

Albana Shala

In Search of Ivanovka

I write about places. Places I visit, places I have lived, places I dream of. Sometimes I express myself clearly enough so that both friends and critics share my perceptions and my thoughts about these places. They say they feel with me, some say they can identify with me. I think they are kind, especially when I know the confusion it might cause to walk with me in Sintra, Portugal as my mind dwells on my childhood town of Kruja in Albania. It is annoying for some of my friends to see me so 'detached', for they would prefer that I focus and be with them in one place. Well, focusing is my problem. I've worn thick glasses since I was six, glasses that became misty when I moved from one place to another, so for many years my sense of place was determined by that initial fog.

I always take my time before fully being in one place, as I am often busy with all sorts of details. Not only because I still wear glasses and thus still see the fog, but because when I get somewhere I get there in pieces, like a pointillist lego mosaic of Don Quixote. As I am asked to take a seat, some parts of me are still travelling. They are still enjoying the landscape view from the train window. Some are now taking the lift and will soon slip under the door.

Fragmentation is a rather costly business. Throughout the years, I have lost some of parts of myself, some hearing, some teeth, some hair, some ability to be flexible, some soul. And maybe that is what happens to everybody through life. We leave behind part of ourselves. Some part of me simply refuse to continue the journey. In exchange for this loss I keep memories of places, of people and of myself moving through time.

Writing about a sense of place relates to this notion of time. Time structures the place. Timelessness of a place implies a never-changing spirit. I tend not to think about timelessness, but about an accommodating time structure for a given place. For example, Venice has been for many centuries now a shining pearl in the Mediterranean. It is sinking deeper day by day; history is the stone weight. Many writers and poets have written about Venice, all of them have been forced in one way or another to take into account the time element.

I grew up in a dictatorship, in a big open prison. An arena of cruelty. My parents built a love nest and they could keep it in tact until the fall of the regime. I felt loved, and therefore, not so damaged. Freedom of movement was limited. But there were old books and old maps, there were the memories and the winter tales about the journeys of my grandparents who travelled and lived in this continent even during the Great Depression. Those stirred my imagination and stoked my hunger for exploration. During those years I sailed the seas and lived in many big cities. My heroes were Jack London and David Copperfield, my heroines Anne Frank and Tess of the d'Urbervilles. For me, Hamlet was staged in Kruja castle and not in Elsinore.

During the years of the dictatorship, my language would be corrupted as soon as I tried to put my feelings on paper, but my imagination was alive and kicking. As Wallace Stevens puts it in his essay, "Imagination as Value": "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before reason has established them." In those years I built my own truth about the unknown, beautiful world. Imagination was my escape, and concepts like freedom and individual choice were first branded in my imagination.

I once happened to read at length about eels, and I started dreaming of becoming an eel. Scientists are still trying to understand what makes an eel swim thousands of miles and go through all kind of hardships and dangers to reach the Sargasso Sea and lay eggs. How is the instinctive behaviour of eels transmitted from one generation to another? Do humans do something comparable? Is migration coded in our genes or is it a survival mechanism that we activate only when in need? Why do we travel when survival is not at stake?

I have spent hours and hours imagining the Sargasso Sea, known as mysterious and bottomless, full of weeds and far away from land, trying to figure out what made it so special to all American and European eels. They say it is the favourable currents and still winds and something else, which cannot be perceived by our senses.

Fifteen years ago I could leave Albania and move to the Netherlands. I did not choose the place I was migrating to, though perhaps now I am choosing to stay there. One thing is for sure: throughout all these years I have been fascinated and overwhelmed by the presence of water. I live on an island, I cannot do without water, and water has found its way into most of my poems.

I also write about borders and how I relate to them. Living in two relatively small countries and having to travel a lot for my job, I have encountered many borders – physical, mental, emotional, verbal, imaginary. Some borders have a long life, to the point that people do not remember what the world was like without them. Some are erected and then demolished within seconds. I think borders permanently define our sense of place. Imagine the Balkans without borders. Imagine the Caucasus without borders!

What am I searching for in my travels? Some years ago I joined Ulvi, a good friend a mine, at his dacha, or summer house, in the prosperous village of Ivanovka at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains in Azerbaijan. The village is inhabited by Molokan¹ Russians who arrived and settled there more than a century ago. Amid the mountains, amid the Azeri people who speak another language and practise another religion, the Russians of Ivanovka still feel safe and at home.

Ulvi's neighbors in Ivanovka hosted us for lunch. As hours passed by I noticed that Ulvi had become another man, a man I had never seen in the

¹ "Molokans – known as "milk (moloko) drinkers" for their refusal to honor Russian Orthodox Church fasts -- settled in Azerbaijan sometime in the mid-19th century, after being expelled from Russia for refusing to wear the cross and to practice any ritual, such as fasting or venerating icons, not explicitly stated in the Bible. Molokans are also known for their pacifism and their communal tendencies in social organization." (www.eurasianet.org)

streets and offices of Baku. His face radiated with joy, he laughed with all his heart. After lunch we took a stroll in the village and went to see his dacha. According to him it was a “paradise for lovers, for philosophers, for poets, for a family with children, for his grandfather and grandmother, for his cousins, for friends like me.” He had found what he was looking for.

I’ve realized that I also keep searching for my Ivanovka, a welcoming place at the end of a journey. Maybe life itself is nothing more than a restless journey, a long search throughout the years, the many events, places and people we meet, to an Ivanovka. What matters? The journey, what you leave behind or the destination? And in what order?

Ivanovka village is known for its good wine. Back at home in Amsterdam, sitting next to my love, I used to drink what remained of the idyllic wine of Ivanovka, making a toast to all our friends and smiling wisely. With closed eyes, I softly recite these two fine lines of Wallace Stevens²: “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw Or heard or felt came not but from myself.”

² Wallace Stevens “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon”