

## University of New Mexico

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### Parade of ghosts: buildings & their echoes

#### Abstract:

At the centre of this personal essay, ‘Parade of ghosts: buildings & their echoes,’ is my effort to understand the impact of buildings on literature, and the impact of literature on buildings. What happens when the built environment is drastically altered? How does memory mediate between what used to be there and what replaced it? I have drawn from personal experience, ancient myths and modern fairy tales, seeking to highlight both the intimate and the universal voice about places and the memories of those places. Piecing together personal narrative in prose and poetry with passages from classic and modern works, I endeavor to create an open-ended collage of words and virtual images that help readers navigate their own oceans of memory and architecture. I am inspired by the work of other authors who animate the page, letting words and thoughts come in and out of focus. Among them are the American author Carole Maso (*The Art Lover*, 1990; *Ava*, 1993); the Canadian classicist and poet Anne Carson (*If not, winter: Fragments of Sappho*, 2003; *Nox*, 2010); the German academic and author W.G. Sebald (*The Emigrants*, 1996; *Austerlitz*, 2001); and the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle (*Take Care of Yourself*, 2007; *The Address Book*, 2012).

#### Biographical note:

Eleni Bastéa is Regents’ Professor of Architecture at the University of New Mexico, USA. Her books include *The Creation of Modern Athens: Planning the Myth*, Cambridge University Press, 1999; *Memory and Architecture*, University of New Mexico Press, 2004; *Venice without Gondolas*, poems, Finishing Line Press, 2013. During the 2019-20 academic year, she will be an External Faculty Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center. There, she will work on her current book project, ‘Geographies of Loss’.

#### Keywords:

Creative Writing – memory – architecture – commemoration – life narrative

And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

## Home

I climb up a few steps and touch the wooden door of our old house. The door opens and I go in. I touch the walls, moving through the high-ceilinged rooms, hearing the floor boards creak under my feet. I sit on the carpeted floor and start playing with my dolls again. Only I am not there anymore. Neither is the house. I left decades ago. The house has since been demolished, a new building claiming its place. But in my mind, I am still the five-year old, playing outside after the rain, making mud pies with the soft soil, skipping rope in the garden, my parents and grandmother always nearby. I am incapable of imagining myself visiting our old house as a grown up. I am unable to bring those memories to the present. My imaginary visits remain distant and private. A curtain of multiple layers of gauze protects the past from the peering eyes of the present.... I begin to lift a corner of the curtain. It's late May. The memory of the hardy rose bush outside my parents' bedroom – President Hoover roses – allows me to peek in. The rose bush is in full bloom. I drink the spicy fragrance of the peach-coloured rose petals and come closer to home.

How do you describe Paradise lost? Start with the house and the garden with its lingering fragrances. Listen to the echoes of bird songs, of lentil soup simmering on the stove, water filling the wash tub. Listen to the echoes of ghosts and record them.

## Thessaloniki

*I was born in a sad city  
of ships and emigrants*

Cristina Peri Rossi, 'Montevideo,' 2008

I was born in a floating city  
sister of mercury  
mistress of the Vardar wind  
mother of tongues  
tethered to the harbor  
by the filigree ropes  
of memory & desire.

I was born in a city of secrets

houses made of air  
& unfinished suppers.  
Students & ghosts  
marching in military parades  
strolling by the waterfront  
hand-in-hand.

Eleni Bastéa, 2018

And then I left, heeding the siren songs of open skies and unshared secrets in other places, other continents. My home and my city, now snapshots arrested in time, became my standards for understanding any home and any city. Moving through them, I had learnt the alphabet of space. And they became the subject of essays and poems, of lectures and academic writing. Gradually, however, I came to realize that I have not been talking about our house and about Thessaloniki *per se*, but about the idea of that house and that city. Are my stories – constructed and reconstructed layers of narrative – replacing the memory of the original physical structures? Perhaps, at times, they are. But at other times, I find myself searching for specific, tangible details – the stone edge at the waterfront where the city meets the sea, the curve of the metal balcony railing – that bring me back home, anchoring me once again to specific buildings and streets. And then along comes the deafening noise of the busy downtown, the smell of hot asphalt in the summer, the picturesque outline of Upper Town, the city’s oldest surviving residential quarters, framed by the Byzantine walls. Architecture has been feeding my writing. And writing has made architecture come to life.

