

PRAISE FOR

HOMELAND ELEGIES

... a stunning self-portrait by a brilliant Muslim-American writer . . . Passionate, disturbing, and unflinching. . . .
—SALMAN RUSHDIE

... a vibrant, insightful, and wickedly entertaining . . . A deeply moving father-and-son story . . . that anyone wanting to know how we got where we are today—and into what a future we might be heading tomorrow—should read.”
—SIGRID NUNEZ, author of *The Friend* and *The Last of Her Kind*

... a astonishing work of an absolutely brilliant writer . . . Akhtar reveals the intersections of class, race, religion, academia, and emigration, and in the process shows us a troubled portrait of our country in the twenty-first century.”
—PHIL KLAY, author of *Redeployment*

... a prophetic. Akhtar rages, he sings, he indicts, he grieves, he loves, he sorrows, he dreams, he mourns, he writes, he transcribes! And finally, he transmutes his pain into the sublimest art.”
—JOSHUA FERRIS, author of *Then We Came to the End*

... the core of this flashing, kinetic coil of memory—part *One Thousand and One Nights*, part reality TV—is a passionate, wrenching portrait of Americans exiled into ‘otherness’ in the post-9/11 world.”

—JENNIFER EGAN, author of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

Dear Reader —

I wrote *Homeland Elegies* in something of a fever dream after my mother passed away, and after Donald Trump’s election. My father was starting to show signs of decline, as was our nation, and I found myself overtaken with a desire to remember.

I wanted to remember what it was that brought them here—my parents and so many of their family and friends—fifty years ago. I wanted to remember their lives and loves, the children they had, who, like myself, had never known another homeland. Above all, I wanted to remember what this half-century had been for us, and what that said about what America had first meant to them coming here, how that country changed, and what those changes meant for all our lives.

Elegies, then, for homelands of various sorts, as told by the child of a generation caught between notions of home, of success, of belonging, and most of all, of America.

And finally, while these pages begin with a quote taken from an Alison Bechdel memoir, this is not a work of autobiography. As the sort of writer who has always felt the need to deform actual events enough to be able to see them more clearly, I have not resisted the inclination here. This is a novel.

Ayad Akhtar

ALSO BY AYAD AKHTAR

American Dervish

Disgraced

The Invisible Hand

Junk

The Who and the What

HOMELAND ELEGIES

A NOVEL

AYAD AKHTAR



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

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Overture: To America

I had a professor in college, Mary Moroni, who taught Melville and Emerson; who the once famous Norman O. Brown—her mentor—said was the finest mind of her generation; a diminutive, cherubic woman in her early thirties whose uncanny resemblance to a Raphaellesque putto was not incidental (her parents had immigrated from Urbino); a scholar of staggering erudition who quoted as easily from the *Eddas* and Hannah Arendt as she did from *Moby-Dick*; a lesbian, which I only mention because she did, often; a lecturer whose turns of phrase were sharp as a German paring knife, could score the brain's gray matter and carve out new grooves along which old thoughts would reroute, as on that February morning two weeks after Bill Clinton's first inauguration, when, during a class on life under early American capitalism, Mary, clearly interrupted by her own tantalizing thought, looked up from the floor, at which she usually gazed as she spoke—her left hand characteristically buried in the pocket of the loose-fitting slacks that were her mainstay—looked up and remarked almost offhandedly that America had begun as a colony and that a colony it remained, that is, a place still defined by its plunder, where enrichment was paramount and civil order always an afterthought. The fatherland in whose name—and for whose benefit—the predation continued was no longer a physical fatherland but a spiritual one: the American Self. Long trained to worship

its desires—however discreet, however banal—rather than question them, as the classical tradition taught, ever-tumescent American self-regard was the pillaging *patria*, she said, and the marauding years of the Reagan regime had only expressed this enduring reality of American life with greater clarity and transparency than ever before.

Mary had gotten into some trouble the previous semester for similarly bracing remarks about American hegemony in the wake of Desert Storm. A student in the ROTC program taking her class complained to the administration that she was speaking out against the troops. He started a petition and set up a table in the student union. The brouhaha led to an editorial in the campus paper and threats of a protest that never actually materialized. Mary wasn't cowed. After all, this was the early '90s, and the consequences of astringent ideological fire and brimstone—or sexual abuse of power, while you're at it—were hardly what they are today. If anyone had a problem with what she said that afternoon, I didn't hear about it. The truth is, I doubt many of us even understood what she was getting at. I certainly didn't.

Worship of desire. Tumescent self-regard. A colony for pillage.

In her words was the power of a great negation, a corrective to a tradition of endless American self-congratulation. It was new to me. I was accustomed to the God-blessed, light-of-the-world exceptionalism that informed every hour I'd ever spent in history class. I'd come of age in the era of the hilltop city gleaming for all to see. Such were the glorified tropes I learned at school, which I saw not as tropes but as truth. I saw an American benevolence in Uncle Sam's knowing glare at the post office; heard an American abundance in the canned laugh tracks on the sitcoms I watched every night with my mother; felt an American security and strength as I pedaled my ten-speed Schwinn past split-level and two-story homes in the middle-class subdivision where I grew up. Of course, my father was a great fan of America back then. To him, there

was no greater place in the world, nowhere you could do more, have more, be more. He couldn't get enough of it: camping in the Tetons, driving through Death Valley, riding to the top of the arch in St. Louis before hopping a riverboat down to Louisiana to fish for bass in the bayou. He loved visiting the historic sites. We had framed our photos of trips to Monticello and Saratoga and to the house on Beals Street in Brookline where the Kennedy brothers were born. I recall a Saturday morning in Philadelphia when I was eight and Father scolding me for whining through a crowded tour of rooms somehow connected with the Constitution. When it was over, we took a cab to the famous steps at the museum, and he raced me to the top—letting me win!—in homage to Rocky Balboa.

