

Zan Bokho

Melbourne, November 2004

A few years ago in my home-town of Dublin, I listened to the African filmmaker Gaston Kabore talk about his film *Zan Bokho*. All I can clearly remember of his talk was that *Zan Bokho* translates as “the place where the placenta is buried.” He explained that in Mossi culture, when a child is born, the placenta is buried at the place of birth - symbolising the eternal connection to the land.

I write this in Melbourne. Even thousands of miles away from home, I can still feel the pulse of my own land. The midwife who helped me into this world 30 years ago is unlikely to have planted my afterbirth in a quiet spot overlooking Dun Laoghaire marina. But I cling to the slender hope that she did.

When I returned to Ireland in August for a brief holiday, my father showed me the building in which I had been born. My first breaths were crystal clear in his memory - and utterly un-remembered by me. It was only then that I realised that my parents are the only witnesses to parts of my life I can never know.

I have been living here for just over a year. I am happy, but think of home often - not just of Ireland, but of what “home” actually means to me. Since my arrival in Australia, I have never been homesick. The lemon and peach trees in my garden, the neon blue cityscape viewed at night from Rucker’s Hill near my house, the joyful multi-cultural heritage that produces wonderful people and sumptuous food - all now make it easy for me to feel I belong here.

Living here has been an education. Notably, I’ve learned to appreciate the true value of one of the most precious blessings of any home - water. Coming from my verdant island of lakes and rivers, I never before felt guilty about long showers or leaving the tap running for ten seconds too long. Yet here, television ads advise people of practical ways to save water - I particularly enjoy that the Government has managed to combine eco-responsibility and a romantic streak by encouraging couples to shower together. More prosaically, electronic billboards around the city provide bulletins on water stocks in the city’s reservoirs (hovering at less than 50% of capacity when last I checked).

Living amid the bustle, sophistication and achievement of a modern city, it is easy to be seduced into believing that urbanites are in some way independent of the land. Yet every day to sustain their populations, cities suck vast natural resources - food, water and energy - from their rural surrounds and replace it with waste and toxicity. I learned a little of how this resource bargain between country and city causes an uneasy coexistence between the two when I was temping for the State Government during my first few months in Melbourne.

The Government Department I was working in (Major Projects Victoria) was seeking to sell the merits of a new toxic dump to the three rural communities short-listed to host it. Unsurprisingly, each community mobilised rapidly and ultimately successfully against becoming a repository for Melbourne’s toxic discharge. They all posed a question which the planners in Melbourne had grave difficulty answering - “if the new waste facility will be as safe as you promise, why not build it nearer Melbourne, where the waste is generated?” They also quite reasonably queried the wisdom of replacing productive farmland with a waste facility and worried about the saleability of agricultural produce in surrounding areas.

However, the most instructive part of the reaction of these rural communities was the sheer horror they expressed that the Government was planning to interfere with the property rights of private citizens. When reviewing correspondence from the affected land-owners, I saw the Government’s plans being cited as both Nazism and Communism. The deep passions reflected the fact that in many cases the land had been in the one family for generations, some of it soldier settlements established by returning veterans of World War One. Taking the land from these families would be removing some vital part of themselves - like a compulsory purchase order for a limb or organ.

This view of the sanctity of private property as a touchstone value is fundamentally at odds with that of the people who originally inhabited this land until relatively recently removed - often by a mixture of violence and fraud. The estimated 60,000 years of aboriginal habitation of Australia represents the longest continuously maintained culture anywhere on earth. In all this vast expanse of time, this

population never felt the need to develop individual property rights. Yet land rights are now at the heart of advocacy campaigns for aboriginal communities.

From early in my stay in Melbourne, I became uneasy whenever I walked past one of the many signs on houses and buildings with wording such as “we acknowledge the Koori people as the traditional owners of this land.” Similar phrasing has been used by event MCs, politicians and speakers when addressing conferences and public meetings I have attended. Yet it all rings hollow. Those who mouth the words or put up the signs are understandably reticent about surrendering their own property as restitution for theft and violence committed over 200 years ago.

I shared my unease about what seemed to be empty gestures with an aboriginal community leader I met recently. She agreed that in many cases, the gesture was empty, but said that even empty gestures are progress in a long campaign over land rights. I found it striking that in over a year of living here she is the only representative of the “first nation” I have actually spoken to. For all its multi-culturalism, when it comes to skin pigment, Melbourne’s palette is mostly of whites and yellows - anything darker is strangely scarce.

One of the more interesting commentaries on Australia’s relationship with their land that I have noted recently is the slew of advertisements for four-wheel drives. These vehicles are pitched as being equally at home in the city as “off-road” in the bush. I suppose the manner in which these cars are marketed reflects the way landscape affects collective consciousness. The message is that Australia’s huge expanse is yours to explore as if it were a new frontier – and that you can still get back in time to collect the kids from school and return to the safety of the homestead.

My favourite ad in the genre is the one for the Ford *Territory*. The Sydney singer / songwriter Alex Lloyd does his bit to flog units, accompanying images of the vehicle against a morphing landscape with his song *Amazing* – “*You were amazing and we did amazing things.*” The commercial’s makers wisely edited out the lyrics that swiftly follow - “*But the things that seem to bind us are the things we put behind us on this day.*” It takes a glorious shamelessness to sell a family car with a break-up song.

The idiosyncratic use of Mr. Lloyd’s music has added to my enjoyment of the two albums I bought of his a week ago. Neither however, is as good as *The Soft Bulletin*, the wonderful album by *The Flaming Lips* that I added to my collection with the same purchase. The inventive and thought provoking music is accompanied by sleeve-notes postulating the delightful theory that the chemical in our brains responsible for being in love is the same chemical responsible for the big bang and the expanding universe. The theory is as eccentric as it is appealing – if anything is powerful enough to create all things everywhere, surely it must be love?

Falling in and out of love are, in their ways, celestial events. When we love someone by choice we bind ourselves to their cosmology - the family, friends, joys and labours that orbit around them as we do. Like any molecule spinning invisibly within an element or a vast heavenly object floating as a speck in our night sky, it is only an exact and delicate balance of forces that can maintain us in orbit. When the equations cease to balance, the invisible strings snap. We spin away at the speed of light, yet seem to disappear in slow motion. Behind us, the solar system of which we had just been a part collapses in on itself and closes forever. An event horizon is formed – across which information doesn’t travel.

It is through those we love that we develop our most grounded feeling of being “home.” Yet all human relationships are fluid, fragile and impermanent. The solid geology of a piece of land seems much more secure – which is probably why we tend to think of home as a physical space, to which we are planted (Zan Bokho) or otherwise psychically tied. Yet we kid ourselves. Home will always be where the heart is.