

Abdulrazak  
Gurnah



'Fierce and vivid'  
*New York Times*

**MEMORY  
OF  
DEPARTURE**

THE  
NOBEL  
PRIZE  
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**ABDULRAZAK GURNAH** is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021. He is the author of ten novels: *Memory of Departure*, *Pilgrims Way*, *Dottie*, *Paradise* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Award), *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea* (longlisted for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award), *Desertion* (shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize), *The Last Gift*, *Gravel Heart* and *Afterlives* (longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction). He is Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. He lives in Canterbury.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Pilgrims Way*  
*Dottie*  
*Paradise*  
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For Leila and Sarah, and SVG



My mother was in the backyard, starting the fire. Snatches of the prayer she was chanting reached me before I went out. I found her with her head lowered over the brazier, blowing gently to coax the charcoal into flames. The saucepan of water was ready by her feet. When she glanced round, I saw that the fire had darkened her face and brought tears to her eyes. I asked for the bread money, and she frowned as if loath to be disturbed from tending the flames. She reached into the bodice of her dress and pulled out the knotted handkerchief in which she kept her money. The coins she put in my hand were warm from her body, and felt soft and round without edges.

‘Don’t take forever,’ she said, and turned back to the fire without raising her eyes to my face. I left the house without greeting her and was sorry as soon as my back was turned.

She was then in her early thirties but seemed older. Her hair had already turned grey, and the years had ruined her face, etching it with bitterness. Her glance was often reproachful, and small acts of neglect provoked her into resentful stares. Sometimes her face came to life with a smile, but slowly and unwillingly. I felt guilty about her, but I thought she might have smiled to greet me into manhood.

I walked through the dark alley that ran by the side of the house. Heavy dew had settled the dust in the air and glazed the tin roofs of the roadside huts. Although pitted and cratered with pot-holes, the road seemed more even



and solid than the mud huts that flanked it. This was Kenge, where the toilers and failures lived, where wizened prostitutes and painted homosexuals traded, where drunks came for cheap *tende*, where anonymous voices howled with pain in the streets at night. An empty bus drove by, growling and lurching on the broken road. It was painted green and white, its headlights weak and yellow in the morning light.

The clearing round the mzambarau tree was empty so early in the day. From the green mosque came the hum of prayer, the faithful clustered in a saving huddle. In the distance a cock crowed. Jagged ends of rock had thrust through the earth in the square, a peril for unwary feet. With the rains, the earth would turn into fields of sprouting grass, but it was now the middle of the dry season.

Kenge was very near the sea. The taste was always in the air. On muggy days, a smear of salt would line the nostrils and the ears. On soft mornings, a sea breeze came to chill the heart at the start of a new day. In years gone by, the slavers had walked these streets. Their toes chilled by the dew, their hearts darkened with malice, they came with columns of prime flesh, herding their prize to the sea.

The Yemeni shopkeeper gave me the loaf of bread without a word. He wiped his hand on his shirt before taking my money, a mendicant's deference. On his face was a servile smile, but under his breath he uttered a muttered curse.

I found my father praying when I got home. He was squatting on the ground in the backyard, his legs folded under him. His eyes were closed and his head was lowered on his chest. His hands, folded into fists, were resting on his knees, the index finger of his right hand pointing at the ground.

I sliced the bread, then went to wake my sisters. They slept in my grandmother's room, the walls of which were always condensed with the smell of armpits and sweat. Her shrunken body lay in folds, arm hanging over the side of the bed. Zakiya lay beside her. She was the elder of my two sisters, and she was already awake. Saida was always harder to rouse. She rolled away as I shook her, turning her back on me and grunting her discontent. I became irritated with her, and in the end held her by her shoulders and rocked her.

'Eh! What are you doing?' snapped my grandmother, roused from her sleep by Saida's whining. 'Be careful. Do you want to kill all of us? Be careful! Don't you ever listen?'

We called her Bi Mkubwa, the Elder Mistress. She looked frail and kindly but was cruel without mercy. I heard her muttering behind me as I turned to leave.

'Don't say anything. Don't bother to greet anybody. Come back in here!' – suddenly shouting – 'You little shit! Who do you think I am? Come back here!'

