

After the Academy

Kerryn Goldsworthy

‘... the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way.’

Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’

AT SEVEN O’CLOCK on the morning of 2 February 1999, I was due at the Memorial Hospital in North Adelaide to relieve my older sister at my mother’s bedside, where she had been all night. The alarm was set for six. At five-thirty, I was woken by the phone; my mother had died, as we had known for a couple of days that she would, from complications following a cerebral haemorrhage. Before it happened, she had been fragile but functional; we had worried in a general way about her health, which had never been good, but nobody could have predicted or prevented the manner of her death.

By the time we left the hospital, the sun had risen and the family had already begun to reconfigure itself; with the lynchpin and peacemaker gone, it remained to be seen whether my father and his three daughters could close ranks and carry on. We walked out of the cool, hushed building into an Adelaide summer morning, through a rose garden whose perfume had begun to be liberated by the heat; every day it had wafted up to and through the open window of the room where she lay. She had been a student of roses, and their tender nurse; she grew them in each of the four gardens of her adult life.

She was unconscious for several days before she died, and nobody really knows what, or how much, unconscious people can take in. She died peacefully in a pretty room at a quiet hour with her first-born at her bedside; it’s as much as anyone could reasonably ask of death. But I hope she knew those roses were there. I hope she took them with her.

‘During the past ten years I had turned myself into a kind of public animal ... giving talks, programming festivals, making friends, making enemies ... I missed the anonymity and absorption of my twenties. I wanted to write again. I wanted, simply, to be.’

Peter Rose, *Rose Boys*

EIGHTEEN MONTHS EARLIER, in the winter of 1997, I resigned from a lectureship in the Melbourne University English Department after working there for seventeen years; I gave my six months’ notice, and, five days before Christmas, I drove home to Adelaide for good, with my thighs

covered in little round black bruises from bashing into the corners of tea-chests late at night when I was too exhausted from packing to walk in a straight line. It’s 750 kilometres, and I sang the whole way.

By the time my mother died, I had been living back here for just over a year, and had seen her at least once a week and spoken to her almost every day; she had made me pots of soup, pruned my wild new garden into submission, and been my guest at the first-ever family Christmas dinner in my house. In the days leading up to her death, and in the weeks and months that followed it, I was part of my family in a way that I could not possibly have been back in my old Melbourne life. It wasn’t just that I was physically here and so able to do my share of all the things that have to be done when someone dies, though that was important enough. It was that, for the first time in twenty years, work was no longer the most important thing: my time and attention were now entirely my own, to give to whoever or whatever needed them the most. Sometimes that was work, and sometimes it wasn’t.

Having elderly parents is a common condition of middle age, and so is the compulsion to examine your life so far and see how you feel about the shape of it. And for women, middle age means adjusting once and for all to the fact that you either have children or do not have them, and either way it will affect the choices you make, the way you are perceived in the workplace, the way that you relate to whatever other family you have, and the quality of your own old age. Asked now to write about this mid-life shift and its aftermath, I can see for the first time that, if I hadn’t already come home, my mother’s death would probably have brought me back.

As it was, I came to visit as often as I could. The older my parents grew, the more I hated driving away from them, and I had begun to put myself through a ritual, as I drove through the Adelaide Hills and south-east towards the Murray River, of formally facing and accepting the fact that I might never see them again. They may have done the same.

This grew more and more difficult, and one grey Monday in July 1997 after a week’s so-called holiday (on which, like most academics, I had taken a stack of work with me) with them in Adelaide, I did it once too often. I drove away in the early-morning drizzle and, as I headed across the river and down the highway towards the Victorian border, I began to feel worse and worse, like someone coming down with the flu. Waiting for me in Melbourne was a bitter winter, a string of deadlines, the kind of leaden and long-drawn-out

workload under which most academics were now labouring, and nothing else.

The Duke's Highway is part of National Highway 8, the road that runs from Murray Bridge through Bordertown and becomes, across the Victorian border, the Western Highway. In 1986 I had crashed on it just west of Bordertown in South Australia, the kind of high-speed rollover that people often don't survive. I never pass the place without sending some sort of thanks out into the landscape, and, when I passed it on that day in July 1997, the little roadside tree that I'd missed by centimetres eleven years before had a message for me: it was telling me that life was short. And about twenty kilometres further on, just across the border, where the red earth begins and the small blistered signposts to ghost towns point north up the flat, straight roads into the desert, I wound down the window and said aloud to a crow that was flumping along by the side of the road in the rain: 'I am never going to do this again.'