## Roots

‘Where are the people?’ the little prince inquired politely.

The flower had one day seen a caravan passing.

‘People? There are six or seven of them, I believe, in existence. I caught sight of them years ago. But you never know where to find them. The wind blows them away. They have no roots, which hampers them a good deal.’

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, 1943

Originally, I thought of *The Little Prince* as a story of friendship and a critique of grown-ups, an innocent, clear-eyed voice reminding us of who we once were. But it is also a story of travel and return, homesickness and homecoming. It is true that, unlike the flower in the story, we have no roots. The memory of place and the memory of stories have become our human roots.

As my father got older and his health began to fail, he stopped writing long letters to me or coming to the phone when I called. My life was in America, his remained in Thessaloniki. But one day he did answer the phone. We began with the daily details about life and the weather, eventually talking about gardening and revisiting the rose bush in our old house. He had always been proud of that rose bush. Hardy and healthy, its main stock as thick as a man’s arm, he used to say. I had carried the memory of those roses—the colour of the petals like orange

marmalade, their fragrance spicy and slightly citrusy. In fact, I had ordered a few roots of President Hoover roses for our garden in the States. I felt that their physical presence would reconnect me with my childhood, bringing something from our old home closer to me. But the roots did not take. What remains is still the memory of our old rose bush. And the memory of the phone call about the roses, my last long conversation with my father.

‘ . . . Next I will tell you all the trees that grow  
in this fine orchard, which you gave to me.  
When I was little, I would follow you  
around the garden, asking all their names. 340  
We walked beneath these trees; you named them all  
and promised them to me. Ten apple trees,  
and thirteen pear trees, forty figs, and fifty  
grapevines which ripen one by one – their clusters  
change as the weather presses from the sky,  
sent down by Zeus’.

At that, Laertes’ heart  
and legs gave way; he recognized the signs  
Odysseus had given as clear proof.

*The Odyssey*, XXIV: 337-348, Emily Wilson (trans), 2017

Odysseus’s father, Laertes, continues to tend the orchard, year after year after year, waiting for his son’s return. Ten years fighting in Troy, another ten years making his way back to Ithaca, cunning Odysseus, master orator, crafty and cruel, carries the trees and the grapevines inside him, invisible roots connecting him to his birth place.

I return to Thessaloniki after a year of being away. I slip back into the familiar environment of grey, reinforced-concrete apartment buildings, market halls and open-air markets, classy downtown shop windows, and a long string of eclectic cafés and restaurants lining the main avenue by the waterfront. Ruins and monuments from the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods continue to remain in the background of our modern lives. There are parts of the city, the ones I walked the most when I was growing up, where I feel the aura of its architecture imprinted on my body. I let my body lead me, passing by corner shops selling cheese pies, crossing the dusty pine-tree park. It all seems as familiar as moving through my parents’ home, reaching down for the door knob or up for the light switch with gestures practiced over the years, by now second nature.

A woman’s skin was a map of the town  
where she’d grown from a child.  
When she went out, she covered it up

.... But – birthmark tattoo –  
the A-Z street-map grew, a precise second skin,  
broad if she binged, thin when she slimmed,  
a précis of where to end or go back to begin. ...

Carol Ann Duffy, 'The Map-Woman', 2005

I thought I knew my city. I thought I could read it by focusing on its architecture, passing my fingers over building details, photographing street corners and stone pavements. I thought that these frequent walks revealed the city's history to me, giving me ownership of its past.

