

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Hunting flowers: home and its poetic deceits¹ Susan Bradley-Smith

i

Leaving a town
It is important to go
In the early morning

Pre-dawn light
Touches the harbour
Between the houses...

It is all and alone his
Who shoulders his bag
And turns towards the bus-station...

from 'Two Silences', Rosemary Dobson

The knowledge of the harbour of still light between the houses, the homes, the places we have left, has its own haunting constancy, and perhaps this grief of leaving is best rendered in poetry. Rosemary Dobson's 'Two Silences'² lends us an image of stealthy and poetic leave-taking, and presents the person leaving home as best doing so in the silence of pre-dawn – as if there is no other proper way. It is the landscape, ultimately, that witnesses the leaving of home, and it is the memory of such landscape that makes us ache when recalling home. Geography owns us, but we too often deceive it. If we believe that we come from 'country', is leaving a denial, a betrayal? Is it possible that the costs of such infidelity might be higher for women?

When I went to my first big 'bus station' – Kingsford Smith International Airport, Sydney – I could not hear the words of farewell and love being spoken to me, so full was my head with the sounds that I believed I would never hear again: high tide at Bronte beach, baby magpies, the gears of the 378 bus struggling to cope with MacPherson Street, climbing up from the Tasman Sea, 'the ditch' between Australia and New Zealand, to Bondi Junction. 'The worst farewells, strangely enough, were to places, rather than to people.'³ It was 1985. I had a degree in History, a one-way-ticket to London, no backpack, but a suitcase full (stupidly) of Australian beer, T-shirts from independent Sydney rock bands to give away, and my collection of Patrick White novels. All a girl needs. I was sitting there, the first in our family to have ever travelled to Europe unless you counted men going to war, sipping champagne with my grandmother. Wishing myself away. I knew I would write to her, but it was her place, our place, the landscape that owned us that I would most miss.

¹ I would like to thank my referees for their invaluable comments, which greatly improved my thinking and I hope writing on this subject.

² Rosemary Dobson, *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Modern Poets, 1991) 204.

³ Mollie Panter-Downes, 'The Exiles' [1947] in *Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes* (London: Persephone, 2002) 17.

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

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the poetic lie of place: a memoir to all your conceits

Moulamein. Bega. Cobargo. Bermagui. Grenfell. Coffs Harbour. Lismore. Sydney. Ballina. London. Pforzheim. Munich. Berlin. Sydney. London. Sydney. Lennox Head. London. Edinburgh. London. Lennox Head. Melbourne. Inverloch. Melbourne. London London London where are you? The whole world wants a seachange, (or 'seashortchange' as my mate Larry calls it), and I want to go back to Hackney. Hackney marshes, which they filled in with bricks once flung all over London from the bombings during the second world war. Hackney, whose Homerton Hospital where two of my children were born is the only hospital in the UK to house a police station; so numerous are the knife wound victims. Gun mile Hackney. Desiring place, needing home, that home. Mad, clearly.

SCENE: A LUNCH DATE UPSTAIRS ON THE BALCONY OF A HIP RESTAURANT, OVERLOOKING THE PACIFIC OCEAN

CHARACTERS: AN AUNT/MOTHER, A DAUGHTER, A NIECE

SETTING: BYRON BAY (AUSTRALIAN SEACHANGE COSMOPOLIS), LAST YEAR, LATE SPRING

NIECE: Aunt, why do you move so much?

AUNT: Because it's fun, sweetheart.

NIECE: But we've run out of space for you in our address book. I think we need to buy a special one just for you.

AUNT: What a sensible idea. What shall we order girls?

NIECE: But surely it must be unsettling.

AUNT: Hmm. I like the sound of this spicy vegetarian meatball thing. There's unsettling and there's unsettling. Who put this notion into your head missy? Do I look unsettled to you?

Aunt pulls a silly face. Niece laughs. Daughter rolls her eyes.

NIECE: Well. Not you maybe. But, like. I've only been to one school and. Well.

DAUGHTER: And I've been to nine. And I'm 10 years old. Can we go surfing after lunch mummy?

AUNT: Good idea.

NIECE: I never know where to send your Christmas presents.

DAUGHTER: We live in Melbourne. Duh. [*pause*] You can't go surfing in Melbourne.

NIECE: Or London.

AUNT: Well. You'll never never know if you never never go.

