

Memory and home

John Hughes

I'd like to start with three ideas, which I'll then try to put some flesh on.

The first comes from Gaston Bachelard's wonderful book *The Poetics of Space*: 'Houses are in us as much as we are in them.'

The second is from the preface to my book *The Idea of Home*:

The story has two origins and, according to Walter Benjamin, 'the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman.'

Yet in all his travels the traveller cannot get the idea of return out of his mind, it haunts him like a ghost, and his stories take on form in the expectation of the audience he has left and to which he must return. Without that place which does not change, what need is there for story? And for the man who stays, the longing plays itself out in reverse, his stories too are essentially traveller's tales—to return to that moment when time began, bursting with the lightness of now. At its heart, the dissatisfaction of the trading seaman and the resident tiller of the soil is the same, both men are haunted by the same ghost. In all cultures there is a name given to this dissatisfaction; that name is *home*.

I'll return to this dissatisfaction and its connection to home, but for the moment, it leads in nicely to my final idea, a couple of lines from Rilke's poem *Pigeons*:

What is home but a feeling of homesickness

for the flight's lost moment of fluttering terror.

Rilke seems to be saying here that home can best be defined as the place we desire to leave, and that what we feel homesick for is the very moment of departure, when all our dreams and ideals of the great world we are about to enter are still intact and untested by the real. The reality, though, is that the great world can never match our dreams and ideals of it, it must inevitably fall short, and so what we long for, what we feel homesick for, what Rilke calls home itself, is that moment when it was still a dream, that moment on the threshold of two worlds. Which is to say that what we feel homesick for is not a place, but the unrecoverable moment of leaving that place, and the fact that it is never the same place to which we return. Return is impossible; only in memory does time run in reverse. Nostalgia, then, has little to do with homesickness for a place; it's neither a longing for a lost place nor a lost time, but is, rather, a homelessness in time. And the more one travels, as the exiled Russian poet Joseph Brodsky once wrote, the more complex one's sense of nostalgia becomes.

Like almost all second-generation Australians, I lived in two worlds as a child. And somehow the child sensed it was essential to avoid actual knowledge; that by knowing just a little, not only was he able to establish his own sense of self, he could also make himself however he wanted; without knowledge, it was the easiest thing in the world to see the forests of the Ukraine, to listen at night to the howl of the wolves, in the backyards of Cessnock. I'm not certain exactly when my sense of being Ukrainian became important to me, but there's no doubt the sense of containing something 'foreign' within myself is crucial to my own romance of what I am.

I'd like to talk a little about the idea of Europe here, because if I had a home at all when I was growing up, it was this idea. Twenty years before I was born, in 1941 in the city of Kiev in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine, my grandfather and his wife, together with their four children, set out to walk from Kiev to Naples, ending their journey in the port of Bagnoli on the western shore of the Gulf of Naples in 1948. The idea of this journey from Kiev to Naples in the middle of the Second World War captured me in a way that was not entirely healthy and in my teenage years led me to turn my mother's family into a kind of fetish. The romance of their life (and the

horrors I imagined) made me interesting to myself in a way my own life in Cessnock could not. I don't know which came first, the romance of the past or the dissatisfaction with the present, and in the end it matters little, as each was just another way of thinking about the other. The idea of my family's walk became, over time, like a map of my life. It seemed as if I was forever measuring myself against it, plotting unsuccessfully my own experience against its impossible contours.

During my four years as a postgraduate in England, I became obsessed with the idea of repeating the walk. I planned the journey for months in Cambridge. I didn't have enough time to walk, as my grandfather had done, and this was why I planned to do the journey in reverse, by train, arriving in the Ukraine after the spring thaw and walking the last leg from Lvov to Kiev. If I was going to find my family anywhere, I thought, it would be here, at the very beginning of their exile, when they might at least have dreamt of a return. I had studied countless maps and bus and train timetables, and worked out an itinerary that was as close as I could come to the reality of my grandfather's remembering: Naples—Rome—Venice—Trieste—Ljubljana—Graz—Salzburg—Munich—Nuremburg—Plzen—Prague—Dresden—Magdeburg—Hanover—Bremen—Hamburg—Berlin—Poznan—Warsaw—Lublin—Lvov—Kiev. That was the plan. The reality, as it turned out, was different. When I returned to Naples, the unreality of the city hit me with a force even stronger than my first experience of it. I realised then, as I should have realised two years before, that the journey could only ever be imaginary for me. My journey had nothing whatsoever to do with war, or exile, or survival. By retracing my family's steps, I would erase them one by one until all I was left with would be a list of names like the one I have outlined above. The past exists nowhere in the world, it is like Plato's cave; the place names of my intended journey were but shadows of my family's walk through Eastern Europe 40 years before, whose value for me, it was now clear, resided solely in my head. I flew from Naples to Hamburg, unable, I think, to relinquish the plan entirely. I didn't even look at the city. Instead, I caught a train directly to Frankfurt and the following day flew back to London. In his book *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino writes:

Marco Polo discovered that what he sought was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past it was a past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the

traveller's past changes according to the route he has followed: not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day, but the more remote past. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.

And that's just it. By possessing these places, I realised somehow that I would no longer possess them. I didn't want the past to change. It seemed strange and foolish, getting there but not going on. But I think now the value of the walk can only ever be for me its quality as an imaginary journey. I see now that I can only go to places I haven't already thought about. Which makes travel a little difficult, don't you think?

My desire to leave Australia was a common one, although unlike the preceding generation of expatriates such as Clive James and Germaine Greer, it required me to be in two places at once (to both accept and deny the place I was bound for): as the product of a migrant family living in Australia, whose legacy could only be fully realised by my success in what they took to be the heart of their new world, my presence in Cambridge was a vindication of their flight (the heart of democracy and civilisation, as opposed to the barbarism of Eastern Europe); but what they had also given me, unconsciously perhaps, but as part of the very same legacy, was this irreconcilable need to experience the world from which they had come, to show them that I too could be at home there, that I could be as large as the figures of my imagining.

It's odd, I think, this nostalgia for a culture and a place of which we have no direct experience. (Yet the older I get, the more nostalgic I feel for the Ukraine.) It's like having a memory of something you don't know; to feel the emotion but miss its source. Even when he was alive, what interested me most about my grandfather were his memories. But it wasn't just me. As with a lot of migrants, his memories were what interested him most about himself. Memories were his currency—it was how he defined himself—and he dealt in them as a means of filling in the temporal emptiness of his new place. What is home, you'll remember Rilke wrote, but a feeling of homesickness for the flight's lost moment of fluttering terror. The exile doesn't have a home; physically he might live in the present but in his mind he is in the past—his

home is memory. For me, growing up here, the objects around me open up the past, but for the migrant they only make him aware that there is no past here. Past and present cannot be brought into focus, and what we might call a temporal astigmatism is perhaps the defining characteristic of the migrant experience.

But on the other side, the side of the children born and brought up in this place, is it a peculiarly Australian experience that our personal heritage and sense of identity includes a place and a history not really our own, not really accessible to us? The fact that our sense of self-discovery and self-realisation takes place in foreign lands is one of the rich and complex ironies of being Australian.

I'd like to finish with a bedtime story for adults. It captures something of what I've been reflecting on this morning and comes from the last section of 'My Mother's House'. In this essay I've been writing about my mother's obsessive collecting, and trying to account for why the taking into the house of so much junk was so crucial to her; I'd never really thought about the reasons behind her behaviour and hence I had no idea what I was going to find or where I might end up. The essay comes to the rather counter-intuitive conclusion that collecting is an aid to forgetting rather than memory; that for my mother, only the forgotten, as she discovered as a child in the convent in war-ravaged Kiev where she had been left to convalesce, were safe. Here's how the essay ends:

Occasionally, when I return to Cessnock, I go into the basement to look for a book I hope I will not find. The truth is, I like to think it doesn't exist. In our first house my grandfather used to sit behind my bed and read me stories from the book. As I could see neither my grandfather nor the book I began to believe the stories were his own. In the lamplight there was only his voice.

