

Leaving New Jersey



Barbara Kamler

Interactive Press
Leaving New Jersey

Barbara Kamler was born in New Jersey and came to Australia in 1972. She is the author of many academic book titles, over sixty journal articles and book chapters, as well as a poetic memoir based on the life of Blanka Wise. She has published poetry in *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Poetrix*, *Poetry New Zealand* and various anthologies.

Barbara is Emeritus Professor at Deakin University, Melbourne, and mentors early career researchers on academic writing and publishing in Australia and overseas. She lives in Melbourne.



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*That kind of blockage, exiling one's self from one's self—have you
ever experienced it?*

– William Carlos Williams

Such is the price you pay for leaving home.

– Paul Auster

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Also by Barbara Kamler

Academic titles

Shaping Up Nicely: the formation of schoolgirls and schoolboys in the first month of school, B. Kamler, R. Maclean, J. Reid, A. Simpson. DEET, 1994

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Something that Happens to Other People: stories of women growing older, S. Feldman, B. Kamler, I. Snyder (eds). Random House, 1996

Constructing Gender and Difference: critical research perspectives on early childhood, B. Kamler (ed). Hampton Press, 1999

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Surviving, B. Kamler Levine with B. Wise. Makor Jewish Community Library, 2004

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Prologue

Leaving is not a destination Fazal says. It is a process. Never finished. He sits opposite. My kitchen table. Recording device between us. He asks. You're on the plane about to leave all you know. What are you thinking? Not much I say. Well how are you feeling? I'm not sure. What do you imagine you'll find? On a blazing day in March forty seven years before Fazal moved from Lucknow to Canberra. Age fifteen. From most crowded to most empty of cities. Forty three years ago I left Manhattan for the dry paddocks of Wagga Wagga. Age twenty five. Fazal is writing his story. He wants me to write mine. But I have no answers. No memory of that moment in 1972 that will change everything. My friend is stunned. For twenty years we have talked diaspora globalisation migration. How can I not know? I see a leggy young woman. She sits beside a handsome husband on a Qantas plane. She believes she is an explorer. Australia is exotic. Unknown. For two years she will travel and teach. *And then she will return home.* Hovering above Sydney she sees red rooves blue harbour white opera house. Two men in tight shorts and high socks spray the plane. Up and down the aisles as if passengers are flies. I am certain that young woman is afraid. Unsure of the man beside her. Ignorant of the history landscape climate culture into which she is about to land. In the silence of not knowing I begin to write. Slowly at first. Then roiling raging tumbling out. Poem by poem. The conversation I cannot complete with my friend. I have been waiting a lifetime for this.

Home

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition . . .

– James Baldwin

Thanksgiving

Plonsk Poland 1907

Nana is leaving Poland for the promise of America. Leaving her mother four brothers three sisters. Fuelled by hate for Plonsk. Hate for boys who scream Jew. Hate for her father Jacob who left them behind for America. Every afternoon she runs to her Buba and begs. Write to him. Tell him to send money. I have to get out of here. *Ch'shtarb avek*. Tell him. Two tickets arrive for the eldest children. Nana and Meyer. Fourteen and thirteen. They are not lone travellers. Two of more than a million already fled. Nana doesn't know this. Only that she must leave the shack at the back of her uncle's house—three rooms no water no heat no light. No family photo for the journey. Just Nana's mother sobbing with Hymie and Louie the twins in her arms. Uncle finds a carriage to take them to Hamburg. Crammed into steerage narrow bunks dark steep passageways herring and potatoes. Nana falls down thirty two steps in the cargo hold. Bruised black and blue. Retching. Terrified. But thrilled to be leaving. She arrives at Ellis Island on the last Thursday in November. Thanksgiving. *Got zay dank*.

Forks

Miami Beach Florida 1957

A photograph. Three children in identical leopard print bathing suits. Chubby. Age four seven ten. Behind us pink stucco walls of El Morocco Motel. Unfashionable Miami. We squint at the holder of the camera with attention. Father smiling. Mama beside him. Urging us to smile. Off camera she holds pails shovels towels. We're going to the beach with Florida Father. The one who drives us to Miami every January. To escape the cold. Twelve hundred miles. Twenty hours in the car. Through Maryland Virginia. North Carolina South Carolina Georgia. Every gas stop he buys us candy. Baby Ruths. Good and Plenty. Nonpareils. We sing in the car. *You are my sunshine. A bicycle built for two.* Every night we dine on early bird specials. Junior's fried chicken. Wolfie's cheesecake. Pumpernick's corned beef. Mama sits close. Supervising. Father entertains. His specialty is balancing forks. Ladies and Gentleman take two forks wedge one quarter between the tines. Carefully rest enmeshed utensils on rim of water glass. *Voilà.* We hold our breath. Mama holds our hands. We never tire of Father's disappearing thumb or the way he makes our noses vanish and miraculously reappear in his palm. We are. Laughing. He is. In love with us. Three weeks later we drive back to home and work. Florida Father gone.

Dress

Newark New Jersey 1960

Even in the days when money is tight. Before eBay and outlet malls. Mama teaches me how to look right. She takes me to Broad Street across Market and Halsey. To Ohrbach's for fashion that's smart. She peruses the floor. Buzzing collecting. I follow behind through the change room door. She sits. I undress. I see what she sees. Just her the mirror and me. That one's too tight. Too revealing. Too drab. This one's just right. She sorts the clothes into piles. Yes. No. Maybe. Calculating. Then hides the maybes where others won't find them. Size tens with sixteens. Skirts behind dresses. In case she changes our mind. She pays. Now she needs coffee. Chock Full o' Nuts. We sit at the counter victorious. Date nut sandwiches oozing cream cheese. Mama considers. Cut colour fit. She is pleased. Last stop Klein's. Dozens of women pressing against us screeching swooping flocking pecking. Mama is fearless. Dives right in. From mountains of dross she pulls out her finds. Chic cashmere. Feathery mohair. Mama's ahead of her time.

Dinner

South Orange New Jersey 1962

We sit at the kitchen table. Waiting. The garage door rises. The front door swings open. Coat off. Hat in closet. Door shut. Same scene every night. We listen for clues. Footsteps. How heavy? How light? Is he humming? Tonight Father stands in the doorway jiggling coins in his pocket. Bad sign. Mama serves salad. Iceberg lettuce in low cal dressing. He gives her The Look. Sirloin steak charred. Frozen spinach instant mash. Father assesses. Embraces his plate with both hands and h-e-a-v-e-s it across the table. Crashing forks falling knives. Porcelain scraping teak. I cling to the roof of my mouth. Mama skewered to the chair. No sound but the fridge. Father rises to gather Muenster cheese dark rye pickled herring onions sour cream. A cold selection.

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