



Guest Rooms: An Expat Essay

My last visit home, I found my parents' house presided over by animals. Magpies had taken the front garden. A family of uncouth, yellow-rubber legged Indian Myna birds lived in the side of the roof out back. Wasps had a smart papery nest there too, and another one inside a bush near the clothes-line; they swooped me in the courtyard while I was having my head shaved. Daddy longlegs, those agreeable airy nothings of the arachnid world, were scattered around the guest room, up in the ceilings and by the opaque skylight. The rest of the house was strewn with their webs and all sorts of other draping cobwebs, which I took to with the broom. A possum could be heard noisily crossing the roof each night, promptly at half past twelve. From my bed in the morning, I could hear the birds—cockatoos, galahs, and maggies: erk-erk, erk-erk-erk. My brother pointed out that a lot of Australian birds have raucous and mocking calls, Australian calls. I think he's right.

There, there are no insides and outsides, only different levels of outside. Nature is a rightful guest everywhere; she has a ticket, and damn it, she'll ride. I have been away for five years, and I still check crumpled-up clothes in expectation of the huntsman spider who isn't idling there. Though more than once I've done the cowardly thing and smashed this innocent visitor with a shoe, the knowledge that, because I'm in this city, in this country, the spider certainly won't be there fills me with some sadness. I may actually miss the bastards.

Similarly, I won't wake up on a summer morning and find an army of ants in my bathtub, and journeying in file along the walls, because I'm no longer living above Melbourne's anthill of Carlton. Social life in September won't include brush-offs with brown Bogon moths, because I'm also not in Canberra. (Long gone, alas, is our original cat Stanley, who used to snack on these treats: their dust would be sprinkled on his chin, the powdered sugar from his French pastry.) In December,

there will be no noble rescues of Christmas beetles; they'll be busy being saved by other by-passers, and a second later, they'll flip their iridescent backs over again for still others. There will be no splattered berries by the driveway, dropped there by cockatoos and rosellas dining in the trees, to accidentally track around on my shoes.

It's been a while since I've seen a red-back. Anyone familiar with these spiders, with their elegant pincer legs and spotted little black bulb abdomen, will know there's no love lost there. I say this despite the fact that there were red-backs presiding over the shed where, on Australia Day one year, I camped with a girl I was falling for. Much farther back, in primary school, I recall a classmate attracting a lot of attention with an ice-cream container. He was holding it in one hand, and removed the lid with the other, at which point a number of the lethal things clambered in slow-motion time up and over the side, some of them sliding back down due to the waxy plastic. Redbacks sometimes lingered in our mailbox too. Because I have always loved letters, the creature's presence there has come to seem prescient in certain ways, foretelling webs of words, and spidery scrawls on leaves of paper.

Inside a cupboard in the guest room that summer, I found some envelopes full of pictures, nestled among old clothes. There were several of Stanley. We had always treated him as a complete individual, so it was peculiar to reflect that, as well as a fright of babysitters and a snagger of cantelopes, he must have been a Maine Coon (and so a dual citizen like ourselves). There were a few photos of my brother and me as young kids, a couple of years after moving to Australia, on a beach with some grey kangaroos. I'm making a silly grin while feeding a pouched joey; an adult stares at us, scratching himself. No reds are captured here—I remember being warned of them elsewhere, and imagining what it would feel like to be kicked or boxed about by them, without exactly wanting handling from claws like that. (Stanley's sufficed just fine, thank you.) In any case, reds usually seemed sternly indifferent to us and our white-bread offerings.

Another group of pictures has my family seated together with some close friends at a coast house in New South Wales, where we would visit some summers. Our faces are obscured by paper masks—we're fitted with moustaches, eye patches, top hats, and fezes—that make us a gallery of transparently pretend rogues and exotics. It's suitably

exaggerated attire for guests in the bush, and guests in a country, I think. That word "guest," or the Latin term for it, anyway, is the rebuke that Dido, spurned Queen of Carthage, finally throws at Aeneas when it turns out he is only passing through. Harmless as it may sound elsewhere, a more burning slight in literature is hard to find. I also think the proud beauty may have indirectly hit on something larger, relating to all kinds of travelers and transplants. The reality of such people is provisional, conjectural, questionably real. One need not be glib, I hope, and equate voluntary expatriation with serious exile, to take an interest in the peculiar divisions of such people. To be from two or more places is to be slightly abstract. Multinationals are part passport, part made of paper.

