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Prelude! “Prélude” Prelude...



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passa festival? 24, 25
porta «festival» 26.03
festival: 2017

It is the event that no book lover wants to miss: every two years, the Passa Porta Festival invades Brussels. Over the course of a weekend, from 24 to 26 March, the best Belgian and international writers, whether established authors or new voices, come together to share ideas and their passion for literature in cafés, theaters, bookshops, libraries and other public spaces.

The leitmotif of this edition : risk-taking in our uncertain age.

Confessions of a Travelling Writer

by Erika Fatland

The organisers were kind enough to send me a list of the authors who have held this opening speech before me, and if that were not enough, they also sent me a copy of their speeches. So it is with mixed feelings that I stand here today – but not only because I stand in the shadow of the giants who have been here before me, (last year, I've been told, it was a Nobel laureate) but also because I feel the weight of age. My husband, who is a fair bit older than me, is a writer as well. When we met more than ten years ago, he had just reached the age where people had started to ask him to open things – music festivals, exhibitions, things like that. There is no better indicator that you have reached adulthood and will soon be joining the ranks of *middle age* - that your youth is very definitely a thing of the past - than to be asked to open a literature festival in Belgium, for example.

People have feet, not roots, as it said on the first page of my introduction to social anthropology textbook. This is one of the central pillars of the subject, and of human history. About 80 000 years ago, a group of people left Africa and crossed the Red Sea to what is today Yemen. They then carried on and spread out to Central Asia and the Himalayas, before populating Europe about 40 000 years ago. Along the way, their culture and language changed in multiple ways.

And we have continued to expand our horizons, and to develop and improve our means of travels ever since. These days, we don't use our feet so much, but rather settle into a narrow seat and let ourselves be transported through the air, ten thousand feet above the ground, in a narrow aluminium tube. We northern Europeans travel so much and so often that we give our credit cards blisters, and, CO2 emissions aside, who can blame us? There's a very good reason why 90 per cent of tourists to Oslo come in summer.

And thanks to all this travel, we hear ad nauseam that the world is getting smaller and smaller. The world is just as big as it has always been: 510 072 000 square kilometres, of which 148 940 000 square kilometres is land mass and the rest is water. The landmass is divided into just under 200 countries and territories, depending on how you count them.

So no, the world has not got smaller. But more and more people travel to the same places. And these places are becoming more and more similar. No more than a couple of generations ago, travelling from Norway to the USA not only involved crossing a great distance, but also from one culture to another, linguistically and mentally. Today, some parts of Norway seem more American than a lot of places in the USA, and we have been adapting their customs and habits, brands and references for a long time now. And as we all know, Norway is not alone in this, so it is rare to feel out of one's depths on arrival in Paris, Brussels or Milan. If you can't speak French, Flemish or Italian, you can still order a Coca-Cola.

Personally, I prefer to go where no one else wants to go. To the peripheries. It's almost become an obsession. When I'm off on some gruelling research trip, for example in a remote village in Pamir, almost risking my life in search of an outside toilet in the middle of the night, with freezing temperatures, and the guard dogs barking and snapping at me, I promise myself solemnly that I will never, never, ever put myself in this situation again. But then no sooner have I unpacked my bags at home than more ideas for other arduous trips pop up.

In this past year, I have travelled along the border of the largest country of them all, Russia, as part of the research for my next book, *The Border*. I travelled from Pyongyang in North Korea to Finnmark in northern Norway, and even though only one country separates Norway from North Korea, I crossed fifteen borders en route.

Crossing a border is one of the most fascinating, and sometimes one of the most frightening things, a person can do. You are at the mercy of the border guards, and if you are really unlucky, he has time on his hands. The North Korean border guard, for example, had all the time in the world. He patiently went through every single picture I'd taken and deleted the ones that didn't show his country in a

favourable light. There were a lot of them. When I finally got an exit stamp in my passport, the feeling was one of immense relief. As part of a group of foreign tourists, I had of course not suffered in any way under the totalitarian regime, even though it was impossible to get Coca-Cola, but we did experience the lack of freedom, the paranoia and the absolute control.

Compared with the controlling and paranoid North Korean regime, China felt like a citadel of freedom. It was as though the neon lights welcomed me. Something familiar at last, something that reminded me of home, something understandable! Facebook and Twitter were blocked, it's true, but at least I had telephone coverage and access to the internet. Once again I was part of the world, and I could walk around without being followed by nervous guards.

Very few North Koreans have ever been out of their country. Those who manage to cross the border illegally, are routinely sent back by the Chinese police if caught. And back in North Korea, all that awaits is torture and a stint in prison or a labour camp. Fleeing the world's best country does not go unpunished.

When you cross a border, the geographical distance is insignificant, often a matter of metres, but mentally and culturally the contrasts are sometimes so great that you might as well have stepped into a time machine. And the language barrier can also be brutal. Off the beaten track in northern China, I was rendered both illiterate and mute.