And then I realized that buildings do not speak. They do not share their secret histories with outsiders any more than families share their own secrets with strangers. My task then was to study the stories and the histories of the city and let those words reverberate over the buildings. Gradually, a palimpsest of past events began to appear:

1922-23: The city's Muslim population is forced to leave their ancestral homes and relocate in Turkey. This was part of the Treaty of Lausanne, 1923, which also ordered the Christian Greeks from Asia Minor to relocate in Greece. As the granddaughter of Asia Minor refugees, I carry inside me the stories of their lost Promised Land. Never once, however, did I hear a reference to the Thessaloniki Muslims who also became refugees. It was as if they left quietly, out of their own free will, without pain or resistance, migratory birds that just disappeared from the map of the Asia Minor exchange, taking their dreams and memories with them.

1941-44: The German army entered Thessaloniki in April 1941 and soon applied the Nuremberg laws to Greek Jews. These included the looting of communal treasures, the Yellow Star, forced labour, circulation restrictions, and compulsory relocation into three ghetto districts. Battles. Executions. Collaboration. Silence.

March-August 1943: a total of 19 trains left the old railway station carrying some 50,000 Jews to extermination camps. After the liberation in October 1945, of the 50,000 deported Jews only about 2,000 people returned, that is fewer than 4% of the original community. Little slipped out through our parents' guarded mouths. A willed amnesia – sense of survival, perhaps? silencing of guilt, hoping it will gradually melt with the rains.

1946-49: Greek civil war. Battles. Executions. Silence.

These historical events, and many more, define the identity of Thessaloniki as much as its sunsets and famed waterfront do. I began to lift the veils of words and study the city through eyes other than my own.

In trying to uncover the city's past, I am confronted by the limits of commemoration. We mourn the people we lost at war and the loss of land that was once ours. Hardly ever, however, do we acknowledge the losses of others: enemy soldiers killed by our troops; homes in our cities that

used to belong to others, others who became refugees themselves or perished at war or during the Holocaust.

I listen for the echoes of those who lived here before me. I seek their shadows on the walls. History itself is but a parade of ghosts lurking around the corner, waiting to come home, to finish supper, to watch the grandfather's last dance and the baby's first steps. Moving between buildings and the memories of ghosts, I promise to tell their stories.

## **Babel**

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup> As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

<sup>3</sup> They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly'. They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth'.

<sup>5</sup> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. <sup>6</sup> The Lord said, 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other'.

<sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

*Genesis 11, New International Version*

What remained after the construction of Babel stopped?

Desert winds pelting the walls.

Lazy sunsets marking the end of a day.

The memory of a city and a tower, unfinished.

The memory of building together.

The memory of a common language.

And we, children of Babel, continue seeking the architecture and the language of union, lost in the labyrinth of time.

When I was in architecture school, writing helped me organize my thoughts about design and provide a narrative of sorts to guide the design process. For others, starting with a three-dimensional object they could manipulate brought better results. Writing and architecture continue to go hand-in-hand, each enhancing the other with layers of shapes and sounds.

As I reflect on the Babel myth, I see it as the first major point of rupture between words and buildings. And a violent rupture of a community. The wrath of God in full display. But I also see the refugees of Babel, carrying their know-how in their rucksacks, searching for another place to call home, a place they could build themselves. There is hope in their eyes.

### **Cities without maps**

We are all wandering Jews  
making our way  
in cities without maps  
without songs or cemeteries  
echoless cities  
of buried languages  
burned books & symbols  
history hidden  
beneath bridges & temples  
monasteries & mosques.

I hear the rattle of ghosts  
and the chatter of children  
crying themselves to sleep  
without lullabies  
hunting for known words  
in the cracks of the pavement  
teaching themselves the alphabet  
by memorizing buildings  
that still stand  
in the Babel of memory.

Eleni Bastéa, 2018

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