

Tautvyda MARCINKEVIČIŪTĖ

On the Road

I left a copy of the book *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac on the hill on which the young, famous Lithuanian poet Vytautas Machernis is buried. He died in the German bombing of the native outskirts when he was retreating by horse-drawn cart to Germany during the Second World War. I left the book with him half a century ago, during my first school tour. It was difficult to obtain books during my formative years. Many were banned outright by the Soviets and you had to have a good bookseller friend, because good books disappeared from the bookstore almost at the same moment they arrived. I bought a copy of *On the Road* because it happened to have been left in that particular bookstore, because the workers of the surrounding collective farm hadn't bought it. It was an extraordinary event: it was a translated book, and the translator managed to persuade the staff of the only existing state publishing house to publish it.

I can't remember exactly whether I forgot the book on the hill or if I left it there deliberately as a token of my love for the poet. I was awarded a young writer's prize in my formative years for writing about Vytautas Machernis' poetry. The book I left there was a treasure for me. Even its translated version served as an odyssey for my whole life.

When I was young and lived in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, I didn't have any chances to travel abroad. Only the agents of the KGB, statesmen, or the pillars of the Communist Party had such opportunities. When the Soviet Union was falling apart, I got the chance to travel to the USA. A Lithuanian community of emigrants invited my husband, who was a well-known Lithuanian poet, and me to take part in their annual congress, "Santara." I got acquainted with the most famous Lithuanian writers who emigrated to Germany and later to the USA during World War II, and whose books were prohibited in the Soviet Union. Trusted friends circulated the only copy of their books published in the USA or even handwritten copies of books (*samizdats*) among themselves, sometimes only for the loan of a single night.

One such night, we were invited to a dinner with a close friend of the host, Valdas Adamkus, who was later elected the President of Lithuania. My husband played a tape recording of his own poetry, which a well-known Lithuanian composer had set to music. These songs were very witty, many about the Soviet Union falling apart, and one song was about Jamaica, a place which had been only a dream to the citizens of the Soviet Union. The future President listened to the Jamaica song attentively, turned to me, and said playfully, "O'key, let's go to Jamaica." I refused to confirm this story to journalists, but I later wrote a poem about this treasured moment.

A lot of my poems are inspired by travel and are written on the go, most of them during my husband's and my tour of France and Great Britain. There exist several cycles of these poems, some of which are included in the bilingual edition of my book published in the USA, so I want to comment on the figures in some of them.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, November 1, 2019
Roy Chicky Arad (Israel), Martha Mukaiwa (Namibia), Tautvyda Marcinkeviciute (Lithuania),
Amanda Michalopoulou (Greece), Clara Chow (Singapore)
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In Paris, there was a woman sitting in a metro train opposite me. It was the hottest summer day, but she was in a sweat suit which was fashionable on the Siberian plains, and she glanced anxiously at every passing woman. It seemed she didn't understand why she was being treated so badly. I recognized she was Russian, so I tried to feel all her despair, all the absurdity her homeland imposed on her that brought her here. In one of London's churches, there was an elderly lady who went to take the sacrament. It was a church built by the collected donation of Lithuanian emigrants and the lady was an emigrant as well. She was so inspiring that my memory of her haunted me until I tried to incarnate all her emigration experiences in my poem, "The Lady of East End."

The American poets Peter Gizzi, who teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, stated that poetry is a mode of travel and it has taken him elsewhere in time as well as in place. American poet D.A. Powell states that the body is the first writer of the poems. I agree. It was poetry which gave me this wonderful opportunity to take part in the International Writing Program, to travel the US writing new poems based on being here. When I write these poems on the road, I use my six senses, I feel rhythms in the environment which correspond to breathing and to the systole and diastole of the heart.

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