only to deny the validity of his own words—to declare that we look toward our past “because it isn’t, and could never be, really there; because it wasn’t [ours], and would never be [ours] again” (“Blue” 25). Yet this preoccupation with memory serves not as an impediment to his writing, but as its fundamental, recurring theme. Indeed, he suffers no qualms in exposing and examining the instability of his recollections, which appear in a volume unapologetically titled *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory*.

His memories and thoughts are colored by resurfacing feelings of loss, dislocation, a scattered sense of self, but as the timeline goes on, Aciman begins to reveal, perhaps ironically, who and how he is. He travels through a stream of remembrance not to clarify the plot of his life, but to discern how such a plot has steered him to his present condition of non-belonging. He sees himself changing over time, always against the backdrop of an equally unstable context. We meet Aciman the drifting nostalgic, expressing his ache for “everything to remain the same” upon witnessing the demolition of Straus Park (“Shadow Cities” 39); Aciman the Jew, as he attends Passover and recalls “another Egypt, the one [he] was born in and knew and got to love and would never have left had not a modern pharaoh named Gamal Abdel Nasser forced [him] out for being Jewish” (“Double Exile” 108); Aciman the son, reflecting upon the tension “between a father eager to say a few things to his son and a son who doesn’t want to regret one day having failed to let him say them”

(“Late Lunch” 112). He presents a multiplicity of selves that matches his multiplicity of places—and reflects his acute, agonizing sensitivity to his surroundings.

A lifetime of relentless transit leaves Aciman in an unrelenting state of tension, always anticipating shift, change, and fluctuation. Constantly he questions. He often views the world with hesitation and reservation as one would view an optical illusion. Reflecting upon his experience as an exile from Alexandria—an experience which is itself now distant and remote—Aciman inquires:

Will Egypt drown again? In 1981, the assassination of President Anwar el Sadat, in recent years the killings of tourists and Egyptian intellectuals, and in October 1995 the stabbing of the writer and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz—are these the new plagues? Must I worry and remember for Egypt as well now? (“Double Exile” 110)

A deeply ingrained anxiety surfaces and resurfaces. He splays his words across the page beneath a shower of question marks and open-ended phrases, leaving us to grapple with a frustratingly inconclusive examination. He constantly revisits scenes from his past in an attempt to regain faraway feelings of home and familiarity. Yet they remain far away.

A collection of re-words emerges, catapulting Aciman backward into his past. He *reflects*. *Recalls*, feeling an impulse “to rescue things everywhere, as though by restoring them here [he] might restore them elsewhere as well” (“Shadow Cities” 38). As a result, he exists in a suspension of self that is partially his own doing; he is a victim of his own retroactive prefix, neither fully embracing the present nor entirely reaching the distant, elusive past. His writing is as unsettled and restless as he is.

The strange thing is, he seems to *choose* this.

He chooses memory, recalling the “famous Jewish names on tombstones and mausoleums” in Alexandria (“Alexandria” 19); remembering the wooden benches of Straus Park, “dirty, rotting, and perennially littered with pigeon droppings” (“Shadow Cities” 37); evoking a visit to Egypt in which he overlooked an overwhelming expanse of the sea from his balcony, asking, “Isn’t it pointless to be given this blue, which I love so much but which I’ve grown to love if for no other reason than because I’ve allowed myself to think it could exist only in memory and is therefore unreal?” (“Blue” 28).

It is “unreal,” he says, yet he writes it down nonetheless.

Two hundred pages of thorough, painstaking contemplation. Absolute devotion to a pool of memories that he deems *unreal*. If this is forgery, Aciman

seems to delight in it.

Perhaps because he bears an aversion to change, a deep desire for the home he never experienced, Aciman lives in a perpetual backward glance, frequently indulging in bouts of longing. In what Freud might regard as an example of “repetition-compulsion,” Aciman “cannot recall all of what lies repressed, perhaps not even the essential part of it” (Freud 19, 17-18). We find him lost in a vortex of “re-words,” looking constantly behind his shoulder, “obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed, instead of *recollecting* it as a fragment of the past” (Freud 18). His text grows heavy with the prefix, burdened to be a shifting anthology of images rather than a consistent documentation of experience. His memories lose stability with each slightly altered resurfacing. But he *yearns* for the stability he never knew, and that need comes through in his decision to settle for the longing alone, rather than any of the longed-for places.

Aciman’s clear, comprehensible style would hardly suggest such psychological complexity. His sentences are short and declarative, most often crafted around vivid imagery and simple verbs that leave us unquestioningly informed of his sentimentality, his fears, his doubts. Indeed, he uses language stripped of illusive artifice. In considering his connection to New York City, for instance, Aciman remarks, “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 the things there, to rewrite the present so as not to write off the past” (“Shadow Cities” 38). He tells us much, but shows us little. Aciman leaves us intrigued by what he says about the nature of memory and self, but not necessarily satisfied by the gratification of our having “solved” or interpreted a multilayered, difficult piece of prose.

