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Adam Aitken, *One Hundred Letters Home*

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Adam Aitken's memoir, *One Hundred Letters Home*, is a near-heroic exercise in excavation and reconstruction, travelling as it does from the United Kingdom and Thailand to several cities in Australia, tracing the process through which Aitken uncovers and recovers almost every emotionally-significant fact, memory and thought to do with his parents, and how these have come to affect him.

“There was a period of my life when I wanted to emulate my father, the father I had before he dissuaded me from becoming what he had been” (9). Thus the book begins, placing Aitken's skirmishes with personal identity to the forefront, and underscoring the deep-seated craving he feels, of wanting to understand the enigma of his sometimes-absent, charismatic British-Australian father, an ad man, who wooed consumers by instilling desire for products. Aitken's unspoken conflict with Aitken senior, his need to be seen and acknowledged by him, plays out on these pages. To him, paternal love is the most “Desired Product” of all (9). “I wanted to understand the ad man who'd met my mother in Bangkok and taken her to London. I wanted to understand why my mother fell in love with him and why he gave it all up to plant trees in a park in Lane Cove. It was a manageable obsession” (9).

However, this obsession is oftentimes stymied by both parents' obliqueness and inaccessibility, with Aitken's father being either absent for notable periods of time, or present only in the presence of that which interests him. Aitken senior's ebullient life is, contrarily, intermingled with the more contemplative activity of list-making. It is significant that, near the start of the book, Aitken the Younger is enumerating themes for a “wooing campaign”. After this, he transcribes one of his father's letters that includes a list of eligible ladies, with a description of the physical and personal qualities he favours in each. The book ends with father and son taking inventory of a lifetime spent in perhaps heedless accumulation and acquisition, with each one, in his own way, trying to transubstantiate chaos into order.

Mining newspaper articles and archive materials to fill in knowledge gaps, Aitken examines old photos then turns them over to decipher the captions written on their obverse. Yet the closer he gets to apprehending his parents' actions, the more the narrative fragments and fractures. As he notes later on: “My parents have bequeathed me

a life of promiscuity with the image, and in the end the only way to accept them is to become, once again, the wedding photographer” (128).

Through Aitken’s portrayal of his Thai mother’s character, he introduces another enigma, this one close-lipped and elliptic. One senses the inner life she keeps out of his reach, and resists revealing. In this detailed description of a special mother-son photo, Aitken recounts:

When I try to visualise the places we lived, I cannot see these anywhere on display, except one, of my mother and I, an enlarged reproduction in moody black and white. She’s nearing thirty and I am the four-year-old by her side. We are sitting by a window and the light is European, sfumato and wintry and my mother looks somewhat calm and unsmiling and wears a thick cardigan. [...] My mother, being brought up in a particularly Buddhist household, prefers to live in an imageless world. [...]

She will always let me see [the photographs], but only if I ask. They remain curiously private and inaccessible. (39)

She is consistently, definitively private. Much later on, when Aitken writes about how, to her suitors, “[s]he was unattainable”, he goes on to add, “like a cliché in a pulp Dragon Lady novel” (226). Elsewhere, he provides a quasi-internal monologue for this scene:

He is a Union Rep who’s had his eye on you for the last few months. He knows all about Suzy Wong (*sic*). Suzy’s not Croatian, nor Serbian, nor a Leb. You are nothing they’ve ever known in a woman. He has a soft spot for you. He thinks you are from the Philippines. [...] Nobody knows why Suzy would bother to work in this dump. [...] They can’t make up their minds if this was the Good Woman of Manila, or the bad one. A bit of both probably. “Good onya, Suzy. Now how about jumpin’ off and givin’ us a kiss?” You surprise yourself. You realise that you can press the accelerator and skewer the bloke. (198-9)

In repeating the labels he imagines they have for her, one wonders why he reiterates the names of these mysterious (to the Western gaze) and fictional Asian women? Still, while she is not the true focus of Aitken’s memoir, his mother does embody a part of his difficult hybrid nature, that aspect which Western perception codifies as dangerous, seductive and unknown.

Providing the occasion of the book’s one hundred letters, Aitken senior’s one-sided correspondence from London with his mother in Melbourne mirrors Aitken’s (illusory?) correspondence with an unnamed Doctor, a conversation that gains ascendancy as the book gathers momentum. The reader becomes privy to the confidences Aitken shares, ostensibly with the Doctor, but in reality it is with us. Thus his anecdotes form part of “the revenge of the Asian-Australian hybrid as a young voyeur. We can all play at being doctors. What was once called the reversal of the gaze” (205). Later on, Aitken relates another conversation with his Doctor.