DAUGHTER: Mum. Shut up. Please?

Niece and niece's cousin, Daughter, are friends again. Aunt looks longingly at the wine list. Then wistfully at her watch. The day resumes. Sound of surf. Fade out.

My dad was a policeman. In NSW, like teachers, policemen have to go to where they're sent. Part of being promoted means moving to another station. We moved a lot. Me, I really liked this, although I do recall a rough patch following one move where I thought it might be a good idea to only eat food that I also liked to rub on my face. This was my young vegetarian-self emerging, no doubt, but mostly it involved eating a lot of 'face-mask-qualifying' foods. I don't want to pretend it was all easy, but I am genuinely grateful for the diversity of experience in my early life, and for feeling that I really know country Australia like I never otherwise would. It has probably allowed me whatever sensibilities I do possess as a writer.

However, it is received knowledge in psychoanalytical theory that frequent moving in childhood can contribute to adult malaise, ranging from melancholia to depression, and beyond. I'm not so sure a psychiatrist would agree that my early life acquisitions of 'sensibilities' and poetic relationships to landscape were worth it. For my brother, I think he was not so fond of change, and our frequent moving. He has certainly lived his adult life in a more steadfast way, and would never drag his kids all over the shop, like I have. I suppose there's nothing for it but to work harder to save up enough money for their future therapies. In the meantime, I live in Melbourne, feeling lost in my own country. I am raising my children as Victorians – if you do not think this is an act of migration, please try singing all of the Australian Football League songs, team after team, at 'Footy Day' next year at our local primary school.

What happens to people when they feel themselves to be away from their own idea of what home is? I believe your poetic genetic sensibilities mutate in a way that Darwin would understand, would classify. One day you find yourself in the wrong end of London Town and everywhere you look, from rotting Victorian mansions to the River Lea struggling to find its own clean pulse, it feels like home. The Australian bush, the pull of the Pacific Ocean, that light that can fry eggs, it all disappears from touch, sinks into lost memory. You realise that adoration and reverence had never had very much to do with your scrutiny of Australia. A policeman's daughter growing up in scrappy outback towns gets to see a lot of ugly things in uncensored places, after all.

Peter Porter's 'Duetting With Dorothea' nails this feeling, that of not being in Wordsworthian concordance with place. Dorothea Mackellar's poem 'My Country' was an anthemic experience for most school children, chanting our love for our 'wide brown land', our 'sunburnt country'. As a child, I missed the poem's insistence that we could never properly love another land like we loved Australia, but Porter explains the terror that lurked beneath the surface for all of those who failed Mackellar's eco-poetic breath test.

But Dorothea's Country
Did not seem mine when I
First looked out of the window
With costive childhood eye.
Instead I saw a landscape
Lit up by inner doubt
And scarred by self-attrition,
Not Barcoo Rot or drought.⁴

So what happens when force of circumstances return you to the place of sunken memories? One day my youngest daughter Scarlet nearly died. I could not think, while she was in a coma, where on earth I would bury her in London. Shortly after her recovery, and diagnosis involving a lifelong condition, and the birth of her younger brother and his diagnosis with the same condition, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome, and postnatal depression. One of us had to stop working to care for our child, and paying a London mortgage on one wage was, for us, not possible. So, our family 'emigrated' back to one of my childhood haunts, Lennox Head, where my family lived, to raise the children in 'paradise'. To be free of London and all its ambulances with their blue light serenades. To be certain of the site of graveyards. I could find no poetry to underwrite this decision. All I had was a job offer at the local university, where, 25 years earlier, I had turned down a bonded teaching scholarship and ran away to Sydney. To agree with Porter's sentiments became an irrelevancy. Or so I thought. Something was lit up by inner doubt, but it was not the landscape.

On anomie and aporia and other explanations for the impossible

It was the French sociologist Emile Durkheim who introduced the concept of anomie, using it to describe a condition of deregulation in society, as he saw it. He suggested that when the rules of behaviour broke down in society, then people no longer knew what they could expect from each other. He called this kind of confusion normlessness, and argued that it leads to deviant behaviour, either in the real or moral worlds. Criminality. Suicide. He was pretty concerned with the effects of social change, was Durkheim. As soon as social bonds cease to exist, life becomes impersonal, and therein the trouble begins. Is it true that we can't find our proper place in society without clear rules to guide us? Is it true that changing conditions and life adjustments leads to conflict? Durkheim surely argued that sudden change causes a state of anomie.