When I was a child, I had a pillow case adorned with a colorful print of jungle wildlife. Were I the graphic sort and had children to entertain, I'd draw up a new pillow-case pattern today, making room for various guests: the small range of animals I've seen in the US over the last few years, and the ones I used to encounter in Australia fairly regularly. I'd yield a bit to the normal softening tactics—the smooth lines and fluffy strokes that tame the jungle, the laws that exclude tapeworms and the like from the stuffed animal kingdom—but try to make up for it by the nature of my selection. It would be a bit of a challenge, expecting anyone to sleep in the company of the Australian animals I've been describing, let alone among apparitions of the rats and roaches here in New York. I'd throw some people in there for good measure, and the American aspect would also demand fire escapes, trains, and scaffolding. Moths sometimes do fly around in subway cars. It occurs to me that the whole thing might conceivably be resolved by a sort of curving of vision reminiscent of childhood, an astigmatism of the pen...

Here there are plenty of mice around. Despite the shrill screams of women, they're perfectly gentle and harmless—and you must murder them. The black cat is brought up from the landlord's apartment; he sniffs and promises nothing. He's a city cat, he explains with a look, those instincts were lost even to his ancestors. He's glad to have met you though; perhaps he can pencil you into his personal planner and talk about other opportunities some time; not next week or the next, but the week after that possibly? In the meantime, admirably juggling family obligations with study, the mouse bones up on the appropriate

guidebook, and learns to dine freely from the snap-trap, paws behind his back. Even with all the midnight raids, the stress of it keeps him thin. You must move on to the glue ones. What to do once he is stuck there, wriggling on his little square of purgatory, nobody can agree upon, least of all the trap manufacturers.

Rats—nobody speak of rats, lest you provoke their notice, lest that be the same as their rancor. Far easier to treat roaches, who are another matter: all right to speak of those, but be sure to call them all "water bugs." These solitary water bugs have an uncanny knack for surprise. They know how to be in precisely the right place that will maximize screams and draw out concerned tenants from their rooms, running with weaponry in hand. Popular thought stresses the antiquity of cockroaches, mistakenly, I believe, for the ploys of these creatures are typically Dada and dated twentieth-century avant-garde. Listen closely and you'll hear the captions they provide in giggling hisses to their performance pieces—"Idiot goes hysterical as I fly at his mouth." Oh, even the vermin consider themselves artists here!

To be fair, I should mention that there's no shortage of sweet-sounding, ordinary little birds. Mornings and evenings, these creatures congregate on the line outside my window, and on every side of the neighbor's fence, chattering amiably amongst themselves. But I wonder if they aren't my special preserve. More public and conspicuous are the trained pigeons, the good cheer of Myrtle Avenue, who fly in formation over the rooftops. The sun's reflected off their dirty wings, as they return in graceful stages to their crowded bird tenement. In the air they take on grace they sometimes lack on the ground, where they fossack for disgusting foodstuffs, or turn courtship circles. One feels a little embarrassed at the sight of a shy female pigeon being pursued by her grotesquely ballooning suitor.

A common view has it that pigeons are just rats with wings, and regards squirrels as little more than rats with bouffant tails. If that is true, people, possibly, are just rats with clothes and cranes and the power to make superioir garbage. If we must all be doomed to being one form of potentially germ-ridden scavenger or another, we might do worse than to be like the squirrels, who at least make good use of necessity by combining it with all sorts of spirited capering. It would be wonderful to fly in the air, but great enough to *practically* fly through it as the squirrel does. A couple traces each other around the trunk of

a tree, aping two twirling stripes on a barber's pole. They work up to the branches, then onto thinner ones, which dip comically with the pressure—can they make it?—they're so fast they're just rushing lines now. One leaps, and—voilà!—invites the other to continue the frolic in another tree in the park's canopy. The other decides it is time to get back to work, but next time, Gadget, next time. Envidable animals! Nervy souls, for sure, but what a glorious lack of ponderousness in compensation.