If at that moment a cop had emerged from the bushes with a radar gun in his hand, I would have mistaken him for an angel with a trumpet. It didn't feel at all like a decision; it felt like something that was being done to me. One minute I was an ageing, overworked, homesick and not very healthy academic who lived in Melbourne because that's where my career was, and the next minute I was a human being who had decided to go home.

When I drove back into Melbourne, it was dark and raining. After only a week away, my mailboxes, virtual and real, were full to overflowing with requests, demands, complaints, forms to fill in, questions to answer and essays to mark. The only truly interesting things that ever arrive in the mail are love and money, and there was almost none of either. Three days later, after a confidential and unexpectedly cheering chat with the superannuation officer — the only other person in the world who knew what I was plotting — I handed in my resignation.

I didn't much like the way that some things were going in my department, my discipline, my university, the state of Victoria (which was being thoroughly Jeffed at the time), or Australian universities in general, still reeling from having been thoroughly Dawkinsed. I had signed on twenty years earlier as a postgraduate student to make a living by reading, writing, teaching and thinking in the field of literature, like a happy cow, but by the middle of the 1990s, at least two of

those verbs were suffering badly and the category of 'literature' itself had become what we in the academy called a contested site; while I didn't mind this, or even much disagree with it, I wasn't very interested in the implications or in the alternatives.

In the meantime, the academic workload was now such that the students were being short-changed, which I hated almost as much as they did but was powerless to do anything about. The various ever-raging culture wars were wasting the precious energy of intellectuals who were attacking each other instead of the real problems, an activity that several of them were cleverly using to build their own careers. There were many people within the academic humanities (and certainly not just in Melbourne) whose

aggressive and self-righteous condemnation of other people's alleged ideological shortcomings sat very oddly with some of their own behaviour, as though it were normal and proper for intellectual life to be disassociated from action. Ostentatious lip service had been paid to feminism in my own department for well over a decade, but, even as late as 1997, it still had four male professors, while no woman in its history had ever made it past the level of senior lecturer.

Then there was the push for universities to reinvent themselves as businesses. I could see the point of some of this. In my new life as a one-woman small business, I have a sharp new respect for the skills involved, and I agree with Geoff Sharrock's remark in his brave article on the subject ('The Business of Learning' in *The Age*, 'Saturday Extra', 13 April 2002) that the universities have at least a few things to learn from the business sector: efficiency and

accountability, for a start. But learning to think of students as clients, of teaching and research as commodities, and of all cultural, intellectual and collegial activities not rewarded by the Promotions Committee or the ARC as a waste of time, was something I couldn't manage; the blind rage kept getting in the way.

Even if I had decided to stay and make the best of it, I would have had to give up the kind of work I now mostly do for a living: literary journalism, editing, reviewing, the odd lecture or 'talk', manuscript assessments of various kinds, and, of course, the mysterious thing that people refer to as 'your own writing'. It was the kind of work that kept me in touch with the literary community outside the universities

**The author's mother and sister Christine
at Curramulka in 1952**

and, although it meant I often worked ridiculous hours, I did not want to give up either the work or the connection. Now that most academics were working ridiculous hours anyway, there was no longer any time for it; it would have had to go.

My life was being eaten by a job I was no longer sure I wanted to keep doing; the only future I could foresee was more of the same, only worse, like a straight narrow channel that was getting deeper all the time. As in most large institutions, an academic career is profoundly linear, hierarchical and teleological; in the course of it, you proceed through accretions of seniority and salary in stages marked by the first five letters of the alphabet, Level E being as high as you can go. The trajectory traps you in its own shape and its own momentum; to slide off sideways and abandon the irresistible curve of its flight looks like a wilful act of unreason.

It should have been hellishly difficult, but it wasn't. I was swept off course by the undertow that was pulling me back to my proper place in the world; the idea of living in my home town — a small city on the edge of the desert, its weird shadow side cut sharper by relentless sunlight, full of family and old friends and ghosts — had begun to overwhelm me. Both of my parents had just turned seventy, and I owed them a happy childhood.

'She had, I suppose, some nutrient hinterland on which she drew.'

Marjorie Barnard, 'The Persimmon Tree'

MY MOTHER GAVE birth to her three daughters in the local hospital of the little South Australian country town where I grew up. It's a large, low, sandstone building with a wide veranda, more like a big house than any kind of institution. The foundation stone bears the name of my paternal great-grandmother, who donated the land and laid the stone. The stained-glass panel over the front door casts red and blue rhomboids and wedges of light onto the polished boards in the hallway: my earliest memory is of that coloured light in the grain of the wood. A mile or two south-east of there, out in the paddocks, the bones of my great-grandmother and her husband and both of his parents all lie in a peaceful, isolated little country cemetery, as do those of dozens of more distant relatives, and old friends of my parents. There are people I went to primary school with, and their parents, and, under one or two heart-wrenching little headstones, their children. There's Brown Owl from Brownies, and my first music teacher, and the man who used to bake the bread.