What else can one do when one feels like this, lost, unregulated, misplaced, except move again? Personal unrest is a curse; it is alienating and makes you feel uncertain about all decisions. This in turn erodes, for me at least, a sense of purpose that may have been fragile in the first place. If anomie can be thought to mean the state of being unable to find a psychological home in one's own society, then it is also responsible for its eternal re-creation. Who stays anywhere they don't feel at home? Well. I am. I do. Now. Maybe. But that is not the only experience of the impossible that funds transgressive change.

So much of my writing contradicts itself. I begin writing a love poem, only to find myself divorced by the end of it. Then making my husband breakfast in bed. He still likes my

⁴ Peter Porter, 'Duetting With Dorothea', from *Max is Missing* (London: Picador, 2001) 668-70.

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

coffee, and me, I think, even though I write horrid poems about us. Is poetry trustworthy? Aporia is a Greek word that once meant a kind of puzzle but when philosophers use it, it means something more akin to a paradox. Or, more, an *impasse*. Derrida was fond of discussing aporias, as his fans well know. He wrote a lot about how aporias and their paradoxes affects our notions of mourning, of giving, of hospitality. And of forgiving. Aporias have a logic to them, but not necessarily solutions. Derrida suggests, for example, that gifts are never really gifts, as they demand in their giving a reciprocation, even if it is only a humble thank you. And on hospitality – how can that be genuine when to be a host means to be a master means to control your guests and if control is relinquished then so too is mastery, and if that is abandoned then you lose your home and can't be hospitable in the first place? On forgiveness, genuine forgiveness involves the impossible, that is, that we forgive the 'unforgivable'.

There's just no hope in some scenarios, is there, if you let Derridean logic castrate you. I'm convinced by these arguments, but what does one do with such information? As a poet, I can feel the intuitive fertility of embracing experiences of the impossible. Unfortunately, this poetic self likes to go walkabout. When I most need her, she is not there, and I am left to deal with my unanchored self, all alone. The paradox has got real claws. For all those who argue that poetry is therapy, my suggestion is to pay closer attention to the joy of pegging out washing with sprightly coloured pegs and remember that writing is wretchedly hard. Poems take years, in my case, their drafts are like entrails into deep history. Throughout the long writing of each poem, I have usually conducted a hundred or so dinner parties, mastered my guests, suffocated them with unforgivable hospitalities, and finally dragooned them into my own special stupor of aporia with a javelin made of candy. We all come back for more, especially if you unfailingly serve up something cooked with artful attention. Derrida is wrong about hospitality, particularly so for those of with no true home to lose in the first place. We just receive guests differently, us hosts from nowhere, and the puzzle of this can always be solved with the writing of a poem, if need be.

Do not waste this, your second chance

Dingoes on the beach: this is not what we came here for
But you drive in that Stradbroke direction, to collect her
Beware the new roads, drive safe, do not forget the law
And I will forgive your slap mother, if you love her back, my daughter.

But you drive in that Stradbroke direction, to collect her
Sea snake you, highly poisonous – water is sometimes dew
And I will forgive your slap, mother, if you love her back, my daughter
3000 snake bites a year in this country and none of them find you.

Sea snake you, highly poisonous – water is sometimes dew
Do you remember those redback spider bites? Corrugated iron hope
3000 snake bites a year in this country and none of them find you
Mop the spill of us up, before the away side wins, before we find rope.

Do you remember those redback spider bites? Corrugated iron hope
Are you there yet? Kiss her. Tell her she is loved. Pretty promise

Mop the spill of us up, before the away side wins, before we find rope
What use are legs when we float in jam? Quicksand tides, bliss.

To survive all those drunken years better, why not just kill him?
Beware the new roads, drive safe, do not forget the law
The policeman will always be there, so hold love, its shiny pin –
Dingoes on the beach: this is not what we came here for.

Friends and their poetic impulses: everyone has something to say

Aporias. Anomie. Scarlet nearly died, and shortly afterwards, after one move too far, one too many, I too fell down, suffering a kind of nervous exhaustion that left me unable to fully care for three children, two under two-years-old who were both suffering from a debilitating genetic disorder. Does any one else find it incredibly hard to choose a home, and in truth to trust the decisions we make on their children's behalf? We had chosen Australia, for their better health, but secretly I had no confidence in the sunshine – the power of place – to outweigh the displacement I felt from my own Australian people, whom to my shame I felt entirely apart from. It may have been all those automatic double garage doors in contemporary seaside suburbia, and their ability to vacuum away congeniality.