I stood outside the back door, waiting to give in to her screaming. I heard her wail for my father, her voice rising like someone in pain. He was still squatting in the yard in front of me, praying. My mother glanced at him, but his eyes were shut to the screaming around him. She shook her head at me. *There you go again.* She hurried inside for my books, leaving me alone with my father for a moment. She gave me a slice of bread and a penny for a cup of tea. It was the morning of my fifteenth birthday.

At Koran school, which I had attended from the age of five, I had learnt that boys become accountable to God at the age of fifteen. Girls reach this maturity when they are nine. It is to do with secretions. So God has decreed.

'When you're fifteen,' my father had told me, 'It's between God and you. Every sin you commit, His angels will enter

in your book. On the Day of Judgment, the weight of the evil you have done will be measured against the good. If you obey the teachings of God, you will go to Heaven. If you sin, you will burn in Hell. You will burn to your bones, then you will grow whole and burn all over again. And you will go on like this for ever. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. We must pray five times a day, fast during Ramadhan, give *zakat* every year, and go to Makka at least once in a lifetime, if God gives us the means. God has divided Hell into seven depths. The deepest is for the liars and hypocrites, those who pretend to be devout when there is doubt in their hearts.

‘Every day you must thank Him that you were not born a kafir or a savage, that you were born of parents who can teach you of His Glory and His Wisdom. You are one of the faithful of God, a creature of God. In a few years you will be fifteen, you will be a man. Learn to obey Him now or you will burn for ever in the fires of Hell.’

On the morning I was fifteen, the same bus took me to school as did every other morning. The same faces were on the bus with me, the usual girls sitting together and apart from us, reared into self-conscious anxiety in the presence of men. I searched among them for the one I favoured. Her hair was spread across her shoulders. She held herself with a stiffness that made nonsense of my desires. The girl next to her looked gentler. They were sitting in front of me and I did not even dare ask their names. I thought of dream nights when the blood flows warm ... on the morning I became a man.

On the way back from school, I went into the gloom of the whitewashed mosque. The floors were covered with gaily-dyed matting for the congregation to sit on. I went in among them and opened my account with the Almighty.

Clouds of dust rising and rising, churned up by tramping feet. Trees glare hard-headed at the noon sun. Tortured by the power of the heat, the sea turns and turns and wastes and evaporates, and turns into mist and vapour, coagulating in the chill that follows the sun.

As I approached the waterfront I could smell the fish-market. Some of the fishermen were still about. Most of them worked at night, and went home to sleep at the sound of the midday call to prayer. Every night they pushed their tiny boats into the water and disappeared. Some of them did not return for several days, and then came back with a shark or a swordfish that they had defeated in battle. When I was younger, I used to think it was a glamorous and free life, a man's life.

The salt wind from the sea washed over me. The smell of the docks, round the curve of the breakwater, mingled with the rumble of hooves. They were loading cattle for the islands. Livestock did not do well on the islands because of tsetse fly. So, every month local traders loaded diseased old borans into dhows and took them across.

I saw old man Bakari walking along the muddy beach towards the steps. When I was small, Bakari used to tell me about the sea and fishermen. He was always kind to me. Sometimes he gave me a piece of roast cassava or some fish to take home. He said the sea frightened him. He said people did not really know what the sea was like. *A monster*, he said. *Deep, deep, so deep that you can't believe it. There are mountains and plains, and many human remains. And sharks that feed. One day ... And the shrill cries of the water-birds. A death pit.* His body was like a wounded, deformed muscle. He squinted at me for a moment, and then he grinned.

'How are you?' he asked. 'And your father and your mother?'

‘*Ahlan mzee* Bakari, they’re well.’

‘And school? Are you doing well? You will be a doctor one day,’ he grinned.

‘All is well.’

He nodded his approval.

‘*Alhamdulillah*. Say *Alhamdulillah* for these kindnesses that God shows us,’ he said, and waited for me to thank God too. ‘Oh well, I must be going to my bed. Give my regards to your parents.’ He waved his arm and walked away, an old man, bent and bowed.