Some heat is necessary for life, and life—alas, someone is thinking—is essential to work. Presumably on account of deductions like these, heat is provided here, and comfortably too. Winter is spent bustling from one warm room to another, removing and putting on layers of clothing—do it so often and it becomes a kind of erotic pantomime. Coats are made with the cold in mind, with a bulk that prevents spiraling up trees. Back home there are no such coats. Or if there are, you weren't aware of them, or you couldn't find them, they were in that growing pile of stuff you overlooked. In winter you went to sleep with a sweater and a beanie on, as a gesture to the drafts of the poorly insulated house you were renting. Droughts aside, the country really should try to be more respectful of tourist bureau philosophy, and stay warm everywhere all the time.

Here, I like winter, sort of. It's cold out; the light is beautifully strong and clear. In my first winter, I would take long walks in Manhattan, going from block to block despite the temperature, waiting in anticipation of when I'd reach the horizontal streets that run the full width of the island, so as to soak there in the light. Distracted by being part of a living pattern, I'd almost forget that I was supposed to be moving. From across the Hudson, the pattern might be by a single hand; you have a child's overpowering grin, adoring a city of paper and tinsel and foil as it sparkles. The river gleams to an intoxicating degree too, if with a hint of danger in the cold beauty of its blues. You'd best be getting home. On the Q train, over the water at night, those great bridges turn into model bridges.

In summer, I deplore garrulous air-conditioners, and refuse to let one into my apartment. It's winter back home, so people are on the computer again; I notify family and friends that I may soon perish in my sleep, and ask to be remembered fondly. (I can't help but think of those wasps, which, when finally sprayed at dusk one day, just fell

out of their roofover nest.) Back home I welcomed the warmth. It's the dryness of the atmosphere everyone worried about. Among other things, a friend of bush-fire, a destructive idiot who arrives on some other idiot's amorous invitation. One Christmas there was one in every direction, and I watched the four fires smoldering in competition, standing on Capital Hill, wondering what they might be trying and failing to say to each other.

I can't get this crazy bush at my parents' place out of my mind. It was there when they got the house, a spiky and tenacious boor, obstructing the steps leading from the courtyard to the backyard. It has little pale flowers (no fine and free poppy, this), overshadows other plants, and generally hogs the light for itself. Probably one of those plants with roots that siphon off water due elsewhere. A juicy beetle could die under it and the mynahs, with the clear-eyed instinct that visitors frequently have, wouldn't go near it. The plant blocks the way to the backyard, which by now is attractively overgrown, and just calling out for use. My parents have something of an eccentric attachment to it, and grow genuinely alarmed when I speak of molestation. I've been away too long and can't talk; or then, am only popping in and just have tickets on myself. At night, awake from the possum, I devise ways of getting around it.

Here I find myself in rooms and offices and train compartments all the time, the same settings over and over, though in still new and novel combinations. Fates are being scrawled wherever there's room, as if somebody's marginal doodles, or then they're played out in a hand of cards. Personalities are made so as to inflate and press up against the frame of any setting. Possibility is limitless—as seemingly limitless as the water in the gym showers, where I wash alongside swimmers, basketball players, and the mad and homeless; as limitless as those comical wads of napkins you receive upon buying anything at all from a bodega. At home, there's more of the wide and still open air, the luxury of contemplation. Why can't the world sort itself out; how easy it can all seem from where you're sitting! There, being is the thing. Here it's about becoming. But let me stop now, having already gone too far in the direction of a beer-garden philosopher.

I miss the language at home, the sound of it and its intelligible common philosophy. Going from best to worst, someone is: a legend, good value, a decent bloke, full of themselves, a wanker, a fuckwit.

I'm not tired of the trait, nor care that it's cliched, that Australians tend to favor loyalty and the disadvantaged, mates and under-mutts. No heroes please. Both the good and the bad can stand being looked in the face; the truth may not be pretty, but it doesn't have to mean being poked in the eye with a burnt stick either. Something shit is "shit-house," or, worse, "ordinary." How was it? Fuckin' ordinary mate. But fair go, you fastidious—*guest*.

If something's unbelievably good, the thing to say is "bullshit," the sense here leaning not on opposites but on incredulity. Sweet words to any expat! I never thought I would miss the funny bird that is ocker-ness, but then I go and say the aforementioned, and add that I would like to be called a petal or a possum by some nice motherly woman again, as she beckons toward a tray of tea and lamingtons. For those who don't know it, that word "ocker" denotes a kind of rough language and culture, a set of phrases that typically belongs in the bush, and which in any case is seen as quintessentially Australian. But city or country, everyone has some ocker in them. The phrase might be dropped ironically, with a self-aware laugh, but the fact that everyone knows it and laughs too proves the universality of it, and maybe even reveals that the irony wasn't needed. At times it can seem that the whole modern part of the country is playacting, that when a certain phrase is voiced, the truth of origins breaks through.

Here, there's no escape from being a listener and an observer, you're constantly remarking on scenes and unbelievable snatches of conversations you've overheard on the train, in the street, in the office, and oh, you find faces utterly compelling. So: you're a damn people-watcher along with everyone else! Perhaps it is the fault of a city in which everyone is either too attractive or peculiar-looking. Whatever you are yourself, not to study and feast on spectacle would be a crime. You needn't be a novelist to appreciate how the whole human adventure is available on the subway, to be heard and glimpsed in facets for two dollars a pop, and complete with music, tears, and backflips.

I used to think there were infinite ways for a person to look. Perhaps I still do; in any case, this city produces that infinity, and makes you walk past surprising new incarnations of everyone you've known. That child there in the bubble-goose jacket, falling asleep while leaning on one of the train's center poles, doesn't that expression make him resemble an old friend? Despite glaring differences—race, sex,

age, class, you name them—you can recognize familiar faces winking at you from behind other ones. That balding man walking past with the frizzle of hair on top, I'm on the verge of stopping him to see if he isn't one of my old teachers. Check the frizzle, perhaps it's a fake. But on second thought, what would he be doing here; he doesn't have the same humorous look in his eye; he didn't walk so fast; and what on earth could he be doing with a Blackberry?

Together with these incarnations of the past, there are the duplicates of people you're certain are here—and alternative you's you're terrified to recognize whenever someone points one out. Much snubbing might be pardoned with this honest plea: I thought it was one of your copies! When you're fighting to get through a crowd, it's unreal people such as these that you're dealing with. Not individuals, but a treacherous, life-size throng of those cutout people you used to make in kindergarten, all linked at the arms and trying to halt any advance.

Greater concentrations of people would seem to multiply one's available interactions, enabling more of every kind; and as a city multiplies scenarios, so it produces more of the kind of character adept at dealing with them. There are people here who act as oxygenating vines, born to flourish amid concrete and steel, and who impart their special character to everyone and thing they touch and curl around. A young friend of mine takes sympathetic interest in a certain stripe of slightly eccentric and usually old person in the city; they instinctively recognize her, and seek her out in all sorts of situations. It's as if she were their keeper. When, separately, I think I see someone who fits the bill, I'm sure to let her know I've encountered one of her people. She is a patron saint, in a city that has patron saints and devils everywhere.

A curious attentiveness to strangers may just as well promote farce. Another friend tells me he was once sitting on a stationary train. The doors were open, and across the platform, on another train, was a pretty acquaintance from his work, a girl he wanted to talk to. On the bench opposite him, also, was a lovely looking girl: he flattered himself that she made eyes at him. He thought of getting up and hurrying across the platform to talk to the girl he knew, but what if the door closed before he could get on? What if, when he then turned back to the original train, it took off? If he did make it in time by rushing, might he still not slip and fall, making a goose of himself in front of everyone? Of course, just as he was getting up, the other train did indeed close its

doors and take off. He sat back down, looked in front of him, and the first girl had moved away.

During brief stretches of some subway lines, well within the dark tunnel, two trains travel in the same direction, running closely parallel to one another for a few seconds. Before it overtakes you, or disappears by ascending an embankment, it's possible to get a good look at the other train's passengers, and for them to stare frankly at you. It tends to be a strange and strangely tranquil encounter, the onlookers on the other train managing to appear as intimate as they are remote. On the one hand, it mimics looking into a mirror. On the other, and though you're only a few meters apart, you seem as removed from those people as passengers in an airplane are from the individuals they spy, ant-like, down there on the ground.

At odd moments, I wonder about what you really absorb here. Strong stimulus can only repeat itself so often—here is the pinnacle, no, wait, there it is!, but hold up, this is even better—until it eventually drags up the shadow from that poem by Yeats, the wind-up ghost who follows on the heels of every one of a poet's achievements in life and art, intoning after each, "What then?," just asking to be thrashed with a supernatural newspaper. If this is what it thinks of solid ends—peach tree, poems, family—what might it say about the tempting follies that are commonplace here? Confide all and the ghost might die laughing, like the snake who attacked Pinocchio.