What does an alien know about paradise and how to live there? Peter Carey had one of his characters in *Theft* say 'A nation that begins without a bourgeoisie does face certain disadvantages, none of them overcome by setting up a concentration camp to get things started'. That may have been then, but the (fictional?) now is also questionable: 'By now of course Sydney is so bloody enlightened it is impossible to board a train without being forced into overhearing arguments about Vasari conducted by people on mobile phones'.⁵ I'm not sure about how 'enlightened' Australia really is, but here I am, here we are, facing all advantages and disadvantages for the greater good. Disembodied. Uncitizenized. The rest of the world envying us our luck – or?

MAY, 2006, LENNOX HEAD

Dear girlfriend,

Thanks for the pictures of your bubbies! They really are their own little people now. Seeing them makes me want to jump on a plane right away and come over and cuddle them. A coffee with you would also be nice. Some quick news, sorry, I have to go teach: we have accepted an offer on Glyn Rd, so goodbye London home. You know where my heart is, and what an ache this causes. But but but. The children are thriving and happy. James has just been offered a job, and we both feel safe enough about the kids' health to consider leaving them in childcare, if we can find the right person. Hunter is really a little English gentleman. He is the only longhaired, blonde surfer boy in Lennox who shakes hands with everyone and says 'How do you do?' and kisses ladies hands and says 'Enchanted'. As you can see, James has been doing an excellent job while I've been at work teaching people how to write love poems about rainforests. God. Don't ask. Ulrike is surfing mad, and certainly looks the part. Scarlet is going to school in January, can you believe that? James is of course her favourite

⁵ Peter Carey, *Theft* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

person in the world, having taken care of them for the last three years while I ran away to work and cried. Basket case. Great having the family around though. Our neighbours are truly atrocious, I don't know what has happened to this country, everyone is so greedy. They yell over the fence at us to shut up in the swimming pool! I think they just hate the pommy accents. Have to go, have to go, sorry. Write and tell me everything.

Lots of love

S

THE SAME DAY, LONDON

Darling S, my dear friend

I have just had a chance to read your email properly and have a few baby free moments to reply, who knows maybe longer ... all of the babies in bed asleep! How absolutely fabulous that you've sold your house, hooray! I'm sure it feels like you're you're cutting some ties but everything you've written adds up, the children, James's job the life you've made for yourselves. What do I think? I think that it's nearly June here in London, it's perishingly cold, grey and miserable and we've had to turn the heating back on. I think that several times a day, by the time I've put on the children's wellingtons and coat, it's started raining too hard for us to go out and I have to try to explain again why we can't go to the park. I think that without the money to enjoy the cultural richness of London and without the long sunny days to enjoy the only things that are free, without the means to afford good schooling or the space and quality of air to allow your children's health to thrive, that it'd be a high price to pay for academic stimulation and the occasional company of some dear friends. That said obviously I would far rather you were just down the road available for coffee and cuddles but that would be selfish. It may seem hard sweetheart to be so far away from what you think you're missing but it's also easy to think that things would be better somewhere else. Perhaps you could view this as an experiment, stay still for a little while longer, feel the stillness, embrace the stability, nurture your body, your children's freedom, see how it feels ... London will always be here and you are not defined by your surroundings, merely living in them, benefiting from them. That's what I think for what it's worth ... I can hear someone crying upstairs. I love and miss you all and long to see you. But more than all that, I wish you some peace. Kiss all your beautiful family for me.

Huge love,

Bxxx

People have always got a lot to say to me about how lucky I am to live in Australia, and how they view my restlessness here as bad mannered. I have shed-loads of emails and letters telling me how privileged I am to live in Australia. But, these people don't even begin to know the grief of reconciliation, for example, and the sense of trespass that is your constant companion – mine, at least – as a whitefella here. An Australian poet of some half a century's residence in London, someone who does understand, wrote me a postcard last year reminding me that when Melbourne turns to dust I can always come 'home'. Some people get it, some people don't.