"I gave my six months' notice, and, five days before Christmas, I drove home to Adelaide for good, with my thighs covered in little round black bruises from bashing into the corners of tea-chests late at night when I was too exhausted from packing to walk in a straight line. It's 750 kilometres, and I sang the whole way."

The cemetery is set in a clump of old trees in a sheltered little dip of land like a saucer, surrounded every summer by paddocks and paddocks of ripening grain, the horizon a rim of gold. Barley Dreaming. I'm not a haunted person by nature, but whenever I get within a kilometre or so of this place my hackles start twanging like piano wire. Peter Goldsworthy, who's a distant relative and was also born and brought up round here, calls this landscape The Brown, Brown Grass of Home, but my name for it is the Realms of Gold.

When I came back to Adelaide at the end of 1997, I bought a little house in one of the oldest parts of town, about a kilometre from the place where those great-great-grandparents got off the boat from Cornwall in 1847, the year of the Irish potato famine and *Wuthering Heights*. They were both twenty-one; they had a baby and another on the way, and each other, and almost nothing else. Theirs are the first graves you see when you go through the little gate into the cemetery; two rather graceful white weathered headstones with formal inscriptions in orthodox late-Victorian memorial verse, side by side, about seventy kilometres from where I live now, due west across the Gulf of St Vincent.

When Patrick White and Manoly Lascaris decided to move from their farm at Castle Hill in 1964, says David Marr:

White had toyed with the idea of buying one of the beautiful city houses of Adelaide, but Lascaris warned him there were not enough people to quarrel with in Adelaide. It had to be Sydney: 'It is a case of the pit from which one was dug.'

The reference is to Isaiah 51:1, and some of the scholarly interpretations of that text are more than a bit unpleasant, but when I first read that remark in Marr's lovely biography, what I imagined was the craggy figure of Patrick White emerging from the earth of the Upper Hunter Valley where his family farmed, a new and dripping clay image fashioned from the stuff of the place and not really matching the earth anywhere else in the world.

'The worlds of plants and music may never have revealed themselves ...'

Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son'

SOME OF THE rewards of the mid-life shift have been the ones I hoped for: feeling like a family member again; feeling at home in the landscape; having time and energy for an inner life that involves the heart and the soul,

as well as the brain; being able to work when I want to, choose what to think about, and vary the pace of my working life.

There have also been some unexpected bonuses, like the question of money. Freelancing makes for a precarious and irregular financial life, and I make a laughable amount of money compared with the old secure academic salary, to say nothing of the sick leave and the superannuation; it might well be thought of as cause for concern. But a couple of hours after I resigned, I happened to run into Barry Hill, who had known me well for a long time and who had been making a living as a writer for many years himself. His advice was: 'Don't worry about money.'

He meant, I think, not that everything would necessarily be financially fine, but that fretting about it was a waste of time and energy better used to get on with the work. It was good advice, and I took it at once, and for good. Even when I make a conscious attempt to whip up a little well-placed financial anxiety, all I can see is the intense pleasure of problem-solving: working out what money to put where, second-guessing bills, allocating priorities. I think of my mother in a sunny back room on the farm in 1958, focused and intent over a dress-making pattern and a length of cloth with her mouth full of pins, working out how to make the fabric design match up at the seams and still only use three-quarters of the material specified on the pattern sheet. There was no real need for this, despite the uncertainties of rural life — for farming is just a particularly precarious form of freelancing: who knows what your wheat and wool will be worth at the end of the year, and who knows when or whether it will rain? — it was more the fierce pleasure of the challenge.

But the biggest and most unanticipated reward of the move back home is a renewed sense of leading an integrated life, which I had almost wholly lost. The pleasures of being pushed to one's intellectual limits all the time by brilliant colleagues and hungry students are complex and intense, and that is one of the things I sometimes miss, but — apart from a handful of beloved friends — the rest of life as a Melbourne academic had become very thin and sketchy. And as if that were not bad enough, the conditions of university life in the post-Dawkins era lent themselves to the kind of alienation that Marx called *Entäusserung*, the sale of the self as a commodity, in which the worker loses control over the processes of work and the products of labour. As we all spent more and

more time sweating over endlessly updated and micro-managed CVs and ARC grant applications, noting and quantifying and defining smaller and smaller units of our working lives, I would look at the lists of articles written and classes taught and students supervised, and, despite the hours and effort and passion that had gone into them at the time, they would seem to have nothing, any more, to do with me. I knew that it was not possible to write fiction, or produce any other kind of imaginative work, in this mode of operation. I also knew that if I ever wanted to write fiction again, I was going to have to live a radically different kind of life and stop forcing heart and soul to live on air.

