

PARTS OF ME

Fleur Cornelius

Australians are wanderers; there is a restlessness I see in us as we spread ourselves away from our empty land with its pockets of cities. Possibly so many leave to seek an understanding of what we are in this globe and how we connect - perhaps we feel forgotten and lost in all our space and distance.

As a young girl in the windy town of Geraldton I thought trips to Perth were brazen cosmopolitan adventures. I remember being woken early one morning (always these trips were made in the cool morning before heat and traffic became intolerable) to travel with my sister on a school holiday excursion to visit relatives. We were travelling without parents and I had begged to be allowed to go. The thing I recall most of that first remembered journey was the feeling of being woken that morning. 'Do you still want to go?' my mother had asked, searching my face for some emotion that would keep me there safely. I know I felt scared, I know I hated leaving my warm bed as I sat up with sleepy eyes and crumpled pyjamas. But 'yes' was all I said, there was no other answer.

A prelude perhaps to future adventures, a pull to see and know more than what I had. The next journey at 17 was to the USA as an exchange student to the stunning Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. A landscape rich with green and lush with life and abundance. I arrived in rain having left sun and came to know slowly the mountains and the straits filled with salmon and the hiking trails and the people. I missed the sun though, and I missed the smells of banksias in the bush, the scrub, the huge blue sky and the jacaranda trees in flower and those hot summer evenings when the symphony of crickets and the fan's rotating 'click' lulled me to a sticky sleep. But between this tearing from home, from family and on the verge of entering a world of work and study, I grew to love this new place and those people who loved me there.

The school was I thought something transposed from an American movie. Huge, filled with jocks and cheerleaders and goths and band students - every stereotype, and you could easily pick them all. I recall being in the school bathroom before first class one morning transfixed by girls with eyeliner eyes peering through clouds of hairspray to sculpt their bangs (fringes) in a 'cool' perpendicular style that looked horrendous - they did this every morning, primping and preening themselves for the start of the day. I thought it madness. I had managed with my host sister to wake up 5 minutes before the bus arrived and in an increasingly common frantic dash we both blearily fumbled for jeans and sweaters and pelted down the road reaching

the bus breathless and laughing at our folly. I even found the yellow school buses to be amusing - surely they're not real? But they were, just like the movies.

And while I slowly came to adjust - to adore salmon when I had once never touched seafood, to devour sourdough bread when at first tasting with my host family I had unwittingly spat it out, to roll my 'r's and join the school newspaper, the jazz choir and the swim team, to hike in forests with bears, to ski or at least to get down a mountain in some capacity, to travel on ferries across the Straits to pretty Vancouver Island, to see the beauty of changing seasons in the red and gold leaves, to smile at the Halloween trick or treaters, to enjoy the Thanksgiving holiday, and to marvel at Christmas, cold and wet in front of a fire with hot spiced rum and Christmas cookies and a real Christmas tree just like the Christmas cards - I could never bring myself to understand the expressive patriotism, the American flags flying or the morning rhythm of students reciting 'The Pledge of Allegiance'. I would stand stubbornly silent listening to their voices and while I came to know the verse by heart, I was all the while thinking of home and the quieter ways we love our place.

At the end I hated leaving. After a year I was filled with a longing to see my home and family and also a dread at losing those I had become a part of and who had grown me with love and life in ways they probably will never know. I sobbed on the flight to San Francisco, blubbing to my kindly neighbour who soothed me with his own tales of travel and sad goodbyes. I listened with melancholy to a special goodbye tape they had made me, it was filled with songs that marked some stage of my life there and came with a note to remind me of all my firsts and embarrassing exchange student moments. As I flew into Perth I thought how brown and flat the earth looked and how bare it seemed, it was hot and the wind was a dry easterly - I was back in my city perched on the edges of a desert and nothingness. My homecoming was magical and lovely, but after the initial excitement and craziness of reunions my mood was unsettled. With all the ribbing my acquired accent was quickly lost - it was decidedly unAustralian to have collected such a thing. I seem to remember my first year home as very difficult, I didn't adjust well and not able to share my experience in any great detail, I constantly flirted with the idea of leaving again.