When he does give us the occasional long, descriptive sentence, however, it typically comes as a release—an illustration of his heavily encumbered memory, an airing out of the rumpled folds that comprise his past. Consider this description of his role as a New Yorker in what feels like a heavy exhalation:

New York is my home precisely because it is a place from which I can begin to be elsewhere—an analogue city, a surrogate city, a shadow city that allows me to naturalize and neutralize this 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 sculptured forefront. (“Shadow Cities” 46)

While he pauses for a breath, we begin to understand the tension constantly at work between Aciman's memories and his perception of place. He is a *daydreamer*. He emphasizes his strong inclination to "prefer the imagined encounter, or the memory of the imagined encounter, to the thing itself" ("Square Lamartine" 59). His sense of dislocation and fragmentation of self, then, stems not only from a childhood spent in unrelenting transit, but also from his inability to suppress his imagination, which makes mental renderings of a faraway, idyllic "elsewhere." In "On the Power of the Imagination," Michel de Montaigne declares that "everyone feels its impact, but some are knocked over by it" (36). Montaigne seems to affirm and understand Aciman's enthrallment with his own imagination more than the author himself does.

Aciman's use of imagery and attention to detail exhibits his devotion to the imagination. In describing a visit to Paris, he embellishes: "The sky as always is silver gray, and the city is in full ferment as we leave the café down the unavoidable route toward the old apartment" ("Square Lamartine" 63). Yet the sky in Paris is not, in fact, always "silver gray." It appears so within Aciman's mind; it reveals, perhaps, a melancholic sentiment that he associates with his experience of Paris, his memory of it, but not the Parisian sky itself. His layers of recollection—moments, distinctive instances that suddenly come forth in a vibrant display of color and detail—derive less from the incompleteness of his memory than his expression of it. We can sense his imagination's disappointment when he visits Alexandria and attempts to gaze at the sprawling city from his hotel room, realizing that "the small, Moorish/Venetian-style balcony is entirely taken over by a giant compressor unit; it's impossible to maneuver around it. Bird droppings litter the floor" ("Alexandria" 6). The "impossibility" of maneuvering around the compressor unit seems to transcend the device itself, pointing towards another obstacle. Perhaps Aciman is frustrated that he cannot find the more idealized Alexandria at this moment. Perhaps, close up, he cannot *imagine* it. But on other occasions, even the most mundane circumstances allow him to make imaginative leaps. During a lunch with his father, Aciman scans the cafeteria setting, noting, "Our corner overlooks the gleaming wet patio, which on rainy days always reminds me of Alexandria. The storm patters on the large glass pane. It feels snug inside" ("Late Lunch"). He imagines himself elsewhere, returning to his distant homeland by means of association, creating it all around him ("Late Lunch" 113). His surroundings serve as reminders, mementos—inspirational cues. We begin to find ourselves, as readers, imagining the pictures rather than reading the words; we *see* his memories intoxicatingly come into being on the pages before us.

Aciman also emphasizes his childhood bookishness as a source of imaginative enthrallment. He remembers how he would choose a place, “read a sufficient number of pages and [he] could almost be there, in André Gide’s Paris or Marcel Pagnol’s Marseilles” (“Square Lamartine” 52). He fondly recalls his favorite pastime: “to take a good book and sit somewhere in a quiet open spot in Rome with so many old things around [him]” (“Shadow Cities” 45). Even as he outlines his experiences in volatile, weightless locations, “shadow” cities that cannot be his home, he uses excerpts and selections of poetry to ground himself. He quotes Emily Dickinson during a recollection of his visit to Straus Park: “How frugal is the chariot that bears a human soul!” (“Shadow Cities” 47). He considers himself a kind of poetic module—a verse, traveling freely, less real than imagined, and able to be interpreted. He does not merely inform us of his experience, but grants us an opportunity to participate in the creative reconstruction of it.

Aciman *chooses* to embrace a condition of perpetual reflection that leaves him acutely aware of his surroundings, forever attuned to reminders of a place called “home” that exists only in his memory, a home that has lost its element of reality throughout years of constant recollections, each adorned with new embellishments and altered by subjective inconsistencies. The *invented* city.

By synthesizing imagination and recollection, Aciman controls his memory, exercising a measure of power over his remembered past that he has never wielded over a fickle, vacillating present. In his perpetual immersion in reflection, Aciman renders himself the object of Montaigne’s repeated question and answer: “Have you been able to reflect on your life and control it? Then you have performed the greatest work of all” (“On Experience” 397). To control one’s life demands a fixation with reflection—and a willingness to polish tarnished, rusty memories. Montaigne’s essays are, to use his less than modest words, his own “greatest work,” because they control not only our perception of him, but also his perception of himself. He ruminates over a past that exists remotely and incomplete, transcribing it so that we can see it, and read it, and stop thinking about it—and so that he can, too. Yet Aciman does not merely reflect on his life; he *lives* in reflection. He submerges himself in his pool of memory—that distant, embellished recollection of the past, rendered false, a patchwork of fact and imagination.

Perhaps, then, we must all take haven in edited memories—we must defend false recollections and find solace in their illusory glow. Aciman certainly does. He maintains a sense of meticulously crafted, controlled perfection within his imagined memory that reality cannot sustain. He *orchestrates*

memory as a function of his imagination; whereas, he feels orchestrated, controlled by the volatility of the present. And perhaps his is the only kind of control we can believe in. Our present is an instantaneous burst between an unknowable future and a disappearing past. In light of such disarming truths, perhaps our only sanity lies in our ability to compose false papers, turning toward a collection of imagined memories and clinging to their dishonest radiance.

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