FAREWELLS

Elisabeth Lopez

'Lo que envejece a un ser son las despedidas. Somos tan viejos como veces hemos tenido que decir adiós en la vida. Envejecer es alejarse de alguien o algo.'
Michel del Castillo, *Tanguy.*

'What ages a being is farewells. We are as old as the times we have had to say goodbye in life. To age is to move away from something or someone.'
Michel del Castillo, *Tanguy.*

In my shared flat in Petersham, the planes that roar low overhead on their way to Sydney airport have been immortalised in a song as 'the birds of the inner west.' The sound bothers a lot of people, but to me it means that leaving is still possible, that thousands of people do it each day.

Four months ago, I was in Madrid. It took me a long time to realise after I'd got back that I'd actually built up a life there over two and a half years. All that while of feeling transient, there was a tissue being formed of friends, relatives, favourite authors and bars, in-jokes and cultural references, slang, and a handle on the politics. When you can weigh into politicians in a new land as passionately as in the one you have left, you've settled in. You have begun to have a stake in that society. Things begin to matter.

As a migrant kid growing up in Australia, I absorbed at least some of its history and personality - which were to some extent also Britain's - as my own; it was sometimes disconcerting in Spain to realise that a civil war and dictatorship were just as much if not more a part of my makeup, via my parents' lives.

Now, these two lives, the one left behind and the one I've just come to in Sydney, hardly seem to belong to the same person. They feel like a sheet of paper ripped against the grain. It's awkward and difficult to tear against the grain, and you don't know how and where the paper will rip, but you know it won't be a clean line.

I could have stayed there for the rest of my life, and at times I did think about that. I didn't have to be anywhere, forced by poverty or exile. With choices like that, sometimes you clutch at straws that look like fate to steer through uncertainty to arrive at a decision. The timing of my stay looked a little fated, framed as it was by a funeral and a wedding.

A few months after I arrived, my 37 year old cousin Raúl died. Raúl was a tax inspector, a francophile and amateur photographer. He was my favourite cousin, with big ears and a rough voice that came out almost like a honk. He was the first to show me around the old bars of the narrow streets of Huertas, where he giggled as I tried eels for the first time. In the months after he died, one by one the places he took me to would rise up unexpectedly out of the streetscape and I would wonder about the criss-crossings of his own meanderings through the city, the places he'd made his own, the scenes of flirtations and nights out with his *pandilla*, that very Spanish institution of a lifelong gang of friends.

Raúl and his girlfriend Enma were to marry. But five years earlier, he'd had a kidney transplant. Maybe the drugs he had to take every day so that the new organ would not be rejected left his system open to the infections that started as a massive, mysterious lump on his neck and a fever that wouldn't go away. Encephalitis and meningitis, which went to his brain as he lay in a coma.

Every Friday for a few months after Raúl's death, Enma and I would have lunch at his parents' house in Aluche on the south-western outskirts of Madrid. Raúl and I had once stood on his balcony surveying a sea of orange-brick apartment blocks. I said they looked like Stalinist urban planning, and he turned to me and said, 'yeah!' with a look of surprised recognition.

Raúl's mother Pilar is my mother's eldest sister. She has a loud laugh and comes out with exactly what's on her mind. She gave me a bubblegum-pink lacy bodysuit that first Christmas after Raúl's death. She poked the press studs in the crotch to show me that I could unfasten them to *'hacer pis'* – have a wee.

That Christmas, my friend Lee came from Argentina. You could see that Pili and her husband Juan didn't know what to make of my blonde, blue-eyed Anglo Australian friend speaking a sing-song Spanish peppered with Argentine argot . Their travels have taken them between Madrid and their village, and little else. 'Juan's hiding at the moment because he's shy around your friend, she's a *mujerona*,' Pili chuckled.

I think the closest English comes to that word is 'all woman.'

When George Harrison died, she and Juan argued over where the Beatles were from. Spain, Pili said; don't be stupid, Juan argued, *Estados Unidos*. I almost felt like I was selling them snake oil when I insisted they were from England.

Pili is much shorter than her two younger sisters. Both Pili and Juan, who I tower over at five feet four, are products of the hunger that gripped Madrid after the Civil War, when people were known to eat rats and hares. The awkward stoop with which they carry themselves must also be about the loss of a son with whom they kept saying they would have willingly traded places. Raúl was cremated in a perfunctory

ceremony that left the people closest to him feeling it was all wrong. It was the first Spanish funeral I'd gone to, and I was shocked that as we tried to match the priest's brisk pace to the gravesite, there seemed to be no chance for anyone to talk about what Raúl had meant to them. Later, I summoned up the courage to ask Enma about it. Enma, Raúl's brother and his wife were dismayed by it too. They said he should have been buried in his walking boots, not a suit.

Those Fridays, Enma and I would smoke and keep Pili company, watching overblown Venezuelan soap operas about wayward priests and conniving heiresses. They taught me to play tutte with the Spanish deck, which has clubs, gold coins and cups. Pili always won at dominoes, which she played like a senator plotting the fall of Rome.

