

My Kind of Town: to be home is to be on the move

Words by Alessandra Cianchetta

As I write these lines, I'm sitting in a funky but not at all unpleasant hotel room in the Windy City, waiting to speak at the Chicago Architecture Biennial's opening symposium. While looking for inspiration — and no doubt courting controversy — I came across quotes by the Surrealist-Dada poet and boxer Arthur Cravan. (For reasons linked with a laborious disentanglement process that is too long to explain here, and which I feel must be taken only with humour, I'm very much into Dada lately.) "I have twenty countries in my memory and trail in my soul the colour of one hundred cities", he said, and "when I stay too long in one place stupidity overwhelms me".

Throughout his peripatetic life Cravan is known to have claimed several nationalities and forged an equal number of passports, for the simple sake of doing it. Elusiveness. Adventure. Transgression. Surprise. All these were a form of avant-garde art. Also, more prosaically, of catch me if you can. My own abundantly stamped Italian passport has sufficed for a similarly fragmented and itinerant lifestyle: a few exotic wanderings, occasional transatlantic sojourns, Asian escapades, a constant criss-crossing of Europe, a beautiful nomadism that has resulted from biographical accidents, serendipitous circumstances, indeed pretexts, a penchant for wanderlust and a lust for life at large.

There is no place, no city and ultimately no Heimat but a multilayered palimpsest of places, cities, encounters and experiences: Swiss glaciers, Scottish landscapes, Atlantic crossings, Lake Inle at dawn, the Euphrates at sunset, many rooftops, anytime. Glimpses of cities, collaged into one impossible city: New York, Beijing, Arezzo, Yangon, Venice, New Orleans, Aleppo, Tokyo, Dublin, Istanbul, Miami, Havana, Colombo, LA, Belfast, Hong Kong, Phoenix, Sao Paulo, Trivandrum, Houston, Phnom Penh, Halifax, Beyrouth, Mumbai and countless others.

I have long had a preoccupation with notorious exiles, all of them writers like some of my great love(r)s. Conrad, my favourite, with whom I share a distaste for routines and restrictions, sailed the oceans in an absurdly adventurous life. Then there is VS Naipaul, whose novel about his new Wiltshire homeland, 'The Enigma of Arrival', was given to me by my last love. Above all, there is Nabokov, with whom I share a number of temporary homes and whereabouts. In his beautiful semi-autobiographical novel 'Look at the Harlequins!', he labels Paris "that dismal city", but in recent years I have had a slightly more forgiving view of the place that has been my intermittent 'home' for the last 15 years, and where my eight-year-old son Tadzio was born. Frigidly elegant, pompously sophisticated, à jamais Capital of the Nineteenth Century.

And then there were those few months in Lausanne, where Cravan was born and Nabokov died. There's also Ithaca, New York, where I spent a marvellous fall semester living in the black and apparently haunted (I didn't notice) Miller-Heller House, Cornell University's shelter for visiting academics. A perfect slice of 'Americana', with crisp blue skies, gorges, waterfalls, forests and lakes, the sound of crickets on summer nights, the almost tropical smell of too-ripe fruit, the leaves turning from green to obscene oranges and reds, the first heavy snows. Isolation. The intense yet somnolent intellectual life, and the lingering presence of so many minds, both alive and dead. And that wonderful, delusional American optimism, marred only by interminable winters and far too many academic sherrys. Up there on the way to nowhere, gritty and glamorous New York City down the road was a very frequent destination. My son, then four, always urged me to stay in Manhattan. "Why do we need to go back to 'America'?", he demanded, adding resolutely: "There are many more adventures to be lived in a big city".

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