Unfaithful fidelities: place traps, happy memories

I might be here, in Australia, but where is my head? London. How embarrassing. Obsession, aporia, whatever, it can't be good for your health. I'm thinking that maybe if I moved to New Zealand I might start writing love letters to Melbourne.

Tomorrow, we're being visited by some family, down from Sydney. When I was still in primary school, I used to go to the beach with this cousin, along with his big brother, and my little brother. Being the eldest cousin, I was in charge. I think in reality this meant I was in charge of the sandwiches, as my boy cousins were the locals at this inner-city Sydney beach. We meandered our way down the hill from Henrietta Street, across a few, lazy, 1970s streets, finally making our way through the gully with its sub-tropical overhangs, to Bronte Beach.

'Although no middens or carvings, such as those at Bondi and Tamarama, have yet been found at Bronte, Aboriginal people were well established throughout Waverley before European arrival. There may be sites of Aboriginal significance in Bronte Gully, including those used for axe-grinding and engraving purposes.'⁶ We knew nothing, as kids. Nothing except that we were white, (did we even know that?), and that migrants who loved to picnic in the gully, they didn't speak English. And we could swim better. And as far as Surf Life Saving Clubs go, Bronte Beach's was the oldest in the world. These things we knew.

Once we hit the sand that was it. God knows what we did, but we did it all day long, until starvation drove us home again, back up the hill to Mardie and Pop, our grandparents. Fish and chips from the shops up the road in Charing Cross, on mint green and dusty pink and powder yellow plates, sitting in the front garden, the salt already deep in our blood from all day in the ocean, and on our vinegared tongues forever. Our skin was tight, our noses peeling paper. We were as happy as rainbows in a mad summer storm.

Bronte Beach is a sacred place for many. Pop, my grandfather was a Bronte Splasher. To own of those gold towels with the royal blue splashes' insignia is a grand thing. Bronte has a sea pool, with lanes and diving platforms. That pool, it has seen some things. At low tide you can lap and lap. At high tide you can wait for the unforgiving waves to break over the rocks, and scream yourself wild as you let the ocean make you jump with it back into the unimaginable container of a pool, looking like an enormous Tupperware of promise, toying with you. Are the edges hard or soft? You go under. You hit the chalking bottom, and can't see through the churn of foam, but the suck and drag of the drama is gone before you surface. You get up, your seaweed-lead arms manage another poolside return, and you stand there looking out at the Tasman Sea. Where are you? Here I am, it always says, just as you turn your back. The set repeats itself, tide in and tide out. It could be lunchtime, hours past, before you remember the boys. Or the surf proper. Or the lifeguards, and their whistles, and their Nazi concerns, way down the other end of the beach. It was, despite no adult supervision and the skin cancers that are forever surfacing in middle age, a safe, charmed, place.

I know people die at the beach. Sadly, I have seen this at Lennox Head. Two elderly British holidaymakers, they walked into the rip hand in hand, it was such a perfect day to die. And I've witnessed dozens of rescues over the years. My brother was recently on the scene at a shark attack. Surfers have never been the closest of friends with lifesavers, or shared the same moral codes, but may god bless Australian lifesavers. And now my children, religiously, on summer Sundays, know that their church is Nippers – the little people's

⁶ <http://www.waverley.nsw.gov.au/library/localstudies/historical/brontepark.htm>

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

version of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia. It is, admittedly, paramilitary in nature. Sometimes it just doesn't pay to mess with the power of suburbia.

Before I'd ever give up on life, I'd set myself up as writer-in-residence with little sign, in Bronte Park, 'Writer willing to convert your Bronte stories into a book of Common Love'. Writing up all these prayers, these poems, would require a committed schedule of reincarnation. So to lay any special claim to the place would be mad, but by god I remain mad about Bronte. Like London, whenever I return, there are places I simply cannot tread for fear of spontaneous combustion.

On the day that my eldest daughter Ulrike was born, I went swimming in the pool at Bronte. I had convinced myself that dedicated lap swimming would make the birth easier. My, how we fool ourselves, but I nevertheless had a lovely time with all the old biddies, the only other fools at the beach in late winter. A few days earlier, swimming, I had seen an octopus at the bottom of the pool. What if it lurched up and wrapped itself around my belly? I was huge, two weeks overdue. My last swim felt like communion – would I ever be able to chant to you like this again after you were born, this long hum of love, I wondered to my daughter? Would the opera of bubbles I blew for you hours before you were born be my last? I was booked in that afternoon for an induction, and induced you were. And tomorrow, the Sydney family who had surrounded you with love when you were born, who lived in Bronte, where we had moved from golden childhood to the honeycombed life of young adults at university, they were coming to Melbourne. May they own decent overcoats. No swimming outside in August in Melbourne. Ulrike and I went surfing last winter, our first down south, in respectable 'steamer' wetsuits, mind you, and it was the first time we had seen ourselves turn purple. It took a few days to find our pink selves again.