I have for years used the University of Oslo as a resource centre for free language learning. The practical vocabulary I have learnt in various languages has proved to be far more useful than all manner of socio-anthropological theory. If you can't talk to people, you can't understand their world. The problem is that there are nearly 7000 languages in the world, and in China, I couldn't speak the only one that mattered. I had actually tried to learn some survival phrases before I left, but got no further than the most elemental sounds. So for three weeks, I travelled around with notes on bits of paper that I clung to like a lifeline, and on the whole, I managed to get to where I wanted to be, but not always. Something as simple as going to the supermarket was a challenge. How could I know whether I was buying shampoo or conditioner? But worst of all, naturally, was that the language barrier prevented me

from talking to people. A journey is as great and adventurous as the people you meet along the way.

From the world's most populous country, my journey continued to the least populated. There are more sheep than people in Mongolia. From the train window, I looked out onto a desolate and barren landscape. Here and there I saw a flock of sheep, a couple of camels, some horses. Just shy of 800 years ago, Ghengis Khan and his men mounted their small, hardy Mongol horses and rode west. As they progressed, they committed massacres so brutal that they left a permanent, ecological scar. The result was an empire that stretched from today's Poland to the Sea of Japan. A larger, contiguous empire has never existed before or since in history, and it all started here, on the desolate steppes of Mongolia.

Once I reached Ulaanbaatar, I got caught in the worse traffic jam I have ever experienced: over half of Mongolia's rather small population now lives in Ulaanbaatar. In winter, as coal is still their primary fuel, it is the world's most polluted city. The empire has disappeared, but Ghengis Khan is still omnipresent. Even though no portrait of him survived for posterity, his broad, severe face adorns everything from beer cans to banknotes.

My journey carried on through Xinjiang Province and over the border to Kazakhstan. The last time I was in Kazakhstan, doing research for my book, *Sovietistan*, I swore that I would never go back. Yet now it felt like coming home. Finally I had words again, and for the first time on my journey, no one reacted to my red hair and fair skin. I blended into the crowd, I could read the signs and restaurant menus, and I loved the grey Khrushchev blocks for the fact that they were familiar.

These days, it is not often that one actually crosses a border – and I am disregarding Schengen, the borderless Europe, here. Crossing borders is a part of *slow-travel*. As a rule, we fly over them and are then funnelled into the new country via orderly queues at the airport. For anyone arriving overland, on the other hand, it is usually far more complicated. Everything down to your smallest belongings, even your dirty socks and pants, are examined with suspicion and interest.

The border guard between Ukraine and Belarus studied my contact lenses long and hard. What on earth were they for? I explained to him that they helped me to see better, but he didn't believe me. My maps were a cause of even greater concern. Why did I need so many maps? Was I a spy?

The idea of writing a book about the Russian border first started to germinate in February 2014, exactly one month before Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Shortly after, the war broke out in Eastern Ukraine and is still ongoing. I could not get into Crimea without a Russian visa, but after much discussion and negotiation, I was given the necessary permits to visit the rebel state of Donetsk. At "the border" we were stopped by one of the rebels. He wore a balaclava, so his face was hidden, and had a Kalashnikov slung casually over his shoulder. For the first time in my life, I heard the crackle of gunfire. Not far from here, there was fierce fighting about where the border should go.

It is 2017 and there's a war going on in Europe, but we hardly ever hear about it anymore, it has already become everyday.

Like everything that is human, borders are neither fixed nor unchangeable. Empires come and go, borders are moved, border stations are built, abandoned and fall into disrepair, only to be then reinstated again. The journey along the Russian border took me through fourteen countries and three autonomous republics. I was not allowed into the fourth, South Ossetia, but under the beady eyes of the Georgian border guards, I was allowed to talk to a man who had been caught on the Russian – sorry, South Ossetian – side of the barbed wire fence. He awoke one morning, four or five years ago, to discover he was in another country. In the dead of night, Russian soldiers had erected a border fence just outside his house. The war ended in 2008, but the border is still fluid.

The poor Georgian told me that he sometimes snuck through the barbed wire fence to pick up his pension on the Georgian side. The only problem was, he couldn't change it into the local currency in South Ossetia because no one there wanted anything to do with the Georgians. It didn't matter that he had lived there all his life.

And moving was not an option, as his wife was seriously ill and unable to leave the house.

Anyone who has followed Putin's doings in the Caucasus over the past 18 years, will not be in the least bit surprised by what is now happening in Ukraine. And with Trump at the wheel of an increasingly introverted USA, Russia's European neighbours face ever greater uncertainty regarding the future. The Baltic states have every right to be concerned.

Borders are a fundamental component of any society and culture. That is the second thing you learn as a student of social anthropology. Identity arises at the border. Who am I if I don't see myself reflected in you? Who are *we* if we cannot compare ourselves with *the others*?

About fifty or sixty years ago, it was not unusual to see "No Northerners" on advertisements for rooms to let in Oslo. Norway is an extremely long country, and people from the north were often viewed with suspicion. *They* behaved differently from *us*. Not that differently, but different all the same. By the 1970s, however, migrant workers from Pakistan had taken over this role from the northerners. Now that someone else was playing the role of *the others*, they were seen as highly attractive lodgers.