Sometimes Bakari went mad. He beat his wife and children. Once he set his wife on fire. He broke a chair over one of his daughters and she still suffers from fainting spells and can hardly speak properly. Afterwards he was contrite, locking himself away and praying to God for forgiveness, begging God to kill him, begging his family to pardon him. He was afraid they would have him put in the mad hospital. Nobody came out of there. They beat their prisoners there, to find out whether they were really mad or just hashish smokers looking for a roof.

Bakari used to say that God was the only truth in the world. And if He wished to give him a faulty head, that was His business. We can only do what we think is right, what we think God wants.

The sea air was good for the pain in my chest. The tide was going out and the fishermen’s dugouts lay on their sides in the mud, the outriggers festooned with weed. The sun beat on the green and slimy beach, raising a stench. Beyond the breakwater, a Port Police launch sped towards the harbour. A ship was coming in.

I knew I would have to go home, because I belonged to them. If I did not return, they would come to seek me. Then they would beat me and love me and remind me of

God's words. In and out of the rooms and into the yard they would chase me, beating my flesh. *Never listens to anyone. He's ashamed of us, of his name. Look at the liar now. What could we have done to deserve him?*

'He never listens,' my grandmother would say, stoking my father's rage.

'Hasn't he had enough?' my mother would protest, hovering on the edges, anxious for her wounded fledgling. In the end she would withdraw into her room, looking stern. What's the good of that? It was better by the dirty sea, away from chaos and humiliation.

In the distance the ship drew near, carrying its shiplot of Greek sailors and Thai rice.

They often told me how weak I was when I was born. My brother Said was born eighteen months before me. He was named after my grandfather, who was some kind of a crook. On the day Said was born, my father got drunk and was found crumpled in a cinema car-park. My grandmother read prayers over the new arrival, asking that God protect him from the evil of other people's envy.

When I was born I caused my mother a great deal of pain. My grandmother said someone should be called to read the Koran over me, asking God to keep me alive. They washed me with holy water from Zamzam and wrapped me in cloths inscribed with lines from the Book. They persuaded the Lord to let me live. Three years passed before Zakiya came. Neither Said nor I paid much attention. What's the good of a sister? Said beat me often. He was the elder. He said it was to make me tough. Said had many friends, and when he was six he was already fucking boys. He taught me to chase stray cats and beat them with twisted metal cables. We raided walled gardens to steal fruit. We baited beggars and madmen. Said forced me into fights with other boys,

to toughen me up. Often in frustration he would shove me aside to finish off a fight that I was losing. When I went home, cut and bleeding, he would get a beating. *Next time you get into trouble I'll kill you, you bastard. Do you hear me?* my father would tell him as he pounded him. After a while, my grandmother would intervene. My mother would take me out into the yard. Said would sob his heart out in my grandmother's room. Many nights my father did not sleep at home.

Said was never quiet. He was always arguing, bullying and getting a beating. He would laugh while my mother tearfully appealed to his better nature. He always cried when my father beat him, throwing himself around the room and screaming with pain, winking at me when he thought father was not looking. Said was very big. When people saw us together they said that he would disinherit me at my father's death. When Said was given money for sweets, he paid little boys to take their shorts off in a quiet corner. He tried to persuade me to join him. Sometimes he brought a boy to me and said that the boy wanted me to fuck him. He would whisper urgently ... I tried to feel as he did, but I was a disappointment to him. I bought sweets with my money, and always gave him half of them.

Once we were all arrested for beating one of the boys in the neighbourhood. Said tied him to a tree and then caned him. The boy's father reported us to the police sergeant who took all of us to the station. I liked the sergeant because he let us go into the station and play with the handcuffs. If he arrested a thief, he allowed us to come into the office to watch him telephone headquarters. When he got us to the station he took out a big book.

'There are names in here,' he said, rapping the book with his knuckles. 'These are evil people. And once your name is

in here, then you go to Court. Do you know what they do to children in Court? They send them to prison in a forest.'

He pointed at me and told me to go home. I fled without a moment's hesitation, bringing a smile to the sergeant's face. When Said came home, all he told me was that the sergeant had given them a warning. In the end, all the sergeant did was to inform my father. Said got a beating. I hid under the bed.