He 'read' from what he said was a collection of Ukrainian folk tales. My favourite was a tale about a Prince who does not know his name. He has a strange idea. He decides on a competition and sends messengers to every corner of the kingdom. Anyone who desires can try to guess his name. But the prize is unusual. The Prince will give a chest of gold coins to anyone who gets his name wrong, but

death to the person who guesses correctly. This is what he thought: only someone who tried to get his name wrong might come up with a name strange enough to be right; a name he could not think of himself. And so the people came forward, drawn by the prospect of easy treasure. They called him Salmon and Trout, Oak and Mahogany, Birdskin, Lionskin, Stone. None of the names were right. 'No one alive is more unfortunate than me,' the Prince thought. He truly believed he would die without ever learning his name.

Then one morning a woman arrived at the castle. No one had seen her before but all agreed she was beautiful. The Prince fell in love with her instantly and forgot all about his name. He asked the woman to marry him. He had never felt so happy.

The woman agreed to marry the Prince on one condition. She had heard about the competition and wanted to make a guess herself. The Prince tried everything he could to change her mind. He was frightened. But the woman would not give in. She would marry the Prince only if she were permitted to guess his name. And if she were right the Prince must swear to uphold his oath and put her to death.

'Why?' I'd interrupt my grandfather.

'That's just it,' he'd say. 'The Prince couldn't understand why she insisted so strongly on his promise, but he saw that she would not marry him unless he agreed.' My grandfather paused and I could hear him breathing. 'On the morning of the marriage the woman came to the Prince before his people. She was dressed in her bridal gown and looked more beautiful than anyone had ever seen. "I will have my guess," she said. The people waited. It was terribly quiet. "But I don't know *your* name," the Prince said. The woman smiled mysteriously. "Then you might guess as well. If you guess right I will marry you now and never think again of your name." The Prince stared at the woman's face blurred beneath the veil and for an

instant his heart lifted. He recognised his bride. And in that instant he backed away in fear. “That’s right,” she laughed, “I have given you your name. And now you must fulfil your promise.” “No!” the Prince cried.’ I started at the sudden loudness of my grandfather’s voice. There was a long quiet before he continued. ‘A great buzz went around the crowd,’ he said, ‘for no one knew what had happened. They could see their Prince on his knees and they could hear the woman’s laughter...’

‘What was the name?’ The story had not turned out as I had expected and I could not understand what had happened. I blamed my grandfather.

‘I don’t know the name,’ he said softly. ‘No one heard it spoken.’

Over the years, I’ve tried many times to account for the story’s hold on me. I couldn’t work out why it so terrified me when nothing seemed to happen. I would ask my grandfather to read it to me again and again, as if the problem was just a few missing lines or an opacity that repetition would clear. At first, I thought my grandfather was telling me about my own name; later, as he told me more of the history, I began to see his words as an allegory of the Ukraine itself. In the end, though, I came to feel that what he was really talking about was death. That the Prince’s name was death and that love alone could make him see this; that this was the truth about life, that every name was death, my grandfather’s and my own included, and that what the Prince sees when he looks into the woman’s eyes is that there is value in the world only because there is death.

All collections begin in defiance of death. My mother started collecting in part, I think, to prove my grandfather wrong. And it wasn’t only her own death she meant to keep at bay—she was thinking about him and my grandmother too. There would be no more death. My grandfather used to read my mother the same story,

he said, sitting, as he would later sit with me, behind her bed. She was his favourite child—in part, I think, because she lived so close to death. He was drawn to what must have seemed an impossible combination of fragility and strength. My grandfather was a hard man but he was never hard with her. And she loved him in a distant way that only drew him more.

The afternoon of my grandfather's funeral, my mother went into the basement and stayed there a long time. She went into the basement to pray. No one saw this as inappropriate; as if, though her collecting had failed, she could still convince God to abrogate mortality. She prayed so hard for my grandfather to come back she lost herself. Lost herself so completely that somewhere in her praying something changed: she realised she didn't want him to come back. Realised, that is, for reasons that elude her even now, that the thought that eternity might be confirmed as real scared her as much as the thought that there might be no eternal life at all. Whenever I think of my grandfather's death, I think of my mother beneath the house, surrounded by all her boxes. It hadn't occurred to me that she too might like to look for things which didn't exist.

If home is anything, it is this looking.