

ECHOES OF A FORMER LIFE

Kim Clarke

The summer sunlight delicately silhouettes the leaves and shadows lightly framing the eucalypt we planted in our little London back garden. A tiny wee scrap of a thing when we bought is from a local Homebase. Now, less than a year later, firmly grasping onto the clayey English soil, it has grown into a strapping sapling, taller than I.

It seems that echoes of a former life are constantly floating towards me. A place where a wide expanse of azure sky is seemingly ever-present enabling a freer, more spontaneous existence. It's amazing the innate pleasure I get when doing some menial task, I can gaze momentarily up into that deepest of blues and almost breathe it into your soul. A romantic ideal some would say, but something the English long for and relentlessly chase. I would have to admit that I do get tired of being asked 'why are you staying, the weather here is awful' as if weather was the only thing worth living for. When I was younger I met a Scottish girl in Sydney, who sick of the constant blue eventually confessed that she longed for clouds. Was her mood and thoughts shaped by the weather? I recall watching a programme on Norway's national rain festival which was dashed by that infernal blue - so much so that they had to enlist the help of the fire brigade for a simulated shower!

Another echo visits, of a time when the sand was so thick on the top of my feet that I thought that I didn't need factor fifteen. Later that evening full of regret, nursing the swollen feet that were too painful to fit into shoes. Australia, the land of extremes. Another echo, of a time when lined up for school assembly, I watched a storm cloud advance with a sheet of solid rain like a shimmering curtain of light - where I stood, just metres away, totally devoid of rain. I wonder if any English person would understand if I said I missed the storms, or the smell of rain on the soil that has not seen rain for months. Even my semantics and turn of phrase is different - more reminiscent of an outdoors existence. My English friends and colleagues talk of pooling and I talk of floods. They talk of needing a drop of drink and I talk of having a desert like thirst. In England, we seek to build houses that encroach on the outside world - an alien concept in Australia. We built a conservatory on the back of our house in London and yet describing it on the phone to our friends in Australia -it became known as the 'observatory'.

Yet another echo, of a walk through steep Australian bush, hued with olive and blue eucalyptus oily leaves shining like fairy lights in the early evening sun.

Would the English understand if I said that I missed the dry, grey-green bush; that I tire of the lush bright green?

An echo of a large blood red harvest moon rising out of the Pacific in the East stirs in my consciousness. Sitting on the veranda of my parents' house on a long, hot evening with the smell of jasmine in the air. Even then, as a sultry teenager, I felt blessed, making a passionate promise to myself to 'remember this always'. Funny, I would never have imagined that I may not be living there when I die.

Another echo, visiting a relative with her children in her home in the Western Sydney. Floral carpet and a brown lounge with Oprah Winfrey on telly, whilst it baked outside. I am offered a cold drink with typical Aussie hospitality and yet I feel otherworldly - as if still in a jet lag or perhaps world lag. Is this so different to what I have in London's outer suburbs? We both flick through books or magazines planning the evening meal. Indeed, perhaps she is more contented than I as she has not the restlessness of being in an alien culture. I continue to ask myself, 'What did I give up?' and 'Have I made the right decision?'

I recall that my ideals were stronger, more passionate when I lived in Sydney. Young and sincere, I campaigned for the environment, human rights, aboriginal issues and the depiction of gender in the media. Devouring works by Susan Faludi and Virginia Woolf whilst actively rebelling against my parents. Forging, in my mind and heart a true identity of what I am. Passions seemingly run high in Australia. A young country, busily pulling itself up by its bootstraps. Everything seems young, energetic and frenzied - like the mates of mine that used to spend seven hours driving to attend a party.

Yet another echo. Driving up to Queensland by myself one hot December day. At 42 degrees, while bushfires raged on either side through Muswellbrook, I became parched, the car seat damp with my sweat. Stopping at a fast food outlet to beg for their largest cup of ice to see me through. Just short of Uralla, my car decided to stop. The fuel tank was still full, the temperature gauge showed that I wasn't overheating. After a short break, the car started again. However, another 10 kilometres up the road the same thing happened again. Puzzled as to what to do, a fellow traveller stopped to render some assistance. He revealed to me that the problem was due to the petrol in my fuel tank vaporising – turning to gas... Only in Australia. The only way to continue was to drive slowly to allow the cooler air to circulate around the engine or the other option would be to turn on the heater in that heat!!!

So I ask myself, how can I have been living in the UK for 5 years – how much have I absorbed of this culture? Am I a curious hybrid of Anglo-Australian culture? Visiting Australia this month I start to conceptualise this. I miss so much about

Australia, yet now, I can see it more clearly beyond the haze of homesickness that so engulfed me in the first few years. Australia, the carefree, easygoing country seems altogether very different now. Not, of course, in the obvious ways; Roy & HG are still on JJJ, the Sydney Morning Herald still has the column 8 section, the Aboriginal health issues are still the same & the harbour still one of the most gorgeous places in the world. I'm talking about a change of culture and lifestyle. Australia seems like a land now, full of people working too hard.