Love for America and a firm belief in its supremacy—moral and otherwise—was creed in our home, one my mother knew not to challenge even if she didn't quite share it. Like both Mary's parents—as I would later learn from Mary herself—my mother never found in the various bounties of her new country anything like sufficient compensation for the loss of what she'd left behind. I don't think Mother ever felt at home here. She thought Americans materialistic and couldn't understand what was so holy about the orgy of acquisition they called Christmas. She was put off that everyone always asked where she was from and never seemed bothered that they had no idea what she was talking about when she told them. Americans were ignorant not only of geography but of history, too. And most troubling to her was what she thought connected to this disregard of important things, namely, the American denial of aging and death. This last irritation would yield a malevolent concretion over the years, a terror-inducing *bête noire* that saw her to her grave, the thought that growing old here would mean her eventual sequestering and expiration in a "home" that was nothing like one.

My mother's views—however rarely voiced—should have prepared me to understand Mary's dyspeptic take on this country, but

they didn't. Not even my Islam prepared me to see what Mary saw, not even after 9/11. I remember a letter from her in the months following that terrifying day in September that changed Muslim lives in America forever, a ten-page missive in which she encouraged me to take heart, to learn what I could from the trouble ahead, confiding that her struggles as a gay woman in this country—the sense of siege, the unceasing assaults on her quest for wholeness, the roughness of her route to autonomy and authenticity—that all these had been but fires beneath her crucible, provoking creative rage, tempering sentimentality, releasing her from hope in ideology. “Use the difficulty; make it your own” was her admonition. Difficulty had been the flint stone against which her powers of analysis were sharpened, the how and why of what she saw, but which I still wouldn't see truly with my own eyes for fifteen years to come, my deepening travails as a Muslim in this country notwithstanding. No. I wouldn't see what Mary saw until I'd been witness to the untimely decline of a generation of colleagues exhausted by the demands of jobs that never paid them enough, drowning in debt to care for children riddled with disorders that couldn't be cured; and the cousins—and the best friend from high school—who ended up in shelters or on the street, tossed out of houses they could no longer afford; and until the near-dozen suicides and overdoses of fortysomething childhood classmates in a mere space of three years; and the friends and family medicated for despair, anxiety, lack of affect, insomnia, sexual dysfunction; and the premature cancers brought on by the chemical shortcuts for everything from the food moving through our irritable bowels to the lotions applied to our sun-poisoned skins. I wouldn't see it until our private lives had consumed the public space, then been codified, foreclosed, and put up for auction; until the devices that enslave our minds had filled us with the toxic flotsam of a culture no longer worthy of the name; until the bright pliancy of human sentience—attention itself—had

become the world's most prized commodity, the very movements of our minds transformed into streams of unceasing revenue for someone, somewhere. I wouldn't see it clearly until the American Self had fully mastered the plunder, idealized and legislated the splitting of the spoils, and brought to near completion the wholesale pillage not only of the so-called colony—how provincial a locution *that* seems now!—but also of the very world itself. In short, I wouldn't see what she saw back then until I'd failed at trying to see it otherwise, until I'd ceased believing in the lie of my own redemption, until the suffering of others aroused in me a starker, clearer cry than any anthem to my own longing. I read Whitman first with Mary. I adored him. The green leaves and dry leaves, the spears of summer grass, the side-curved head ever avid for what came next. My tongue, too, is homegrown—every atom of this blood formed of this soil, this air. But these multitudes will not be my own. And these will be no songs of celebration.

A Chronology of the Events

- 1964–68 My parents meet in Lahore, Pakistan; marry;
immigrate to the United States
- 1972 I am born on Staten Island
- 1976 We move to Wisconsin
- 1979 Iran hostage crisis; Mother's first bout with cancer
(with recurrences in '86, '99, and 2010)
- 1982 Father's first attempt at private practice
- 1991 Father's private practice folds; he declares bankruptcy,
returns to academic medicine
- 1993 Father first meets Donald Trump
- 1994 Dinner with Aunt Asma; reading Rushdie
- 1997 Father's final encounter with Trump
- 1998 Latif Awan killed in Pakistan
- 2001 The attacks of September 11
- 2008 Family trip to Abbottabad, Pakistan
- 2009 Car breaks down in Scranton
- 2011 Bin Laden killed
- 2012 First opening of a play in New York City; meet Riaz
Rind; Christine Langford and her unborn child die
- 2013 Awarded Pulitzer Prize for Drama
- 2014 Join the board of the Riaz Rind Foundation; meet Asha

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE EVENTS

- 2015 Diagnosed with syphilis; Mother dies; Trump declares his candidacy
- 2016 Trump elected
- 2017 Sell my shares in Timur Capital; *Merchant of Debt* opens in Chicago; Father tried for malpractice
- 2018 I begin to write these pages

Family Politics