

Bury seed, water life

*Ben Rivers**

My family lives in Tasmania, an island that rests on the southern borders of our world – nothing but icy oceans between our wild shores and the continent of Antarctica. I grew up there, in a weatherboard house, surrounded by apple trees and beyond that, tall stands of iron bark and wattle ‘bush’ we feared for its summer fires and tiger snakes.

My mother would never accept this foreign country as ‘home’. Yearning always for the landscapes of her youth, she recreated within the perimeters of our land a forest of oak, beech, sycamores, and silver birch, with understoreys of scarlet maples, scented azalea, rhododendrons and spring bulbs. The garden was both my mother’s sanctuary and a place for purposeful action – long hours spent in digging, planting, weeding, hauling, pulling, pruning, and shaping the unruly into a place of form and colour. Though rarely a place to rest, there were afternoons, harvesting for the evening meal, or bunching bucket loads of flowers for tomorrow’s sale, where a sudden wave of satisfaction would arise in her, as if the garden in all its sensuality had spoken back.

But even a garden has its limits.

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My mother lives alone and yearns for her annual trip to Egypt, where we'd meet, usually during my holidays in Ramadan. I see now, an image of her sitting on the faded pink balcony of Pension Roma, overlooking Sharia Emad Eddin, in the heart of Wust el Balad. She never minded the clamour of car horns, loudspeakers, and street hawkers, joking, instead that Cairo's chaos and pollution made her ten years younger.

Crossing the road each morning to 16 Adly St, my mother would take the lift (if it was working), or walk three flights of stairs to Dawar Arts, where I lived in a small room, big enough for a single bed, one desk and a chair. For years, I refuted her advice (and that of friends) to move into a separate apartment. It's true, there were times where I missed privacy, my room opening onto the main hallway, where during a busy cultural event, crowds of people would gather, animated and excited to connect with one another. But this is also what I loved, the sense that I lived in the heart of a small village, an artist's commune, a vibrant crossroads that brought together folks from all walks of life, a rainbow of religions, nationalities, professions, social classes, and political persuasions.

We'd have breakfast on the tiled balcony, inspecting the potted yuccas and aloe veras for signs of growth. My mother told me about her morning ritual, the obligatory garden tour, checking on, and encouraging, each plant and its bed. It's a ritual I have adopted. At day's break, bleary eyes sharpening into focus as I behold with wonder or concern, the progress of plants that feel like kin. Today, before writing, it was the fava bean shoots that brought special wonder, their delicate leaf buds, held together like little prayers as they pressed through the soil.

By 9:30 am, people would begin arriving. Mustapha, Menna, Younes, Jimmy. The office opened, the lights on. Warm greetings, small talk, and the scent of coffee. On some days, groups of women would arrive, women from Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Eretria, as well as those from Egypt – all there to begin a day of deep sharing and improvised theatre. The hallway and tearoom would fill with their presence, a surge of energy, the pleasure of connection, a gladness for this temporary reprieve.

In March 2020, I took my own annual pilgrimage, traveling from Cairo back to Cygnet, my home town in Tasmania. What was planned as a one-month holiday turned into a seven month stay. Two weeks in, and borders around the world began to close. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, social distancing and quarantines

came into full force. On our island, the drawbridge was hauled up and the gate locked. Suddenly, mobility ceased. My carefully crafted schedules based on movement and travel, unravelled overnight. Greater forces held sway, bringing an abrupt halt to business as usual. For a moment, cities quietened, and the skies shone, clear.

I turned my attention to the garden.

As winter came and went, eclipsed by September, then October's warmth, the garden beds began to rise and shake. Thick knots of purple-flowered bean stalks bustled with wild bees. Yellow calendula sang under a sharp sun. Pots of salvia, snap dragons and buttery violas began to shoot upwards and outwards, claiming their own, turning my small wooden deck into a place of raw delight. I'd sit there at dusk, surveying a day's work. The apple and cherry trees I'd pruned (albeit too late!), the blueberries transplanted to a wetter zone, the sturdy cords of couch grass my mother and I had pulled out, only half triumphant, knowing that even one part of a single, wiry root could multiply and invade, forming into a dense and thieving mat.

Before summer arrived, I managed to find my way back to Egypt where work and my other life awaited me.

It's April 2021. Each afternoon, I cycle through the streets of Assala, past low white houses, goat herds, and sheep that roam freely. Scraggly moringa appear over courtyard walls, dangling long dry fingers, enticing me to snap them free. Later, I'll break them open, marvelling at the papery sheaths that cover their sweet tasting seeds. I've planted them in a friend's yard along with a hundred other trees, shrubs, herbs, and flowers - a young garden that already has a life of its own.

My family and I swap updates and photos from opposite hemispheres. Their late summer harvests of tomato, corn and squash. Here, our first few seedlings beginning to emerge, a surprise patch of fungi, a bunch of freshly cut greens, a single butterfly, foraged leaves, seaweed and manure, breaking down into a dark loam.

In this pause, the intermission, I have been pulled more closely into the orbit of our living earth, drawn to collect and bury seed, to water life, to be nurtured

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back, to be urged and inspired by each tip and shoot, to lay down at night with the visions of a garden merging with my dreams.