One day, rummaging in a dustbin, I found a five-shilling note. I asked Said if I should take it in to the people whose dustbin it was.

'Don't be a fool,' he said. 'You found it.'

'But it's wrong,' I said. 'It doesn't belong to us.'

'Who said?' he asked.

'Father.'

He grunted his contempt.

'But it's like stealing,' I insisted.

'You're so stupid,' he said coldly, hurtfully. He started to walk away. I ran after him, clutching the five-shilling note. We bought two ice-creams each, and *bajia* and *mbatata* and chocolates. We sat in the public gardens, Jubilee Gardens as they then were, under a leafy, shady tree and had a picnic. We bought a plastic football and went back to the gardens to play with some of the other boys there. We walked home with the football under my arm and two bars of chocolate in Said's pocket. Said said that we could hide the ball under some sacks and then *discover* it there a day or two later. When we turned into the backyard there was no one around. Said took the ball from me and ran to the empty sacks.

'What are you doing?' shouted my father, standing at the door.

He walked over to the sacks and took the ball out. They were convinced that we had street-begged for the money, or



even worse. I said we had found the money, which annoyed my father. He said I was insulting his intelligence, and did I think he kept his brains in his shithole? Said glared at me, warning me not to say anything, to keep quiet and take a beating. I told them that we had found the money in a dustbin. Said raised his eyebrows heavenwards. A sudden silence fell over all of us. I did not know why what I had said was so shocking.

‘So!’ my father said, turning to Said. ‘You found the money in a dustbin!’

I could see my father beginning to swell, his eyes glaring. Said started to snuffle.

‘What dustbin?’ my mother asked, stepping between Said and my father. ‘What were you doing? You’re lucky you haven’t caught a disease. What were you after?’

She grabbed Said’s collar and started to take him away. My father stepped forward and pushed her aside. Said retreated hastily, and my mother whimpered softly, her eyes filling with tears.

‘I’ll tell you what he’s after in a dustbin,’ said my father, walking towards Said. ‘He’ll look in dustbins for what he can’t get at home. And when he doesn’t find it there either, he’ll look for it in somebody’s bed, having his arse fucked. You little bastard!’

I wanted to say that it was I, not Said ... I was too afraid. Said had stopped his snivelling and was watching my father with unwavering concentration, poised for flight. My mother was now openly sobbing, her body rocking slightly as if she were in prayer.

‘I warned you,’ my father said, beginning to crouch. ‘I warned you. I’ll break your neck for this!’

Said turned and ran, and my father felled him with a blow on his right shoulder. It sounded like an axe soaking

up meat. Said's knees buckled, and his mouth gaped as he struggled for air. My father stepped forward and stopped within inches of the heaving body of his first-born. He kicked him in the stomach. He kicked him again as he tried to get up. He beat him with his fists, butted him with his head, bit him on the wrist. He beat him until his bowels opened.

'Leave him be!' my mother screamed, throwing herself at my father. 'You'll kill him!'

He knocked her down. He turned on her and snarled like an animal. His arms were shooting out, smashing the air with fury, my mother on the ground. He turned back to Said and screamed and roared at him. He beat him with real anger and hate, the sweat streaming off his arms and down his legs. The cunt. And in the end he stood over him, feet wide apart, and shouted, *Have you had enough?* He stood over his first-born and shouted, *Have you had enough?*

My mother blamed me. I know she did. Said was blubbering and shaking like a little animal. My mother washed him and wept over him. She sang to him and stroked him as she put him to bed. I was the one who found him, that same evening. My mother had left a candle by his bed. When I went in, his shirt was on fire. On the floor beside him, a pile of clothes and newspapers was ablaze. He was lying down, struggling to get up, beating groggily at his chest. I shouted his name and he turned to me, fear leaping in his eyes.

'Put it out! Put it out!' he yelled.

He screamed with all the force in his being. He screamed with a panic-stricken abandon, thrashing at the sheets. He struggled to get up but couldn't. I ran forward, crying and shouting, trying to beat the fire out, but I only burnt my hands.

‘O Yallah! Yallah!’ he screamed.