I was a child at Bronte. I lived a magical part of my adult life there too. I wrote my first book there, in a sun-flooded flat across from the beach. I remember myself then: and tomorrow, my Bronte cousin will arrive at our busy road in our shabby Melbourne suburb in a Government car. He is a politician now, not much time for surfing these days. He and his family will be treated like royalty tomorrow, we are bereft of family down here at the bottom of a big island that one former prime minister called the arse-end of the world. Even ruder, Ava Gardner, starring in the movie of Nevil Shute's dystopian novel, *On the Beach*, which was being filmed in Melbourne in 1959, famously said that there was no better place on earth to shoot a film about the end of the world. Well, you can take the girl out of Sydney, but ... sorry, Melbourne. I will be upbeat about you, tomorrow, when they come. Please stop your raining.

Alain De Botton argues in *The Architecture of Happiness* that we are different people in different places. He says that architecture itself can 'render vivid to us who we might ideally be' and that 'to speak of home in relation to a building is simply to recognise its harmony with our own prized internal song'.⁷ If it is true that we need home in a psychological sense because of our everlasting vulnerabilities, then we are all involved in the emotional purchase of place. We choose home, we choose to love it, because in such a manner we affirm our identity.

Once, I was on the 378 bus from Bronte, where it began, quite early in the morning. Even the seagulls were quiet. Not like my travelling companion, a little old Jewish lady, who lived in the same block of flats as me, and had numbers tattooed on arm. She was fond of my German husband, and approved of his motorbike ways, and us, and our marriage. We used to

⁷ Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006) 107.

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

sit together, rocking and rolling up the hill towards the city proper. *Do you like Sydney my dear? Do you miss Europe? It isn't what it was when I was a girl, no. No. Well, of course it doesn't matter where you live. You know that. So long as you are with the one you love. That is all that matters. All that matters.* She had absolutely glorious hair, that lovely lady. She had a convincing style. I never asked where she was travelling to so early in the morning. But I have asked myself if she was right – is it people to whom we owe our greatest fidelities?

On the lack of grace and the problem of it being an essential ingredient for ecopoetic sensibility

Regret. Oh London, how I loved you. I will always be your slut. Sorry. Sorry to all my friends who write to me moaning of having to walk the children to school with their umbrellas being blown inside out. Sorry about having to turn the central heating on in the middle of summer. Sorry that your petrol is frightfully expensive. Sorry. Did you know it snowed in Victoria last Christmas? Sorry.

I have a habit of writing poems of apology to all the places I have loved, and left. I am so routinely unfaithful. Being in the right place can improve us, morally and spiritually. My resolve to be better, to be well, to 'identify' home soars as I age. Travel, and all the shedding and loss involved, has less appeal than ever. I have an even more unsavoury habit of writing poems about places I live that I am still developing a firm relationship with (the quest for love). Such much of life reeks of that arranged marriage.

'Someone else's cool': prose poem for Amy

If you take this job, one day you'll be standing on the corner of Plenty Road waiting for the 86 tram at an intersection to kill all intersections, and you'll spy, waiting for the lights, first in line, a plumber, 'Joe the Plumber', in his fluorescent green ute, and sitting placidly next to him, moronic with boredom, is his sad daughter. She has end-of-the-day pigtails and a grubby-collared high school uniform and, really, could do with some braces, bless her. *Why don't you just move to Byron Bay and be done with it?* you will think, *If I was a plumber that's what I'd do. Fix shit and surf.* You will think this, you stupid woman, you who can't even afford a car HOW CAN THE STUDENTS AFFORD SO MUCH PETROL? hence the tram, and the wait, and you standing there thinking this despite the fact that you know, you know, that all the teenagers in Byron Bay wish they were in Sydney (note: not Melbourne) or New York, anywhere but this suburban dustball on a late sunsplit afternoon. The pollution. The pollution. You will stand there, listening to Primal Scream on your cold pink iPod remembering seeing them last time, in Brighton, and forgetting that you once decided to write a book about a deranged Gillespie groupie and the worship of all things primordial, all the time praying that this green-uted life will not be your daughter's. That she will be saved such intersections. You will stand there twisting in the heat and choking on everybody's urgent exiting, suddenly knowing that leaving Stoke Newington Church Street N16 London and St Mary's Church of England infants school where she was the only white girl in her class was the dumbest-arsed thing you ever did. To never again sit across from the school in Café Vortex, chowing down to an egg and bacon sandwich and the hum of your girlfriends also fresh from the school run, their sweet talk like birdsong in a crystal vase, in between

