

Like Home

I've been clicking my ruby heels together in innumerable multiples of three for as long as I can remember, but Kansas still eludes me.

"There's no place like home" was not only the familiar chant of my youth but more accurately the philosophy and closest thing to religion I've ever known; it is the cornerstone by which I have lived my life. My parents had made the perhaps arbitrary decision that 'The Wizard of Oz' was the only piece of cinema or television that I was permitted to watch. They were at the time (and perhaps are still) unaware of how profoundly this classic piece of American cinema would shape my entire life. I am yet to determine whether or not my use of the word 'profound' is describing something positive or rather something insidious that has shaped the kind of chronic anxiety I have come to know as normal. Like the endless repetition of the film throughout my childhood, I have unconsciously recreated Dorothy's quest for 'home', more times than I can count. In the final year of my undergraduate degree I sifted through countless essays and books written about the 'Wizard of Oz' as representation of the American Dream, as an economic metaphor, as a message about migration...I was writing an essay about how Baz Luhrmann's highly problematic film 'Australia' with its repeated allusions to 'The Wizard of Oz' was essentially presenting what lies at the heart of a diasporic colonial nation such as Australia; the constant search for a 'home', literal or metaphorical, that is just out of reach.

My own yellow brick road was built before I was born when my American dad followed my mum to Australia some forty years ago. I grew up with a heightened sense of the ocean that lay between the parts of him, and inadvertently, the parts of me. I was filled with a need to connect these separate parts, these unknown missing pieces; it felt like if I could just put them together, I would make sense. And so, as soon as I could, I moved to the States; a quest to get to know my family and to better understand myself. For five years I lived, worked and studied in New York City spending breaks in North Carolina unfurling the mystery of family. My dad's family slowly and irreversibly becoming my family. Home sickness for Australia became a permanent ache. At the end of five years, exhausted and broke, I decided to come back to Australia. The first months were a blur of a lack of belonging mixed with awe at the vibrance and ease of Melbourne life; wages you could actually live on, healthcare, an ease of existence I had forgotten existed, but all tinged with a new feeling - homesickness for the place I had just left. I began to realise that 'home' was a more complicated notion than I'd ever realised.

I like to tell myself that things became complicated once I found a second home on the other side of the world, but that's not true. I've been grappling with the concept of 'home' for as long as I can remember. My suicidal teenage self clutched desperately on to the mystery of 'home' as if it could save me from my misery. At the height of my pain, amongst the feeling that I couldn't keep going, the mantra of "I want to go home" would become deafeningly loud. Like an obstinate child, my brain would tantrum with the plea to "go home". I didn't understand it then, and I probably still don't quite understand it now, but it was as if I knew that if I could just click my heels together three times and go 'home' everything would be okay. I wasn't alone either; I remember talking to a friend at the time who was also navigating the darkness and hormonal brutality of the teen

experience, who confided, and showed me, where she had cut the word 'HOME' into her thigh with a razor. I didn't need to ask why she had chosen that word; tacitly we understood each other.

Being back in Australia, I began to settle into this deceptively familiar world; at times confused by who'd I'd been before and who I was now. I found new friends in a workplace full of artists; a place where sexuality and gender felt more liberatingly fluid than I had ever known. A place where a beer after work on a summer afternoon merged seamlessly into a Northside house party where we would dance until the sun rose. I found community and belonging and I felt more like myself than I had in a long time. Compact Fitzroy houses with bright bursting gardens provoked fantasies of a simple reality sowing vegetables that would nourish a family. After work reading a book whilst baking on the concrete beside the sharp blue of the local pool, surrounded by tattoo covered hipsters. I sat in classy bars with friends, drinking expensive wine that I could afford on my liveable wage... This was what I had been searching for. *I'm finally home.*

Even amongst the wonder of returning to this rose coloured haven, there was always a niggling at the edges of my consciousness. A nagging that wouldn't quite let me surrender to this place, as if the comfort was somehow a sign that I needed to move. To pack my belongings once again and force myself back into the discomfort. It was therefore maybe not altogether surprising when I made the spontaneous decision to return to New York City to visit an old flame; the excitement of the romance combined with the longing for the familiarity and comfort of my old home.