But perhaps such shades can be held at bay by making a few improbable adaptations. At any rate, you're making them, and hope there's a point to them. It starts to seem impractical to take an interest in every person and their background, since everyone is from somewhere else and nothing will get done. I start not to mind quite so much that people don't inquire about what it's like over there; I don't have the energy always to ask it of others; contrary to the idea I like to hold, curiosity may have to sleep at times. New Zealand?, why, don't be fussy, that'll do just fine. Occasionally, I dream of penning an inspired and un-publishable rant defending the use of listening to music with headphones: not so much as a way to drown out the "What then?"s, as a therapeutic response to the pressures of the city. I'd do it despite the conformity and aesthetic silliness, the anti-social quality and awful mosquito whine, simply because in the end there are just too many conversations you're made to listen in on, and not all of them

are interesting. Or if they are, you don't always have the energy or insight for it, and anyway something has to give. But then, who cares, because everyone already agrees.

I don't mean merely that you want to call some stranger a rude mofo, and maybe do. Even your sweetest friends do. Now and then you want to say, simply and quietly, some of this is dismal or disturbing. On the sidewalk, it is increasingly common for people's mouths to slide around unconsciously, not in the serene style of horses, but anxiously, forming antic grimaces. Better to aim for the proud tranquility of those mighty-rumped lions out front of the library, or then the resignation of the squat poetess out back, even if pigeons walk about on them, and a dewdrop hangs from her nose. However, if able to attain such feats before being turned to stone, might it not be wisest to move out?

I have been going on—rabbiting on, crapping on, I'd say if I wanted to be semi-apologetic about it, as instinctively I would—about here and there, as though both were fixed in time. Thus I have hit on one of the emigré's childish mistakes, thinking that while you are here, there will wait, and that it will stay the same simply because you want it to. Both places, all places, advance, of course, impudently disregarding the wishes of travelers.

I can't help but notice that the incredibly amateur quality of so much Australian culture in the eighties, the time I grew up in, is long gone. Where would the likes of Secret Valley, whose idea of evil was a bunch of adolescents hiding in caves, stuffing their faces with tuck-shop eclairs and devising one inept plan after another, find a home on television today? And the original *Neighbors*—that addictive drama of preposterously dull life in suburban Melbourne? Its characters used to make you feel like a genius in comparison; now they're young and attractive and ironical. And on the stage of real life, nothing now costs under three dollars. A few summers ago someone whispered in my ear about quail eggs wrapped in prosciutto, accompanied by some raspberry "jus." The seductress was a pub menu.

Here everyone complains that New York is changing. I rail along too. However, it's not my wish to be a constant watchdog and analyst of gentrification. There is too much that I like and love. Perhaps because I come from where I do, I also doubt the ability of places to really change in the long run. Cranes, scaffolding, rubble, it all seems as appropriate to something half-destroyed as to something half-built,

and this place is probably constantly both, its air alive with sirens of every kind. Aeneas had reasons not to stay in half-made Carthage. Still, if a modern Dido laid the subway down in time, might her lover not be so delighted and distracted as to both endure a crazy affair and forget about his past? I wonder.

Woe to whoever seeks not a place, but a place as remembered at a given time. For what they seek then is likely to be an atmosphere of memory more than anything. When writers strive to recreate the past, they commonly speak of the effort, if they don't obviously aim for the effect, to make it feel clear, exact, and vivid. By contrast, I have noticed that many of my own memories are delicious on account of their vagueness: to be exact about them means being exact about that indefinite character. It's as if these recollections are shrouded in fog; fortunately, I happen to love the sight and smell of actual sea-fogs as they move through a city, nature obscuring and distorting the urban image. Under such transformations, life feels lighter, out of focus, as if nothing were more substantial than those swathes of daddy long legs spiders in the corners of the guest room.

Once, overseas, I was standing on the deck of a ferry, and we were riding through fog. Everything was white; my only company was a seagull, who hovered directly overhead. Though we were both moving, there was this pleasing illusion that each of us stood still. We shadowed each other, the animal and I, and it felt plausible that I might pluck it out of the air with my hand.