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

10

Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

breastfeeding and smiling at the singer from Cornershop who is smoking and drinking coffee and writing lyrics and laughing with his mate, to never again be so close to your own shimmer, your true quickening, is irredeemable sin. Or, it would be. If you take this job, that is. But, there is this, also, to consider, that she may never know the lonely lusting for honeyed Hackney evenings and the quicksand pull of long summers in fifty foot gardens full of French wine and London's naughtiest, your daughter, she may never credit it: all such loss is someone else's cool. She may after all prefer Berlin.

Why so close to all this traffic?

In the mirror atop the hall table, in that crevice between frame and glass, there is a birthday invitation lodged, alongside a bill for the piano lessons, and, on top of them all, an old postcard from Geales, the fish restaurant in London's Notting Hill. It seems I have married into that family, Geale being my mother-in-law's family name. It has recently changed hands, again, that fine fishy bistro. It hasn't seen a Geale running the place in years. The houses around it are painted in pastels. The restaurant is in a suntrapped street in a magical part of the city. It serves many fine seafood dishes, but fish and chips is their business; so if their fish and chips is not among the best in town then they don't deserve their business. They do. When will it cease to be part of our pilgrimage, the lunch at Geales, whenever we hit London town? Stories can never be untold, but should it be necessary to forever behold? *You can't put your arms around a memory*, as Johnny Thunders said best.

Ten thousand dollars

I wept. It was the
cheque that did it,
fluttering to the floor
like a petal from the past,
coming through time from
history, to heal. The card said,
'It was what we always
wanted to give you', and I
wept some more, sunk on the
floor. I recalled her corned beef,
and Saturday fish and chips
from the Chinese chippy
in Charing Cross, and pastel
plates, and knowing which
pub the Bookie drank in and
how to find pop and dad, and
what to wear to church, and
how to catch the 378 all the
way to Circular Quay, and
back to Bronte again, before
being missed, just for fun.
And now she's alone, playing
piano to the also dying, in

that peopled home for the old,
daily dens for cheque-writing
redeemers. 'What do you want
to do with it?' He picked it up,
looking at it for truth, that English
gentlemanly abandoner of children,
blackrunning his way through
slippery colonial slopes. Kisser of
dying grandmothers, both. 'Go Home',
I said. 'Let's go Home'.

I have never been back to Glyn Road, E5, despite years of tenancy that needed inspecting, and being in London as often as seven or more times in three or less years. In future, I plan to make similarly ripe, decent decisions. First though, whilst hunting wisdom down, it seems I have to spend more words retracing life than I ever did hours living it in the first place.

They do very good fish and chips in Port Melbourne. By the way.

Codas big and small

NOVEMBER 2005, LONDON

Dear Diary

It has to be one of the most belligerent Novembers on record. Went to Katherine Gallagher's latest poetry collection launch, *After Kandinsky*, at the Menzies Centre. Beautiful poetry, like uninvented colours. As usual, there was a mob of interesting Australians there. Enchanting reading, with music. I felt horribly lonely. Ended up in gay bar in Soho, as you do. Finished interviewing most of the writers for the book [a literary history of Australian women writers living in London] except a few, all insisting they are moving back to Australia soon. There goes another pig past the window. Convinced I don't know anything anymore. Can't wait to go home, go for a surf. I promise myself never to write a single poem about surfing. Or a research paper. About anything I love, lest it be sullied. Liar liar liar.