DOCTOR: Please continue.

ME: I've thrown a party in my share-house in Newtown. It's a great success, not least because my father can flirt with Miranda, my girlfriend at the time. Together they spend some time in my bedroom, drinking a bottle of whiskey he had already presented to me. Needless to say, when I get off the plane my first priority was not my father. (229)

When Aitken repeats the anecdote in the following chapter, with its knowing aside to the Doctor, the repetition feels both nigglesome *and* suggestive:

My father liked her too. I have to admit, Doctor, that Miranda and my father were flirts. Ever since they spent more than a short period of time in my bedroom on my 21st birthday party, I knew that Miranda was amused by him, and he was utterly charmed by her. And if she had charmed him, I am not sure I cared too much. (Am I screening something out here, Doctor?) What I found most annoying was how they'd taken the bottle of whiskey he'd given to me as a present, and drank a good deal of it in sitting on my bed. (233)

In light of this, what does it mean when he observes, "My father was getting very forgetful" (221)? Is he echoing his father's forgetfulness? Or is this more akin to a kind of textual stuttering? And then, by following this thread of paratextual interpretation, has Aitken finally planted us, the reader, in the role of the cryptic Doctor?

Aitken includes his poetry throughout the book, providing a different lens through which to interpret these lives he examines so minutely. As he is known as a poet, the appearance of these poems, with their rich intensity, should not be a surprise, and yet it is. The first poem, "Bangkok 1957" (51), describes contrasting scenes where a speaker in monsoon-struck Kowloon wonders:

who's missing me?
My cup needs filling.
Instant noodles.

The poem then goes on to address "you", whose more fortunate, hedonistic life is full of gambling, luxury, and love. As a bookend, the penultimate poem, "A small Delhi pony", appears significant with portent through its very placement in the book. Thick with capitalised nouns and localising detail, the poem creates a mood of dislocation and inaccessibility, with only two glimpses of vulnerable personhood — in the lines when the speaker enjoys a G and T, and with the question "So what do you recommend?" But then the thicket of capitals returns, along with the feeling of something or someone lost in its density, trying to make their way out.

Following this poem is the section "House of Roses", situated almost at the book's very midpoint, and it is here that the book changes tone and style, moving from dream-like opacity to straightforward recounting, a movement that recalls the transition between walking unsteadily out of a swimming pool, towards the solidity and dryness of the

poolside. What does it say about the two states of mind, this duality between the two halves of the book? Does one section reflect one parent, then the other?

Early on, Aitken laments, “He was so often absent” (37). So it is that *One Hundred Letters Home* feels at times to be a lifelong pursuit for the father he wishes he could have, one more emotionally-engaged and present. “My doctor has pointed out to me, a few times, albeit tangentially, that my problems are connected to the obvious absence of father figures in my early years” (150). Paralleling this search, Aitken also notes his mother’s suitors in the period before and after his father’s marriage to her, comparing them with each other on their suitability as replacement father figures. Of one such suitor, Robert, he writes, “He is a ‘father’, but the other one, the one I thought I wanted to have, a powerful figment, a cipher. But why?” (226)

There are rare moments of reprieve from his almost-unremitting quest. One such moment of connection with his absent father catches Aitken by surprise, occurring on a trip to Thailand and described in the chapter “(Un)becoming Thai: Bangkok 1982”:

I reminded my relatives of the man they last met in 1958, the man I never thought I had come to resemble or invoke in others. I had always been my mother’s child, not his. At that moment of their recognition of him in me, I felt a surge of love for him, of connection. My relatives, who were still strange to me, were reminding me of how much of him survived in my body, and how well they remembered him. (248)

With a centrality that feels utterly paramount, Aitken’s longing is solid and palpable. It is no small thing that the last look he gives in this memoir is towards his father, as he finally observes that “he was no longer unhappy” (298).

Adam Aitken’s *One Hundred Letters Home* presents an author trying to make sense of his parents’ actions and persisting through comfortless decisions, documenting the ways in which their lives influenced his. Aitken’s memoir is less about obsessive, biographical exactitude, and more a movement towards excavation and piecing-together fragments into a distinct identity. The book’s rawness is a manifestation of his remembering and recollecting, like a story torn from an old newspaper, or a confession inside a much-folded letter.