As You Set Out For Ithaka

By Molly Beer

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As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
-Constantine P. Cavafy

There is a collective respect for that bend in the road — that dark divergence in the wood — and for the daring souls who choose to travel down the rough-but-scenic route through life. In this Lone Ranger world the footloose, the fancy-free, and those who act on wanderlust garner admiration, even envy. It should not be this way. Some lives have a propensity for sprouting roots and others grow wings. It’s little more than a constitutional difference, yet our mythologies teach us that true heroes quest for glory, they do not wait for it at home. One great secret tacitly shared by those who go, who charge down the road less traveled, is that leaving is the easy part of the journey, as are the battles, clashes, and bouts of homesickness. The greatest challenge is the anti-climax, the coming home and the laying down, and then that monumental act of merging back onto the mainstream path most traveled.

Setting off for far away places is an act of abject optimism. You pack your bags, quickly kiss your family and friends, and wave so long over one shoulder as you walk away. You may choke up a moment, visions of loved ones already a thorn in your memory, but all the while your eyes are looking forward. Everything else is peripheral, except the road ahead of you and the nebulous space where it blurs into horizon. Your senses and your mind stretch open: foreign tongues, Cyclops, Laistrygonians, strange cuisine—they do not scare you, not yet. You will meet each monster as it appears before you.

There are rocks in your road. Rocks and robbers, kamikaze bus drivers, days spent roaming in frenzied circles, invasions made on your intestines, tedious traveling companions, border mayhem, faux pas, bodily damage suffered, uncooperative animals, lost luggage, earth shattering natural disasters... but these are in and of the road, as quintessential to travel as the view and utterly out of your control. Although you will be changed by this, you are a witness where the outside world is concerned. You are watching, wondering, wandering, tasting the air around you, making contact, then moving on. Anything can happen. Anything is expected. Everything is accepted once you understand; you do not quest for comfort or for common knowledge.

While you are away you wish for things. You dream of a sandwich made just-so, of a meal without rice, of basic routines made basic once more, of being inconspicuous in a crowd, and of the familiar in all its senses. Most of the time, however, you concentrate on moving from here to there, of living your journey day by day.

“T'ou muse, to creep, to halt at will, to gaze— / such sweet wayfaring,” Wordsworth exclaims from his carriage along the Rhine, because it is a delicious way to live: vibrant and vivid. The longer your journey is, the longer you’ll wish it to be. You live in the midst of discovery; you see the whole world fresh and new each day with the vigor of the traveler who does not know or expect to know for long the land and landscapes, the faces and face-scapes. Odysseus took twenty years to make his way to the end of his journey, and the delay was not all happenstance.

The world of the road is perpetually shifting and morphing as you come to know it better, just as you are shifting and morphing as you come to know yourself better. You are the equivalent of a fully conscious infant immersed in new stimuli: language tastes new to your unwieldy tongue, yet is often as surprisingly delicious as the food you reject at first; your body, graceless in the beginning, learns to bow, to measure the appropriate distance between it and another body, to sleep in a hammock or on a hard floor; and your eyes, propped open wide with wonder, are awash with new colors, faces, and strange shapes. Every aspect of life is so poignant and important, even when it is difficult. Nothing is easy, per se, but every facet of life on the road is rife with intensity. The grocery store, crossing the street, posting a letter, riding in taxis—the most mundane elements of your day are prime for epiphany and wondrous discovery. You exist on the steepest slope of the learning curve, and when that novelty wanes, you move on into fresh virginity. You begin again.

So how does one come home?

One expects a climax in the end, a great culminating crescendo, but coming home is never what you expect nor what you hope for. There are the passionate embraces and celebrations, but soon everyone begins to speak at once and the sound is as foreign as the street noise of some bustling port city that you once eyeballed through. You try to tell that story. Everyone listens politely. Then they change the subject. That part of your life, your travels, are over. Your world welcomes you back into its fold — but like lovers to whom you have been unfaithful, those you left when you left home do not want to know the details of yourdigressions. You sit there bursting with stories and associations, observing links to far off lands in your very living room, but these are dirty secrets that only certain ears can hear. No, a circle has no peak, no zenith; the journey does not end with one great summit rush.