Borders create and separate both people and cultures. After six months travelling from country to country, from culture to culture, it was in a way sad to come back to the EU. The first thing I saw in Vilnius was a kiosk owned by the Norwegian company Narvesen. The border between Latvia and Estonia runs straight through the middle of a town. I sat and watched out for the border from the bus window. All I saw was a small, blue sign. Then I was in Estonia. The currency was the same, which was practical, but unfortunately most of the shops were also the same: global mega-chains offer consumers the world over exactly the same goods, regardless of borders. And obviously, small companies and local tradesmen can't compete, but that is what the West calls a free market.

There are often also borders within a country that are invisible, yet distinct, not only because the country has more than one language and culture. These invisible borders often pass through people's minds and hearts. Belgium is by no means the only example of this. Invisible, elastic, but clear mental borders separate one language group from another, one cultural group from another, rich from poor, young from old, layman from specialist.

The EU, on the other hand, has a hard external border that is very real.

Eighty thousand years ago, it was the sea level and then ice that restricted people's movements. Today, we are walled in by visible and invisible borders. Nearly four thousand people drowned in the Mediterranean last year as they attempted to reach their dream of Europe. And of the thousands who made it alive, decidedly few will realise the dream.

The world is not fair and it never has been. Nor are borders fair, yet we can't manage without them. The current wave of Islamic terrorism has definitely not peaked yet. We all have to live with the fear, but those who have lost someone or experienced it themselves, also have to live with the grief and trauma for the rest of their lives. In connection with my work on earlier books, I have met victims of the Beslan hostage drama in the Caucasus, and the terrorist attack on Utøya in Norway. Life goes on, for them too, but those who have not experienced it first hand, almost always underestimate the time it takes. Just how many years it can take.

In Beslan, I met a man who had moved into the graveyard to be with his dead daughter. It was the only thing that made sense to him. The local authorities appointed him as director of the graveyard and built a house for him there. In Oklahoma, I met a father who had lost his daughter in Timothy McVeigh's bomb attack in 1995. Initially he sought comfort in alcohol. But now he travels the world working for the anti-death penalty lobby, which his daughter was passionate about.

Ghengis Khan's warriors left behind them rivers of blood and heaps of decapitated heads. They did this to create fear, so that their reputation would go before them and make the next town surrender without a fight. Today, in the age of the smart phone, fear spreads instantly. There is no reason to be naive. At a time when thousands of radicalised Europeans have experience of warfare, it is important to

control who crosses our borders. At the same time, we must never give in to fear, because then terrorism has won, in line with Ghengis Khan's recipe.

The greater part of any preventive work has to happen *within* national borders. In 1983, the child welfare services in Oslo were deeply worried by the development of a four-year-old boy. He showed no understanding of normal play and often wore what the child psychologists described as a "false, deprecating smile". The boy's relationship with his mother was so dysfunctional that the professionals concluded that he should be taken away from his mother. Unfortunately, this decision was never followed through and Anders Behring Breivik grew up at home with his unstable, mentally ill mother. Today he is serving a prison sentence for the murder of 77 people.

Not everyone who has a difficult childhood becomes a mass murderer. Most manage fine in life. But we, as a society, cannot afford to let a single person fall through the net, or allow any group of young people to set out mental borders that define the society around them, and its people - a society where they should feel they belong – as the enemy.

The world's physical borders cannot be dismantled, but there is still some hope for the borders that exist in people's minds. And this hope lies in people's ability to communicate. To understand, to reason, to learn and to teach, to persuade and be persuaded.

I am writing this on La Gomera, the second smallest of the Canary Islands. Today, the island is a part of Spain, a small speck of the EU way out in the Atlantic Ocean, on the same latitude as the Western Sahara. Before it was colonised by the Spanish in 1440, it was inhabited by Berber aboriginals called the *gomeros*, also known as the Guanches. It is most likely that they came to the island several hundred years BC, and we know very little about them. They didn't build much, left only a few fragments of writing and didn't even make it to the Iron Age. The only thing that has survived, in an extremely modified version, is their language, *silbo*, a form of whistling communication that comprises six different sounds, which can be combined to form over four thousand different words. Even though the Guanches have died out – they suffered the same

fate as the natives in Latin America – *silbo* is now a compulsory subject in school on La Gomera. The Guanches no longer exist, but their language has survived them.

As a species, language is our greatest advantage, and is the only real means of cross-border communication that we have - but sometimes it can also be the greatest barrier. It is only through language that we can get to know *the others*, and it is through language, with the help of simultaneous surtitles, that I can stand here today and tell you about the borders I have crossed. If it hadn't been for the book that I am writing now, I would never have experienced all those outside toilets along the way. For me the book, the words are the goal, not the means. They are the actual journey.

But as long as our words continue to cross borders, in their own right or with the help of translators, there is hope for humanity.

Prelude Erika Fatland

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