There was something comforting about those afternoons. I could never find much to talk about or ask about with the three of them – the question 'how are you?' felt redundant and inquisitorial. But those days showed that cards or a board game can generate a companionship and a feeling of closeness without the need for too many words.

They're not an introspective generation, on the whole, the generation of my parents. After Raúl's funeral, over dinner at my aunt Isabel's place, my uncles from out of town talked about building sheds and raising chickens. No one talked about Raúl. I still don't know what this silence meant, really. They wouldn't have seen Raúl for years, maybe not since he was a boy.

I have photos of Juan and Pili and most of her siblings from the summer of 2001, just before Raúl died. Rare that they should be together in the village once again, as they're scattered between Madrid, Palencia and Barcelona. My mother was over from Melbourne and we bussed together through the red earth and olive groves of La Mancha to Aldeanueva de Barbarroya for the annual fiesta. Funnily enough, the parched landscape reminds me of New South Wales, with clumps of silk-coloured grass that look like spinifex. Aldeanueva is on the Tajo river, which flows out to Portugal. It was under Muslim control for centuries. But more recent records that might have hinted at how long my family had been there were probably wiped out as archives were in so many villages and towns during the Civil War. There is a turgid history of the village that someday I will get around to reading. I do know that my grandfather Félix was a left-leaning mayor for a short while in the early 30s, then got out as the dogs of war started their growling.

The closer we got to Aldeanueva, the women who boarded the bus turned out to be women my mother had grown up with, and she was chatting excitedly like a girl. She hasn't lived there since she was 15. If you were to measure someone's

nationality by the length of time they had lived somewhere, then she's three quarters Australian.

From my aunt's house on a trickling brook, you can see the lights of the next big town, Talavera de la Reina. The blue and white pottery that lines the walls of El Escorial, the monastery and summer palace just outside Madrid is from Talavera. My mother got her first job at 15 here, as a maid. She hated it. Her father had just died and there was no question of staying at home.

In the days before disposable napkins, maids had to wash rich women's rags… details that never make it into Merchant Ivory films. She left Spain to escape the poverty and greyness of the dictatorship, which forbade kissing on the streets, and has no desire to live there again.

The village is almost empty the rest of the year. Most young people have moved to Madrid or Talavera. Very few have stayed; when they have, it doesn't seem to have done them much good. There's a distant cousin of mine, Ángel, who my cousins gleefully tried to set me up with and who didn't want to hear my protests that a blood connection was a fundamental barrier to romance . And there's a barman at one of the village's two bars who gives every female customer a business card advertising his attributes – 'gigolo, waiter, lover.' My cousins hooted with laughter when I got it after a morning of beers – 'You've waited till *now* to give it to her?!'

The sepia photos from that August don't convey the fierce blue of the sky against the whitewashed mud brick house where my mother and her brothers and sisters were born. My mum's stories are of hunger, of scoldings when one of the children found the hiding place for a meagre stash of sugar and gobbled it, and the anaemia that struck her as an adolescent and saw her whisked away to a sanatorium to be tended by nuns. A little further south, a young Gerald Brenan was chronicling the poverty in an Andalucía village where a woman prostituted herself for an egg.

When I was a small child, I looked to my surroundings in Melbourne for inspiration in imagining my mother's house. I seized on a huge Federation mansion in Brighton. That incredible disjuncture between what I imagined and what was, tells me so much about the culture gap I experienced with my parents on all sorts of things.

My mother was 15 when her father died in 1950, as old as the century. He left six mouths for my grandmother Maximiliana to feed. For years, my grandfather Félix had complained of a burning in his throat and a constant thirst. We think he may have had the same condition as Raúl. These days, he would probably have received a transplant.

In one photo, my uncle Juan is standing over a bucket of prickly pears. You're supposed to swallow the pips, but they're the size of melon seeds and I just couldn't make myself, much to my aunts and uncles' mirth. We spent a lot of time in the

concreted patio, eating, drinking and snoozing, and going to the festivities in the evening when the oppressive heat died down. Little kids ran riot. I took a photo of one little girl wearing a traditional flounced dress, the Pokemon bag slung across her shoulder striking a weird contemporary note.

A little over a month before I left Spain, my cousin José Alberto got married at the village church. His mother Isabel threw up her hands at the decision – why can't you get married in Madrid? The village women will criticise everything! Sure enough, they were sitting outside their whitewashed houses on little deck chairs watching the guests trail towards the church.

The steeple of this stone church, like so many churches and railway pylons in Spain, was a nesting place for the storks that migrate to and from North Africa. From the ground, the nest seemed as big as a bathtub. Inside, the church was aflutter with dozens of fans women had brought in to combat the heat.

I was there with a friend from Melbourne who doesn't speak a word of Spanish. As we made our way to Pili's place before the ceremony, we passed the village's two bars. They looked as grungy and butt-littered as ever. We stopped in one for a pre-lunch vermouth and a *tapa* of dubious looking chorizo on hunks of stale bread. Mr Gigolo served us. Plastic chairs were stacked in the square outside, and we looked at each other incredulous that the reception might be there.

At Pili's place, I showed my friend the wedding photos that have been hanging in the lounge room for decades. Isabel and Pili both married within the village, as José Alberto was just about to do. My uncles Ciriaco and Nazario married two sisters from Andalucía and became part of that enormous post-war migratory wave to northern Spain, escaping the poverty of the south. Ciriaco's wife Lola told me about their courtship. It lasted six years, she said, until they could 'make their house'. I realised that that is the origin of the word to marry, 'casar' – to make a home, or *casa*.

I find it extraordinary that my mother had the faith or recklessness to set out at age 24 to the other side of the world, alone and with no English. The only one of her family ever to go overseas. Her older brother Mariano didn't leave the village until he was 31.

My cousin José Alberto is 35. He moved out of home weeks before he married. His first baby is due early next year. I puzzle over the delayed adolescence of my generation, which is part economic, part cultural, but so different from what our parents experienced. Boys in particular are astonishingly mummied. My aunt Isabel once told me she had forbidden José Alberto to use the washing machine after he'd 'broken it.' He's an aeronautical engineer. He hadn't broken it – he'd simply left a tissue in the wash.

That protracted childhood and the sclerotic education system and labour market make me glad I grew up in Australia. I would never have been able to leave home at 18 had I been brought up in Spain. Our relative affluence offered a margin for a experimentation and a few mistakes in our early 20s. But that experience I think also created a gulf between me and a lot of Spaniards my age, and that was one of the reasons why I decided to come back. Some of my most formative experiences in my late teens and early 20s were in shared households. I still live in shared households now, but those times when the world seems made of infinite, untested possibilities, are irreplaceable.

So now I'm back and missing Spain terribly – carrying on like my parents' generation about how much it breaks my heart to be away. If I have an inner child, it's probably saying right now, get off it! You couldn't wait to get back. You whinged about Spain with your expat friends all the time! And you didn't want to be Spanish when you were growing up – you wanted sausage rolls and pies with the best of them.

Right now, the reasons why I returned now seem minor, apart from wanting to be closer to my friends and family. I have to remind myself I missed the landscape the way you miss a person. Sometimes I would walk through the Retiro, Madrid's central park, and jump to try and pull a leaf off one of the few eucalyptuses that are pruned to look like neat European trees, obviously by hands with no feel for the anarchic, wild beauty and individuality of a bush gum. I also missed people engaging in strange hobbies in back sheds, warm kitchens to chat in and have a cup of tea, and to be able to express myself without my command of the language being an obstacle. I missed the conversations with Australians. And I missed Australian men.

In the leadup to leaving I felt only a small twinge when I visited favourite haunts for the last time and said goodbye to people. I had a job to come back to and it seemed life would be a rolling red carpet of one sunny new place after another. But as soon as I landed, I thought, what am I doing here? The feeling of being wrenched was far worse than anything I'd experienced when I left Australia for Spain. There, I kept thinking I'd had such a soft landing, and waited for a crash that never really came. Here, I expected a soft landing and instead got a crash.

I'm told it's reverse culture shock. Someone kind said jet lag for long-term travellers is allowed to last six months. Then other people say that it takes as long as your time away to settle back in. Which is not a very appealing thought right now. And I don't know that I ever felt fully at home in Australia.

When you're bridging experiences of two disparate countries, the process of making sense of this can seem like indulgence in rank generalisations . It seems to me that as a frontier, immigrant society, Australia has been a place where people have

had to invent their own traditions, make their own way in the world and negotiate others without the benefit of a universal social code. Rather than a melting pot,. I think it's a flux that has made us ripe for new, progressive social movements,. People reinventing themselves, tossing out redundant or harmful ways of behaving and seeing the world. There is an independence of spirit. Here, a 35-year-old man who had never left home would probably be gently advised to see a shrink.

But the negatives are, I think, alienation, an overemphasis on privacy, a grasping at fads, and an extremely competitive culture. Our American-style urban planning allows us a little Eden in our backyards, at the expense of life on the streets and a lot of the casual social interaction I took for granted in Spain. Walking around Petersham during the day, I wonder where all the people are. There is no one in the front yards playing cards, watching the world go by. You don't walk out your front door to socialise … you step out to go somewhere. It's very linear. The way you buy train tickets in Sydney says it all: you pay for travel between two stations. Make a spontaneous decision to get off somewhere else, and your ticket is not valid.

Part of me would like to catch the first plane back. Soar away on the wings of one of those great big birds of the inner west. But to what? It's one of those times when you don't trust your perceptions – how else to explain a total about-turn in feelings for two places, two identities? You realise that what you think of a place is so coloured by whether or not you're there, how far away you are, and how simple or difficult it might be to return.

Someone told me I probably wouldn't be happy right now wherever I was. They're probably right. And anyway, the life I had there has changed - people, jobs and places to live change, move on, disappear.

There's been a certain coming down to earth in all of this. For while globalisation makes travel and living in other places so much easier (if you have the right passport), the need for roots, to feel embedded in a culture, can make a shocking, insistent intrusion. When those roots happen to be in two places, the mix gets complicated, for better or worse. For the time being, I have had my fill of farewells.

Elisabeth Lopez was born in Melbourne and has worked as a journalist, translator and researcher.

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