Eventually I re-learned the pace of life at home but the thought of exploration never left, there was too much more to see and after all I knew Australia, didn't I? Once finished at university I carelessly applied for a job as an *au pair* in Sweden - there were no jobs and I angrily thought that if my own country didn't want me I would go to a country that did with a hope to then travel Europe. Much to my surprise I was successful and soon flying to Stockholm for a year's contract with a wealthy Swedish couple and their 3 children. Stockholm I found to be a city of much beauty and history, very ordered and expensive. It was cold and dark in winter but

summer, if good, was gentle and pleasing and marked by bared flesh and upturned faces in homage to the sun. Stockholm was full of stylish urban sophisticates, cool in manner and with a patriotic zest and love of nature not unlike the US. The Swedes fly their flags too, in their country homes during *midsommar* when twilight lasts all night and the maypole is decorated and danced around by costumed children with coloured ribbons. Where there is *Name Day* to celebrate your own name like a mini birthday with one name reserved for every day of the year, *bullar* (cinnamon rolls), and *glugg* (spiced wine for Christmas), and potatoes served with almost every meal while pickled herrings and pig's trotters appear at a traditional Christmas table. Where you can feel the seasons change and I could tell one fine day, sitting on the porch steps watching the children in the sandpit, that spring had come. I learnt much there, but never found the warmth that had made my year in the USA so treasured.

For the first time I found myself in a culture where I could not communicate with language. It was strange to not understand conversations and this sent me whirling to find some grounding. I gradually developed other ways of gauging meaning, I became watchful of others, their expressions, their tonal inflections, their body language, I trusted my instinct and relied less on words to understand my surroundings. Of course Swedes speak perfect English, but it was when they spoke Swedish in my presence that I most wanted to know what was said and I silently reflected on immigrants and minorities during these times and wondered how they had felt in Australia and other places, trying to find a way to fit in and belong with us.

I too was a novelty there, introduced at large dinner parties held by my employers as the 'Australian' *au pair*, I felt like the flavour of the month - 'how exotic!' guests would cry and croon for five minutes before I was released to check on the children or help in the kitchen. It was difficult for me to be in such a submissive working role. It was not the generous cultural exchange that I had received in the US - I was employed to do a job and whatever illusions of cultural sharing and bonding I had seemed to disappear with the onset of a cold and dreary Swedish winter.

There were many happy moments there though, I became very close to the children and loved them dearly - it was them I dreaded leaving. I recall picking wild strawberries one perfect spring day in the pretty front garden with the littlest girl. We ambled around the patch in the soft sunshine me speaking English with an occasional Swedish word thrown in for good measure, she answering back in a gibberish not English or Swedish but entirely full of sense - I could tell by her eyes and the way she would giggle when she shared something amusing to her. We lay on the grass and watched the clouds roll by chatting as I pointed out shapes to her and her to me, both of us connecting and sharing meaning without a common language. It was quite magical.

I travelled with the family to their country house north of Sweden, to Norway, to Austria and Switzerland for skiing, and to the south of Sweden, to Torekov, for the month of summer vacation that typifies European life when the cities are deserted and the resorts are full. Swedes love their country and are known to stay for a good summer rather than travel abroad. Although not a perfect summer that year, it was passable and the month spent in Torekov where we biked and swam from rocks and boated to islands and devoured strawberries and summer fruits, was quite beautiful. I marvelled at the travel and soaked up every place for the beauty and wonder it had to offer. It was a world I had never experienced and I was grateful that I had the chance to see it.

And when Christmas came and my thoughts flew home to hot weather and cool water, I was seeking some generosity and kindness. Since acclimatising to and then anticipating the needs of my Swedish family for all those months I was low in love and warmth and in desperate need of some care and attention. Luckily it came in the most unexpected way. I spent that Christmas in Stuttgart with my dear friend Nicky and her Aunts. After the long train journey from Stockholm I arrived tired and despondent - yet it turned out to be one of the most delightful Christmas' I'd ever had.

Nicky's Croatian aunts had immigrated to Germany many years before and made Stuttgart their home. They occupied 2 tiny flats and gave one up for us to use and have privacy; they squashed together into the other and would not listen to any protests. Although their English was limited, Nicky managed to cross the divide and we spent 4 wonderful days being pampered and fed and loved by them in their tiny space. They had little, but they gave it all and the generosity was at times overwhelming. Christmas Eve dinner was roasted vegetables with sauerkraut and crepes with chocolate sauce for dessert, we could barely eat another bite at the end of it all fit to burst as we were, but they were not dampened and entreated us to more until we left for Croatian mass. I did not understand a word of the ceremony, but the rituals of the mass were comforting and the church gave me a familiar feel of home and the chance for reflection and thanks for the kindness and caring I had received.

By my year's end in Sweden I had come to love this proud and beautiful place and once again battled the tumultuous feeling of leaving what had become a part of me. For although the reality of being an employee had changed the dynamics of my relationships there, between us all grew an appreciation, caring and consideration that I was sad to see end. The children were kept in my heart and I left on good terms and without regret. I had been asked to stay but this time I was ready to move onwards and glad of the promise of what was to come.