To be back on the subway in a place that feels so much like home it makes my breath catch if I actually acknowledge it. This city. This city that beats you up, spits on you, steals the shirt off your back and yet knows that somehow you'll always return and beg for more. For the first time in a while I'm not visiting when she's showing off her best - spring or fall, when the colours are sharp and the air is clear and the brutality of the other two seasons are a vague memory, a distant worry. I wondered how I'd feel being here, winter, a season I loved before I spent five here, and yet somehow I know already I'll be seduced. It's the grimy, shitty, miserableness of this place that is part of the charm; that's why those few brief weeks of perfection a year shine so brightly. And I don't even need to see them to know. I'm disappointed by how quickly I have fallen into the trap of sentimentality about this place - countless books and movies are dedicated to this very thing. It was something that seemed so obvious once I left - that we all had an abusive relationship with this place; we stayed trapped in this Stockholm Syndrome relationship with a place that didn't deserve us. And yet, I've barely been on the ground for an hour and I've already fallen for it. It's dark, it's cold and I'm navigating an hour and a half of public transport to get to my Airbnb after 30 hours of travel, and yet I feel alive with the buzz of being home. The brutal memories of a place that shaped me so profoundly that I will probably be inextricably linked to it forever. Being on these subway platforms at every hour of the day and night. Drunk at 3am on a deserted platform waiting for the notoriously unreliable G train to rumble into the station - its fluorescent green G a shining beacon of the possibility of making it home before sunrise. Levels of exhaustion I had not known existed - wishing I had money or a time machine or anything so that I could replace that platform with my bed. Broken hearts that at the time seemed fatal, and perhaps almost were. And yet, here I am. Still

me, older, probably not a whole lot wiser, but more aware of who I am - from having been here, and from having left.

Whether it's my home in Melbourne or my home in New York City, day one is always my favourite. It has a gentleness and its edges are soft. I spend my life clutching onto the softness; the vibrance or clarity combined with an openness, a vulnerability of grief, of pain, of newness, of happiness. For me, heightened moments have bright colours and soft edges, like an impressionist painting; wheat fields dancing under effervescent skies. Time is of no significance on day one. The world moves slower and one can move with it in a kind of symbiotic fluidity. There is nowhere to be, nothing that has to be achieved. Like the day lost when traveling from the US to Australia, it is a day that exists outside the regular parameters of schedules and deadlines.

I spend two weeks falling in love on every level and by the time I have to go home I'm so confused by what or where 'home' actually is that I feel I will burst. The twinkling stars of the New York City lights feel like constellations I've studied my whole life. Familiar and unrecognisable all at once. And yet I'm flying away. A skyline full of constellations that form daggers in my heart as I clutch to the image of that big beautiful city through the little round window. Many hours later, as we get close to Melbourne I look out the window where I can see the hot, dry, barren and achingly familiar world below. The creases of the mountains, like a roughly thrown sheet ripple in perfect chaos. Once, whilst studying in the US, I read out a seemingly innocuous poem to a room full of classmates titled 'Red Dust'. I barely finished the first line before the grief constricted my chest and choked any chance of speaking further. I hadn't realised how homesick I was. Red earth, whilst not even a major part of my day to day life, has always resonated with a deep and inexplicable longing for home. As if, without even realising it, the tiny particles of dirt from my home country had made their way into the crevices of my being and become synonymous with a primal and inescapable notion of home. Even now, when all I want is to turn the plane around and go back, I can't fight the feeling that I belong here. My heart is in my throat and I can't speak and so I just stare out the window like an animal in the headlights; part deer, part kangaroo, as always caught between two worlds.

- By Leah Filley