Arriving home, you are amputated from your travels with such abrupt finality that even the things you carried, those essential objects that you load with meaning on the road, become trite, useless, and decidedly old. Those boots you wore every day for two years across swamps and up mountains, the camera you clutched as you slept, the marsupial pocket-belt beneath your clothes that has born your worn out passport... you take each off, you lay it aside. You discover your traveling objects next by accident, shoved in a drawer, and realize they have died of neglect:
The knife there on the shelf—
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break?
I know each nick and scratch by heart,
the bluish blade, the broken tip,
the lines of wood-grain on the handle...
Now it won't look at me at all.
The living soul has dribbled away. (Elizabeth Bishop)

Tokens of your odyssey are reduced to souvenirs, to mere momentos of a great trip you once took, a vacation away from your real life. The people who you left behind, meanwhile, find other things important—things you cast off when you left, but things they've infused with meaning — the treasures of their roads through life: a new car, an entertainment system, or a new baby, a whole universe in diapers.

This opens yet another door. Home does not stay static and patiently waiting to change until you decide to reclaim it. Your friends — though they remain faithful Penelopes awaiting your return — live on in the interim while you are away. They have their own stories, equal to yours for they are also the tales of adventure, their adventure. The one that you walked out on. The one that you forsook when you took that damned divergent path.

You start to miss rice, and even that sandwich, just-so, isn’t quite what you are hoping for…

They say — the psychologists, the researchers — that a prevalent symptom of reverse culture shock is the urge to reverse one’s homebound tracks and walkabout all over. Doesn’t it make sense to stay away? Isn’t it better to keep home pure and perfect and muck around in other places that you can leave without a backwards glance the moment you dislike them? There is a traveler’s proverb that claims “travel is practice for death” because the goodbyes you say as you pass through are so permanent, so final. This is even true for the goodbyes you say as you first set out to dream your dream and have it too. The experience of travel not only changes the self, it changes the very definition of home: The wayfarer is at home in the world. All of the world. And this change cannot be reversed.

Then why double back at all? Why come full circle? The world is vast — why would you walk in your own footsteps twice (if it weren’t for that tone in your mother’s voice, the guilt of missing one too many weddings or funerals, or that pesky, shriveling savings account)? Or are these the wrong questions? Are you even going home as you do so? Or is there even such a thing as home anymore?

For myself, the urge to return to my homeland — albeit the side opposite that I once called home — is simple. After a bit of Asia and most of the Americas, after many years and three new languages, I want, like Voltaire’s Candide, “to cultivate my garden.” For that, I need family.

Now that I have landed, I rarely look at the pictures on the wall — a series of photographs of doorways in Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, and Tibet. The marketplace watercolor hangs neatly in a black frame in the living room, and the thin, pottery bowl with the fish painted on it which crossed three countries in a backpack without breaking, sits on the mantle, a plain brown, misshapen thing. I have been in this place a year, but I still read overseas job listings and the travel section first. Still, I dream of the road, of early morning markets, of long treks between villages, of hoisting my slim belongings onto my shoulders and walking onwards. Still, I imagine lands I haven’t seen, but I dig my hands into the earth of my garden, and I imagine I am sprouting roots.

What can’t be diminished or curtailed are the rocks of the roads that you carry within yourself. For example, if you learn one thing as a traveler, it is a tolerance for the nonsensical. Thus, you can follow this conclusive logic:

There is a concatenation of events in this best of all possible worlds: for if you had not been kicked out of a magnificent castle for love of Miss Cunegonde: if you had not been put into the Inquisition: if you had not walked over America: if you had not stabbed the Baron: if you had not lost all your sheep from the fine country of El Dorado: you would not be here eating preserved citrons and pistachio-nuts. (Voltaire)

You could only get to where you are because of how you came — pure Panglossian obviousness, but relevant all the same. Your travels make and shape you, they determine your future paths, but it is in the return that you ultimately measure the distance you have traveled.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.

... And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean. (Cavafy)

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