I begged him to put the fire out. I stood and watched him burn. His eyes were shut and he fell on the floor and his face was twisted and angry. I ran around him, hopping and calling, stupidly crying. He rolled over. His legs kicked the bed and the frame fell over him. And he burned. His legs were like torches ablaze at the thighs. His face was unfamiliar and white in places. The fire reached the upper part of his thighs. His chest was leaping fire.

My mother was the first to come in. She stopped at the door and her hand went to her mouth. The scream tore through her fingers as if wrenched out of her. She ran in and started to beat the fire with her hands. She beat the fire with whatever came to hand. Someone came running in with a bucket of water. I can’t remember. He is dead. I was five. The room filled with people, shouting prayers and wailing. The room was awash with water, and scraps of charred newspaper floated in puddles. My mother was weeping hysterically in somebody’s arms. She turned round and pointed at me, screaming hysterically. I didn’t hear what she said.

Why did they blame me who had never done him any harm? They all beat him. I was five. He was my friend, he was my brother. He was my only friend and my only brother. Why did they blame me?

A man read over the grave, first the words of the Koran and then instructions on how a dead man should conduct himself in the grave. He instructed Said on the answers he should give when the angel came to question him.

‘And when he asks you your name, tell him you were called Said bin Omar, creature of God ...’

For all the wrong Said has done he will suffer long. For all the little arses he fucked, the angels will put red-hot

chains through his mouth and out of his arsehole. That is God's punishment.

My father paid for a *khitma* to be held at the local mosque. It seemed like hundreds of people turned up to read the Koran for Said. Prayers were read and eulogies chanted for the dear departed. The *halwa* was served by professional servers, to ensure that the greedy in the congregation did not wipe out the platters before all the guests had had a helping. I had never had a close relative die before. People came to shake my hand, to share in our sorrow. It made me feel very proud of Said.

Said's spirit lived on among us for many months. We were not allowed to sing too loudly or quarrel too often. My father's prayers became longer and his arm heavier. We were not allowed to go to the pictures or attend weddings or dances. My mother hardly spoke to anybody. My grandmother went to Tanga to visit relations. My father beat me often. He filled me with such terror that I was afraid to speak to him. Many more nights now he did not sleep at home.

When he was younger, my father was a trouble-maker. When he came home at night, his walking-stick was covered with blood and hair, and there was never a mark on him. He was a man in those days, a man as men are supposed to be. Some people say he was a dog then, which is not altogether an insult. There is a photograph of him, taken before I was born. He was standing in front of a studio backdrop of palms and beach. His eyes were leaping out of his face, daring the camera with a ferocious arrogance. His walking-stick rested lightly against his right thigh. His left arm leant against a tall flower table. He looked as if he was about to erupt into an uncontrollable rage.

It was my mother who showed me the picture, and I waited silently for her to say something. She put the picture away

without saying a word, without looking at me. I wanted to ask about those eyes boiling with rage. Now they are glazed with drink. I wanted to ask her, I always wanted to ask her why he was like that. Why was he so unhappy? Is it true what they say about him? Is it true that he used to kidnap little black children and sell them to the Arabs of Sur? They told me that at school. Is it true that they put him in prison because he ruptured a little boy?

I could not believe that such things were true. Then his rages were so real, so fierce and devastating, that he seemed capable of any cruelty. His lips were fat and lined with cracks that sometimes bled in the dry heat. He looked taller than he really was. His arms were thick and lumpy with muscles. His close-cropped hair was flecked with grey. Said would have grown to be like him, and my father would have looked at him with pride. He hectored me about respect and obedience, when never in my life had I sought to challenge or thwart him. I lived in terror of him. Sometimes I cried as soon as I was in his presence. His cruelties were inflicted with such passion.

Once, when I was ill, my mother spread my bedding on the floor beside her, in case I needed attention during the night. I was proud of my illness, and proud of my exalted position near her. So often she did not let me come near. Oh, she cared for me and fed me and picked lice out of my hair, but she did not let me come near. And I could never forget how she had stood screaming her loss, with her finger pointed at me. But on this night she stroked me and put me to sleep with a strange, sweet liquid which she said was good for me.

When I woke up, my father was leaning against her bed. The door was open, and the hurricane lamp that was left burning in the hallway through the night, lit up part of