

## The way out is in

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*In the beginning there was water<sup>1</sup>*

My mother always narrates that I was born old, with little hands wrinkled like an old woman's and with my eyes wide open. The nurses used to say: "Oh, this child, how she looks at us!" I was born almost a month late, perhaps to be born a Pisces, on the 22nd of the 2nd. Water is my element, it is where I find peace and balance.

*As you set out for Ithaka hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discover.<sup>2</sup>*

This situation has often repeated itself throughout my life as an emigrant: about to die, only to be reborn. To emigrate is to be reborn in many aspects of life: work, friendships, culture, language... Each new process has polished me in disparate *Ithakas* such as Germany, Peru, North Macedonia, Lebanon, Palestine, Italy, Belgium, and finally Switzerland. My curiosity and interest in other ways of living, relating, and communicating are my fuel, my eyes open. But each overexertion to adapt to a new country has been sapping my energy, and my tiredness and frustration have increased to the point of exhaustion due to the titanic effort involved in raising, in a short time, pillars of support that others have been building for years. One day my body said: "I can't take it anymore". And I had to stop.

*Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them.<sup>2</sup>*

Dr. Kudura called me on the phone. He wanted to see me the next day to discuss the biopsy results with me. I remembered the moment of the extraction of the sample: my children present, the doctor apologizing for inserting the needle and me reassuring him with the words of Master Oogway from *Kung Fu Panda*, "Don't fight. Let it flow. Inner peace." That's what I was going to need during our date. The verdict was expected: *Schilddrüsenkrebs*<sup>3</sup>. In that instant, I saw myself on stage, the theater in darkness, in absolute silence, the room empty, alone, *black-out*<sup>4</sup>. The rest of the clinical words - in German - were a voice-over. The world stops, I am *cento per cento* present. Something like swimming in Lake Zurich in winter; the temperature of the

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<sup>1</sup> IMAMOU Exhibition, Collegium Helveticum, University of Zurich.

<sup>2</sup> Poem Ithaca by Konstantino Kavafis.

<sup>3</sup> In German, thyroid cancer.

<sup>4</sup> In the theatre, fast curtain drops.

lake drops one degree per week - this year to 5 degrees - the icy water, my body burning, they call it *Baltic point*. Alone: the lake and me. The cold is so brutal that there are almost no thoughts.

The sentence is final, there is no probability of error. Then the maelstrom begins: "given the classification of the carcinoma, we must operate now. Then the therapy". There is no time to think, to reflect or even to say goodbye to the gland that has accompanied me for 45 years. Within a week - Swiss efficiency - it was out. When the surgeon visited me to tell me that the operation had gone well, shyly and like a child, I asked, "Where is my thyroid?" He told me it had been sent to the pathology service. I couldn't say goodbye, I thought. "But I have a picture!" he added. "Can I see it?"

They say that everything we do not express, that we repress, leaves its mark on our body. Without extended family in the host country, or very close friendships, the loneliness felt as a foreign mother and in my relationship, seasoned with silences, due to language incapacity or imposed, weighed heavily. Drop by drop that was piercing her. The butterfly<sup>5</sup> got sick, transformed and flew away. For a while I missed her. I never thought I could miss a part of my body that I had previously paid little attention to. But it was like this. I was grieving.

*You'll never find things like that on your way as long as you keep your thoughts raised high, as long as a rare excitement stirs your spirit and your body.*<sup>2</sup>

To emigrate is also to put down roots again in an unknown land. To place oneself in the right place, where the sun will shine, but not too much, where there will be water and hopefully company in due time. Each new country, a new rooting. And as with any test of life, hard and painful, is that "harder still" of the circuses of my childhood. Immigration confronts you, takes you out of your comfort zone, forces you to keep going, to fight harder than you would in your home country, to stand your ground despite adverse times. *Beti aurrera*<sup>6</sup>. How many times have I visualized myself as Forrest Gump: "Keep running, don't stop"?

*Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey. Without her you wouldn't have set out. She has nothing left to give you now.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The thyroid is butterfly shaped.

<sup>6</sup> In Basque "always forward".



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Zurich is my *Ithaka* today. And it still has something to give me. The freedom that a separation brings makes me discover new places and spaces in Swiss German - the *Cold Swimming* Association (swimming in the lake in winter) and the gospel choir - and allows me to resume friendships that I had to abandon because of my upbringing, studies, and work. I still have a lot to discover and enjoy in this city. From acceptance, the challenge is to make the best of my present situation.

*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.*<sup>2</sup>

Before going into the water, I make myself aware that it is going to be freezing cold. I learned from watching a Swiss grandmother that it's a no-brainer to jump in. It fits with my father's saying "Don't think about it, just do it". I'm already at the knee, then the left arm sprays water on the right and vice versa, one more step and.... I'm in. It was not always that easy, it took me some time to let me *apprivoiser* by the lake. At first, I was suspicious, like the fox in *The Little Prince*, so marked on my body is the imprint of the Cantabrian Sea, the salt water. The thermal *shock* is such that the mind remains in a state of high alert. The only thought is: "Zaira, swim!". But the intense cold imposes a toll: it only allows slow-motion movements.

I never thought I would be able to make friends with the cold. I have always run away from it. But this winter, we have met and embraced each other. In those moments - just a few minutes - I am in company, in solitude, in peace: the lake and me. I thank him. It has strengthened me, both physically and psychologically. During this thermal exchange, the cold enters my body and once outside, it slows down my hyperactive brain that works at a thousand per hour. It is possible to think and move so slowly as to enjoy every thought and movement. I feel inner calm, serenity and after the explosion of endorphins I caress happiness. I can start again, a new rebirth.

The thousand of roads I have traveled, the countries I have emigrated to, the people who have accompanied me on my journey, all these experiences have brought me back home, back to myself, and from there, I am at peace, wherever I am. I have finally understood that *the way out is in*<sup>7</sup>. This time yes.

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from *Thich Nhat Hanh*.

## Additional Documentation

### Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:  
you'll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement  
stirs your spirit and your body.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.  
May there be many summer mornings when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfume of every kind—  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

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.

*Poem by Constantine Cavafy*

Additional documentation:



Calligraphy of Thich Nhat Hanh

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