

PILVAX

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A Belonging Place
From Tirana to Pogradec
by Morelle Smith

As the two men devoured the platefuls of meat in front of them, I looked the other way. Outside the restaurant, through the open sliding windows, I could see a man was carefully, almost tenderly, hanging a carcass on a hook. It looked like a small sheep carcass or a young goat. He put his hand into the slit middle of the body and pulled something out. He disappeared and the body swung slightly in the strong wind that had sprung up since we left the plains behind and climbed up into the mountains. The man returned with a second carcass that he hung next to the first.

This was the only direction I could look in, unless I turned my head right round and looked behind me. I could not speak to the men although we had done our best to communicate. But I only knew a few words of their language, they knew none of mine, nor of the other languages in which I was more or less proficient. So I simply had to sit there, twitching my fingers after I'd finished my espresso, while they worked their way through the heaped food in front of them, as well as a large mug of beer each. I gazed at the swinging carcasses and tried not to look at the people at the next table, who had no reservation about looking at me.

I'd gone to the corner of the Elbasan road where I'd been told the mini-buses left for Pogradec. It had begun to rain and I'd taken shelter, along with many other people, in the covered entrance to a play park and café area. I went up to every mini-bus or fourgon, as they're called, that slowed down to go around the corner, but they were all going to Elbasan. After this lack of success, I decided to walk down the Rruga Elbasanit, as I'd been told I might have to walk further along, to get the fourgons going to Pogradec. The road was in the process of repair, which meant there was a heap of rubble piled along the side. The rain had turned this into a pale grey mud and I squelched along, keeping one eye out for possible fourgons. Several passed, all full. Their number plates showed that they were from Elbasan. Then I thought—if I see a Pogradec number plate, then the chances are, they're likely to be going there. No sooner had I thought this than one appeared, coming down a road on the right, to join up with the main one. The driver had to stop and wait before he could move out into the flow of traffic, so I went up to him and said Pogradec? He shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture to indicate that the mini-bus was full. But

the driver of a passing car heard what I had said, and pulled over on the side of the road. His friend, another man, got out, and opened the door for me. The car had the Pogradec number plates, but they clearly weren't a mini-bus. I didn't know if this was customary practice, or a bad idea, but as they were heading in the direction that I wanted to go, I decided to go with them.

* * *

The rain is beating down on the flat area in front of my balcony. On the left is Lake Ohrid, a thick, morose green color, leaned on by the almost silver light, the curtain that the rain turned into. The hotel is right on the lakefront, and from my room I can hear the sound of the waves. Earlier, walking along the lake, I watched the rain clouds moving closer, from the north, in spectral white light over the water, and in bunches over the mountains, like a feathery army of wraith-like trees. Thunder was growling in the dark area of the lake, over on the other side, in Macedonia. A couple of jagged gashes of lightning ripped the luminous curtain in two, like a demented tailor, slashing at cloth. The wind came in off the lake, before the rain arrived. The wind grabbed the fine sand that lay on the walkway and flung it in dry showers around peoples' legs. Finally, the rain came.

I walked up a narrow street, Rruga Naim Frasheri, where the shops and buildings show distinct signs of age, with little pilastered balconies jutting out above the narrow street. Standing under the shelter of a strip of corrugated plastic, I look into the shop behind me. There are trays of biscuits laid out on the counter. I go in and buy some. The elderly man weighs them out carefully. Eight biscuits cost 100 lek. When he's wrapped the biscuits and I've paid him, he hands me a wrapped chocolate.

All afternoon I've had the feeling that my perceptions are not relaying the usual kind of information. All the places I've seen before—the mountain road to Elbasan, the road to Librazhd, and then to Hotolisht, do not look the way I remember them looking. And after Hotolisht, the unfamiliar road keeps reminding me of other places, though at first I do not know what these other places are. I feel as if I know these places, I've seen them before, but their familiarity is alien because it isn't real. On one part of the road I see another winding road in my mind's eye and, after some effort, remember it as a road near Le Mazet, in southern France, where I stayed two years ago. The mountains and Lake Ohrid seem to approximate vaguely to hills and lochs in Scotland—and a street here in Pogradec, a pedestrian walkway, reminds me of a pedestrian street near the train station in Brindisi, Italy.

It's as if memories and the perceptions of the present have linked and smudged and it feels a little like falling—not suddenly or far but a constant kind of falling, like being slightly off-balance all the time. When I went into the shop and bought some biscuits, some slowing-down of time, an indistinctness in its sense of placement within past and present, brought some feeling of the mystery of Christmas as a child. Perhaps it was the rain and the faint chill in the air. Perhaps it was the way the elderly shopkeeper handed me the chocolate, as if I was a child that he was favoring. I came back out into the narrow street, with its little corrugated overhangs dripping onto the pavement and felt like an intruder in a fairy-tale, but one who was tolerated at least for now, at least as long as the taste of the chocolate lingered in my mouth.

The entirety of Morelle Smith's piece can be found in ISSUE 7 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.