Two memories strike me most after my departure, one was arriving in Heathrow and for the first time in many months, hearing English spoken loudly

everywhere. I was astonished at how foreign it seemed to hear it and was conscious of feeling disconcerted at understanding the snatches of irreverent conversations - I felt as though I were eavesdropping on private intimate moments and wished I could filter the words out. I had become so used to not understanding much of what was said that it took me by surprise when understanding was everywhere whether I wanted it or not. The second memory is of shopping in Perth a day after my arrival home. My brother took me to the new and much admired shopping complex that had been built in my absence - it was indeed modern and shiny, but what struck me particularly from that visit was the father barefoot, in stubbies shorts and a singlet, wandering randomly with his little ones in the mall and after that image, the thick accents and the general slow and unconcerned pace that permeated there. It was such a contrast to the style of Sweden and my head struggled to reconcile the changed images and environment within such a short space of time.

After this travel I was back in Australia determined on a path in life to establish myself and embark on amassing belongings and credentials that would get me to wherever it was that I was going. I ended up becoming involved in international education and began working with international students studying in Australia. It seemed all I had done thus far prepared me perfectly for this role and I revelled in it - in the cross-cultural exchanges, in the interesting students and cultures and life they brought to us. I could sympathise with homesickness, with language barriers, with illness and with the thousands of complications and situations that arise for people negotiating another culture. However, after nearly 6 years in this field I could feel a restlessness descend again and a need to establish once more a connection and excitement away from my country and the family I loved. My family by now were more used to this need for me to leave and puzzled less at it, but my mother did ask why I would go through the sadness of leaving again - 'you know you miss us all terribly when you leave'. I nodded, but had no answer.

This last sojourn has brought me back to the US where I work in international education for a company promoting Australian educational institutions. I was elated to come back, to re-connect with my host families and some friends made along the way, and to explore my field with a pioneering spirit - to get back to the roots of experiencing cultural exchange and dialogue. However, world events has made this time a strange one, with raging world opinions over war with Iraq and the accompanying uncertainty breeding mistrust and anger. It has been difficult to be here now and to retain some sense of who I am in this country obsessed with work and achievement and I think more than ever since 9/11, a country conservative with fear. In many ways this has been the most honest cultural experience I have had, to work in another culture gives a perspective that is not achievable by any other means.

I have thought much about being an Australian here this time and how deeply my values are aligned with the broad ideals of my country. This time, I have struggled with the novelty factor again somewhat, with the stereotypes that invariably extend globally of Australia and Australians as gregarious, friendly and harmless jokers - still seen here to be unfailing supporters of the US. I think there is little understanding of the complicated and perhaps contradictory feelings many Australians have towards this country. I have mused at my own reticence to excessive work demands and expectations and receding leisure time in this culture that I find to be in such contrast to European and even Australian values of work and leisure. And I have wobbled when faced with the confidence of these people, their need for information and understanding and the fleeting but disarming interest I hold when I am happened upon in some social circumstance.

To me, the culture here seems like boiling liquid in a jug, brimming over with ambition and individualism, demanding attention and satiation and questioning the physical limits that keep it constrained. Why can't there be more? Bigger? Better? Faster? Stronger? Its excess has no end, no patience, no caution and no time for contemplation.

Mostly though, I feel this time has been special because of the students I've helped on their way to Australia and the re-connections made with my host families from those years ago - the journey that really started it all. I spent last Christmas with them again - the Bakers - and it was as perfect a Christmas as I could have wished for. The Bakers' house is out of town a little way, set in forests and surrounded by big green fir trees and ferns with walking trails you can easily spend all day wandering through and swilling your lungs with fir tree smells. They built their house many years ago, a wooden house with high ceilings and windows with views to the forest. They have a lovely log fire that I usually make my own and a cosy living room perfect for tea and conversation. I love it when it rains there - the rain dribbles patterns down the skylights and the forest seems heavy and soaked with water. It's delightful to be by their crackling fire with a book safely watching the weather happen outside. So with the fire, the rain, the lights sparkling on that real Christmas tree, the visit from the local Santa, the hikes, the biking, the carols and most of all the love, I was welcomed like I had never left and cared for like true family. The feelings I had returning there were strange, it was different but familiar and felt like a homecoming - the feeling you have when you return to a place that is safe and holds some understanding or part of you. And so it seems, in my forays away from my loved but somewhat abandoned home, that a little part of me is left wherever I have gone and a little part of those I have known stays with me wherever I go. Perhaps that's all there is when crossing cultures.



Fleur Cornelius grew up in Geraldton and Perth, Western Australia. One of 5 children she was awarded an exchange scholarship to the USA in 1990 and spent a year in Port Angeles, Washington State. After returning to study an Arts degree in Australia, she left at its completion to work as an au pair in Sweden and then travelled Europe. More study in education led her to work with international students in Australia and she has since returned to the USA, currently working to gain further perspective on the international education industry.

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