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CULTURE REVIEW

## Nan

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It was a grey Tokyo afternoon in winter, early January 2000 when I got the news via telephone. Landlines were still de rigueur, back then. This one was cordless; silvery-metallic blue, it was a Sharp-branded phone. I'd only ever seen Sharp microwaves and fax machines in my twenty-three years on the planet.

The phone was passed to me. My brother said, 'She died ten minutes ago'.

Nan was the only grandparent I'd known. She was 79 years old; died of renal failure brought on by diabetes mellitus. Her dementia was well advanced: four years before, in my cousin's garage down past Wollongong, Nan and I were having a cigarette; she turned to me and said,

*Where are you living now?*

*With Mum and Dad, Nan. In Marrickville.*

*Oh. Who are they?*

I can still see and smell the smokey vortices, swirling around that garage, in my mind's eye. It's where Nan lives now. It was at that moment I began to mourn my grandmother. Looking back, putting my grief on layby was a practical, efficient thing to do.

But back to Tokyo.

I boarded the plane for the return trip to Australia. It was a Boeing 747-300, the kind that doesn't have the little winglets at the end of each wing. It starts to snow as I look outside the window, seldom does it snow in Tokyo; of course it does so as I leave.

The flight attendant gifts me some cans of Japanese beer as a souvenir; later Dad would say that it tastes 'Just like Tooheys' (that's a put down) as he inhales a can of Asahi Super Dry. They also let me deboard with the first-class passengers: I told them I have to catch a train in less than three hours after the plane lands.

With my family already in Kempsey, I could not get into the house to get a change of clothes. A neighbourhood friend's mother allowed me to shower and change my clothes before

leaving for Central. Her mum made me bruschetta for breakfast. I don't normally eat raw tomato; but when you're in an Italian woman's kitchen you do not, under any circumstances refuse to eat the food she makes you.

I'd just travelled ten hours by jet and now I have to endure twelve hours on the XPT to Kempsey, which is the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales. And still, in the three days since I've been told my Nan is dead, not one tear. I do not cry easily, or readily.

A newly acquired Japanese Discman and a handful of CDs accompany me to Kempsey on the train. Among them, the RENT Soundtrack, the original New York cast recording. The train leaves the station and I start listening to the soundtrack.

I'd seen the Australian stage production about two years before so I regularly listened to the album. At track seven, *One Song Glory*, I began to cry. And not just quivering lips and one tear from one eye, like you see in Hollywood movies: my rib cage was vibrating with sorrow, uncontrollable sobbing that culminates in a snotty nose. A pure momentary release of grief. As the train cleared the city and persevered through Kuringai National Park, my focus shifted to the verdant growth outside the window. After nearly three weeks in the dreary monotony of Tokyo, this life outside the train window was revelatory.

It wasn't so much the lyrical content of the song that ignited my grief; it was more that it touched me, sonically. Bicknell reminds, 'Specific structural and sonic features of music are often associated with strong emotional responses'.<sup>1</sup> I don't grieve like a 'normal' person would; though there is no set text on how to move through a loved one's death, it is hard for me to show emotion, at the best of times. It took something else to take hold of it, within me, and pull it out.

The song itself, *One Song Glory*, is about a junkie contracting AIDS, and how he copes. If I had told my mother that this was the song that reminds me most of her mother, she would have been horrified. For Mum, the process of remembering and embodiment was with Dolly Parton's *I Will Always Love You*, which she played daily for two years after:

*Playing music can support the bereaved person's expression and powerfully promote their connection with the deceased relative.*<sup>2</sup>

For me, it wasn't so much about literal meaning. Jetlagged, on a train on my way to a funeral, *One Song Glory* had a depth of meaning that transcended the literal, the obvious.

Aural (or auditory) memory, defined here, as memories are laid down within one's brain by the hearing sense that can be recalled later.<sup>3</sup> All sense memory are evocative, none so much as olfactory memory. I believe that visual memory is as important, but nowhere near as evocative or poignant. I acknowledge that, it could have been any song in the train that Monday morning that would have brought the grief to the surface. It wasn't just the words I connected with: it was tone, pitch and beat. I connected with something deeper:

*Musical experience forces an encounter between mind and body, clearing a liminal space that is simultaneously charged with affect and fraught with tension. Musical experience seeps, exposing the arbitrariness of binary divisions between memory/imagination and subject/object.*<sup>4</sup>

Further, it's not just my Nan that I recollect when I hear the song, now. It's that time in my life, when I was listless, nomadic, early-20s and unsure about myself. My identity had not yet been refined. I hear that song, and I remember how unconstructed I was, as a person. I remember other details: the friendly purser on the train who, upon hearing my story, gave me

a vacant sleeping cabin so I could sleep; I remember the taste of the bruschetta, it was drizzled with olive oil. I remember that I was feeling overwhelmed with fatigue and not grief-stricken:

*Sensory memory is a form of storage. Storage is always the embodiment and conservation of experiences, persons and matter in vessels in alterity. The awakening of the senses is awakening the capacity for memory, of tangible memory; to be awake is to remember, and one remembers through the senses, via substance.*<sup>5</sup>

It was the ‘in-between’ feeling of liminality, as described by Victor Turner. Turner defined I was in the liminal state for those years I mourned my Nan, from that first moment she didn’t know who I was. I would enter this state, with each passing member of my family.

‘How important is hearing?’ I asked my partner, to which he said ‘I guess it goes back to that age old question, would you rather be blind or deaf?’ I responded with ‘How very Year Five of you’ but I started to think, it’s not about privileging auditory above the visual; it’s more to acknowledge the importance of the auditory. To extend the idea of embodiment, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and pressure receptors are extensions of the brain, not separate from it.

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## Endnotes

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