Back home in the subtropics, I wrote and wrote and wrote, poem after bloody poem, imagining every day I'd spent away from them, my family, and what transpired in my absence. My black absences. All of them. There were long, awful eulogies to all the streets I had lived in, and to that special shade of seduction that is a November London sky at 3pm. Then came the 'relief landscapes', terribly long, boring, unpublishable poems about rocks and sand and surf and their infinite possibilities. Writing, always, anthropomorphically. Like a child with an invisible friend, if I could not write myself into the landscape, if home was always slapping me or leaving me, then I would write it a speaking part and hope that it would choose me as its friendly director. What kind of citizenship is that?

Writer and memoirist Gillian Bouras is an accomplished emigrant: Melbourne/Greece/London, that triangle always chimes. In a memoir of her mother-in-law, (a traditional Greek woman living within an oral society), Bouras explores her own displacement, as a woman writer particularly, trying to insert herself in this life as an emigrant to Greece. She reminds us that Zeus punished Aeschylus for bringing the alphabet

'Hunting Flowers: Home and its Poetic Deceits.' Susan Bradley-Smith.

12

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to mankind, 'for script imprisons, memory flows. Mere mortals should have been content with memory, but wanted more'.⁸ Exile and punishment, memory and redemption. Women as transnational citizens do not have special claim on memories. They just have special claim on us.

Global mobility for (privileged) women remains costly, no matter the benefits, as it insists on the attrition of skin, that which keeps us bound to ourselves. Documenting such attrition is the business of poetry. For women writers acting on desire, such trafficking in memories is often your only solace: not many people, from lonely, needy, aging parents to confused children to told-you-so psychiatrists, respect your decisions. As I, too, begin to waver in my steadfast respect for all these enactments of desire, I can only revisit the sites – psychologically – and hope that what memory offers is worth it. This is perhaps the last landscape of refuge for the feminist poet, that relationship with memory. It has its own special geographies, its own eco-poetic responsibilities. When Clive James remembers reaching up for his mother's hand, witnessing an Anzac parade as a child he acknowledges that he grew up in a world that these men made, and that 'To mock it would be my mistake'. He may be rendered 'barely fit to stand', but it is his mother who is holding his hand.⁹ This is a beautiful poem, but I remain, and always will, more interested in the mother holding the hand, the woman, the one whose censored spectatorship defines all desire. Punish me as much as you want, but I will still play with the alphabet, while I hold your hand.

Theory and history, where the poetics of place are concerned, can only offer limited consolations. As much as they help one to understand their place in the world, memory is sometimes a woman's better friend, no matter how haunted a country that may be. Illness, in my case, certainly did something peculiar to landscape – you are there, inhabiting it, but you are also not: '...how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed', Virginia Woolf said. She also insisted that our need for poets is paramount when contemplating life from the perspective of anyone who has done living out their embryo lives: 'We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaven-making should be attached to the office of Poet Laureate'.¹⁰ Perhaps Woolf is right, that it is so essential a task that it is best left to poets, this urgent need to know our destined 'country'. I would add that the quest to know our lost homes (our past) is similarly vital. Stendhal said that 'Love is the only passion which rewards itself in a coin of its own manufacture'.¹¹ Like love, place is also thus manufactured: subjectively, uniquely, and irrevocably distinctive for each and every one of us. The currency of memory can not, however, be exchanged, so the quest for home is a more decisive one than I ever understood. In 'Two Silences', Dobson goes on to discuss what happens when a child is born among the tribes of Lushae, where a seven day vigilance of quietness ensues: 'And the soul, little bird,/Flutters first then settles/Seven nights, seven days.'¹² Souls, ideally, arrive and depart quietly. They begin to belong to people, to 'the careful shoulder/Of the parents...' but ultimately belong to place, to 'houses/In cocoons of silence...' where people sleep. Some people stay where they are born, some people head for the bus stations, walking through shadows. The place I want to know most is trapped in the past, a past lived in real place and

⁸ Gillian Bouras, *Aphrodite and Others* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1994) 131.

⁹ Clive James, 'In Town for the March' in Peter Craven (ed) *The Best Australian Poems 2003* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2003) 13-5.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 101, 107.

¹¹ Stendhal, *Love*, trans. Gilbert & Suzanne Sale [1957] (London: Penguin, 1975) 262.

¹² Dobson 205.

time. In London. And later, at the beach, in Australia. Confined, in silence, in still light. My children were there, but I was not. One doctor called this ‘absence from home/from self’ postnatal depression. Another called it chronic adjustment disorder. I just call it poetry, on its usual hunt, for the smell of home.