And it is, and they don't, and among the richest nutrients of life and work now are two I could never have predicted: the garden and the choir. Both have an effect that is the opposite of alienation: you can stand in the heart of each, doing your share of the work, and feel the boundaries of self dissolve.

Between them these two things take up a great deal of time, which makes me feel like a maiden lady of a certain age in a 1920s English-village comic novel, unrequitedly in love with the vicar. But both the garden and the choir are actually full of sex and violence, and both, largely because of that, are constant sources of inspiration, instruction and delight. The garden is an unruly big tract of sandy Port Adelaide soil full of rabidly overgrown creepers and vines, and native trees and bushes down the back that flower into unlikely gold and cream and crimson bottle-brushes, and bring hundreds of rainbow lorikeets and honey-eaters flocking in for the nectar and shouting at each other through the blue air.

Cannibal crows and magpies rob the blackbirds' nests and pierce the pale blue speckled eggs with needle beaks; spiders fight to the death in mid-air in the middle of the night. (I know this because I watched them, mesmerised, by torchlight at about two o'clock one morning; the Great Garden Spider won, in the end, parcelling up the vicious White-Tail invader in mummifying threads and stashing it in a corner for later.)

The choir is one of the city's two or three big choral groups — there are about one hundred and fifty of us, with maybe four or five public performances a year — and I am the humblest of its foot-soldiers, skulking in the middle of the Second Sopranos, only just barely good enough by the skin of my teeth, and sometimes not that either. The violence there is covert and emotional, to do with territoriality, rivalries,

**The three Goldsworthy sisters
photographed by their mother in 1957**

and the occasional twanging tension when things are not going well; the sex is in the music, and the voices, and the ranks, where there are flirtations, spats and marriages. In a choir, the sexes are formally defined and segregated for obvious reasons, the differences stylised into four voice ranges. (In music as in life, however, gender difference is more a matter of spectrum; we have a tenor called Catherine and, until recently, a brilliantly gifted soprano called Gordon, who moved on when he got a job with Cirque du Soleil.) The soprano part is almost always the melody; you are floated on a huge rich swell of sound, held up and carried along by the ocean of male voices at the bottom of the chord.

Our rehearsal space is in Hindley Street, in the ritzy new headquarters of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Hindley Street in the 1960s was Adelaide's small-scale King's Cross or Fitzroy Street, with a reputation for seediness, violence and colour; partly transformed forty years on, it's still full of sex workers, junkies, beggars and cops, but also, now, of musicians, artists, students, cafés and the best bookshop in town. Just down the road from the new rehearsal studio is the building where, thirty-five years ago, I would get into the smelly, ancient lift after school and be cranked up to a tiny shoebox room on the top floor, where a portly man with a grey moustache and crew-cut used to give me piano lessons and tell me smutty jokes and vicious gossip about the television studio where he worked. My cognitive map of Hindley Street layers memories of the lawless, the fluid and the secret: splashes of blood on the pavement; cups of real coffee in the Italian cafés of the 1960s; music being learned note by note in hidden rooms.

“I didn't much like the way that some things were going in my department, my discipline, my university, the state of Victoria (which was being thoroughly Jeffed at the time), or Australian universities in general, still reeling from having been thoroughly Dawkinsed.”

‘What interests me is cultural exchange, respecting the integrity of the local, while opening lines of communication between different localities ... There's no going to a place that's more energetic, less boring, more cultured and so on. It's about movement.’

John Kinsella, ‘The Search for a Culture’

ANYONE WHO HAS lived in more than one city for any length of time — three years, say; long enough to observe the patterns of seasons — knows that it is a nonsense to compare cities anywhere; to say, This one is better than that one, or, Oh erk, why do they want to move *there*? It's not so much a matter of comparing ducks with chooks, though it has that aspect also; it's more that cities, like other people, exist mainly as accretions of experience, and your vision of any given city will always be shaped by what has happened to you there.

So what I miss about Melbourne is not the theatre or the nightlife or the shopping or the seats of cultural and political power; plenty of all these things can be found or made in any city of reasonable size, if they are what you want. But I miss my Melbourne friends, and their children, and the pleasure of sitting yarning with them around tables in kitchens and restaurants and cafés.

What enlivens all places is the play of difference between them, particularly when they contain people you love. And coming home to Adelaide has made the other Australian cities glow in brighter colours for me, now that I feel earthed, finally, in this one.