

October 16th, 2009 - Judith Krummeck

When dusk drew in that October evening, we lit a fire—more for the Gemütlichkeit than the need for warmth in late spring—and gathered in our cabin at Millstream with the friends who had celebrated our wedding with us there, just before I emigrated. The time and distance always contracted to nothing whenever we saw them again, and we could pick up the conversations from a year or two ago as if one of us had just popped out of the room for a moment.

Millstream is the kind of place that is now so layered with associations for me that it's almost mythical. At times, it seems mythological too when the mist rolls in over the low hills, the pink sunset is mirrored in the still surfaces of the trout dams, and the shy, red-chested cuckoos give their strange call and response, Piet-my-vrou! Piet-my-vrou! It's a place on the northeastern escarpment of South Africa, and it's the only property I can still lay claim to in my native country. This was my place, my homeland, resonating with memories and histories.



But America was my place too by then, even though I only had to open my mouth for people to hear that I didn't belong, and I was prepubescent in terms of my time and history there. When we were at Millstream that Friday in 2009, I'd been living in America for twelve years, and had been a naturalized United States citizen for eight of those years. After decades of geographical isolation in a place scarred by apartheid policies, I couldn't have felt more proud to be an American in a country that was basking in the first year of Barack Obama's presidency, or more grateful for the opportunities that my adopted country had given me.

As I sat in front of the jumping fire at Millstream, asking questions and listening to the back and forth of our friends' conversation, I began to realize that I was strangely out of touch with the key players in the political, social, and cultural life they were discussing. As much as I'd had the lurch of homecoming when I smelled the red African earth, and saw the huge expanse of her pale sky, and tasted the heavy fullness of the red wines, it was as if I was estranged from the shifting dynamics of the social structures, the relative value of the currency, the pulse of the place. I felt, in effect, like a stranger in my own country, coming face to face with the dilemma that any immigrant faces—not quite knowing where to call home.

As much as I tried to make sense of my divided life, I felt as if I was carrying around an overload of shifting experience, unable to give it shape and form. For the first time in my life—a life where I'd always worked with the spoken word, first as an actor and then as a broadcaster—I started to feel an urgent impulse to write it down. But the raw, visceral creativity I'd always associated with writing frightened me, and I had no idea where, or even how, to begin.

Tentatively, that year, I started to put out my first feelers about pursuing an MFA in creative writing. Ten years later, my second book is coming out this fall. The most astounding outcome of my divided life, it turns out, is that it made me into a writer.

Judith Krummeck is a writer and broadcaster living in Baltimore. Judith holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts from the University of Baltimore, and she has been the evening drive time host at Maryland's classical music station WBJC-FM since she immigrated from South Africa to America in the late 1990s. Her biographical memoir, *Old New Worlds*, intertwining the immigrant stories of Judith and her English great-great grandmother, is being published by Green Writers Press this fall.

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