My friends are working so hard, it's difficult within a three-week holiday to see them. Life seems incredibly fast paced there – with work driving everything. I remember when it was a 'cushy number' to work for the government. Another echo reminds me of my first job, where Julie, one of the care managers described to me the day in the life of a care manager. First, there was the 'getting started coffee and smoko from around 9 am to 9.30 am. Then one to two home visits a day, enjoying the hospitality of the family – you may even be lucky and have freshly baked cake. Of course the tedium of the day would be punctuated with further smokos and a very long lunch break. At the time, protestant work ethic drummed firmly into my skull, I found it all difficult to cope with, managing to make a hell of a lot of work for myself despite them. Now it seems that if you work for the government, you are working a minimum of seventy hours a week, whilst being paid for thirty-five. I scan through the professional employment section of the Sydney Morning Herald and see too few jobs in my field, all of which are either part-time, temporary or both. I recall that I always had difficulties getting the right work. Either it was the perfect job, but temporary or a terrible job but permanent. Now, not even terrible but permanent jobs are available. I am shocked to see people I know and love working like dogs, driving themselves so hard, just to keep afloat. How did this happen? Yet so many people say that Australia is thriving, one of the strongest economies in the western world.

I drove through many suburbs of Sydney, formally sleepy little places with red brick houses and little green lawns with a sprinkler on. Recalling another echo, of my grandmother's house with a funny shaped block resplendent with a chook shed and cage in the sharp corner of the block. Nanna would always get upset if we made fun or teased the chooks. Then, after she and Pop started going up to Yamba every year for the great fishing expedition, she got rid of the chooks. The shed and yard looked strangely small, an inverse to the size it seemed when I was young. When they both passed away, the house was sold to developers, extended, landscaped, decked and rendered. That is rendered unrecognisable to those with memories of it. Now, it seems that every house in Sydney is being sold to developers and 'done up' to make a profit. I walk up street after street and see no red brick at all, only pale terracottas and pastels. The papers are printing stories every day about how many more property

millionaires there are in this suburb or that suburb this week. I ask myself, who can earn this much to afford these houses? Despite the fact I currently own a property in London, I don't ever think I could afford to live in Sydney. Curiously, I am shocked but lots of people seem accustomed to it – perhaps I am becoming more English after all? It seems that it's not just me who can't afford Sydney though. Walking through Centennial Park in the early morning, it's easy to see the other people who can't afford it too. Whole families living in their Holden Commodore's making breakfast on the bonnet while the kiddies unwrap themselves from their doonahs. I used to think that this sort of thing didn't happen in the 'lucky country.'

I went for a bush walk with my Dad, reminiscent of the same walk we made several years ago. A cool winter's morning in the Australian bush, smell of the leaves, the parrots screeching. We climbed a volcanic mountain overlooking beaches, the sea and a large blue-green bay. The sun shone gently on my skin as I look down on the birds fishing near the cliffs. The last time we had to stop, Dad was getting angina and I was getting worried. This time, following cardiac artery stenting, he slowly but steadily ascended. I am proud of him, hugging the breath from him when we reached the summit, trying to score the echo into my memory so that it won't fade away. The distance of everyday life makes everything seem so fragile and fleeting. Perhaps because these experiences are so few they are all the more precious? How will I feel when my parents are too old or ill to travel? It is then I continue to ask myself, 'have I made the right decision?' It was easier in some respects when Dad was younger because these choices were not there. I suppose however, a different set of equally challenging choices lay before him then and he made the best available choice at the time.

Like that little gum tree – on the surface Australian, but nourished by English soil and elements. Absorbing, osmotically the fundamental of life to become a part of the current environment. Still clinging to that clayey soil – yet growing fast and strong. Would I ever be able to go back? To grow back there? Such is the constant questioning of someone knowingly displaced – wishing, somewhat foolishly, for a life where all the perfect elements are there – all at the same time. Is it possible? I don't know, I don't think I'll ever know. All I can hope for is to be content with the choices that I make. Perhaps it is better to think of a quote from another 'knowingly displaced' person Karen Blixen 'the world is made round so we cannot see too far ahead'.



Kim Clarke was born in Sydney, Australia and is currently living in London. She has worked as a Speech & Language Therapist (Speech Pathologist) in the National Health Service since arriving in the UK in 1998. She is married to a chef who also happens to be from New Zealand. The rest of my family still live in Australia.

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