

No Place Like Home

An Emigrant's Epic Tale

Lesia Daria

Lesia Daria is a writer, journalist, campaigner, and volunteer. She is a communications adviser at the Ukrainian Institute London, and in Surrey where she is active in her local community, she is helping Ukrainian refugees to settle into life in the UK. Previously Lesia worked as a journalist in Washington DC, Kyiv, London, and New York, and lived in Paris, Minsk, and Istanbul. She holds a BA from the University of Virginia and an MSc from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Her poem No Place Like Home explores the shared human longing for a home, not only as a search for a refuge or place to settle, or a return to where one is from, but also as a feeling of belonging and rootedness.

I broke the rules
when they asked
Is there still no place like home?

Probably they wanted a reasoned reply
(academics and bureaucrats like certain forms)
regarding migrants and immigrants versus war-torn refugees,
insights on nations, nationalities, notes concerning cross border trends,
socio-political citations, a case study or two,
not me saying
 well, it depends
 what you mean by home
or at any rate what I mean (since you asked me)
and that no definition or survey will ever do
since to get at universal truth
you'd have to ask all the residents of Earth,
the sum of human existence through Time –
 the lady on the corner, the homeless man,
 even those with no place to go –
because everyone's got their streets
and I can only tell you mine.

I've got the streets of Philadelphia, for starters,
 the '80s video, before the '90s song,
 the roads of my neighbourhood and the ones downtown
 where bums rolled in trash bags and steam rose from grates,
 beaver-clad prostitutes, Society Hill dates,
 a Center City far from the Greater Northeast
 which wasn't so great.

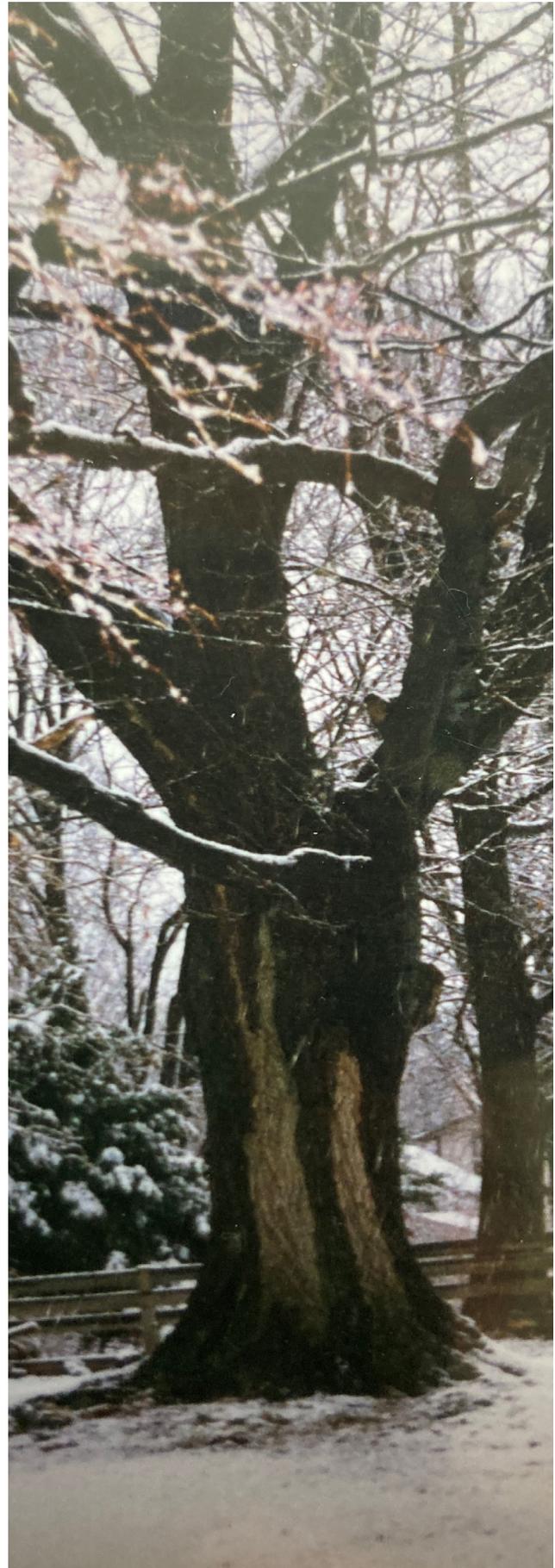
So Lana and I would hop in the Fury,
 sail down past Frankford on I-95,
 park at Race, strut South Street
 pretend we weren't afraid of guys
 or in awe of punks.

Then back, past the Boulevard
 where Chargers raced Trans Ams
 revved up by tough kids who'd flunk their exams,
 past Krewstown and Famous where we fought for pastrami
 fresh bagels and lox, the joy of the deli
 with pickles in barrels and corned beef and rye,
 our pale numbered tickets just holding the line –
 elbows got in first, as the Irish died of thirst
 while Ukrainians scooped up herring
 as soon as it came in store
 and Jews hustled *gefillte* and everyone agreed
 the whitefish salad was to *die* for!

Lana ate orange crackers stuffed with peanut butter
 we'd sit in my room and plot our future
 wondering where we might someday end up.
 Alone, in the backyard I breathed in giant oaks,
 centuries of Penn's Woods
 that made my parents buy the abode
 without ever stepping inside.

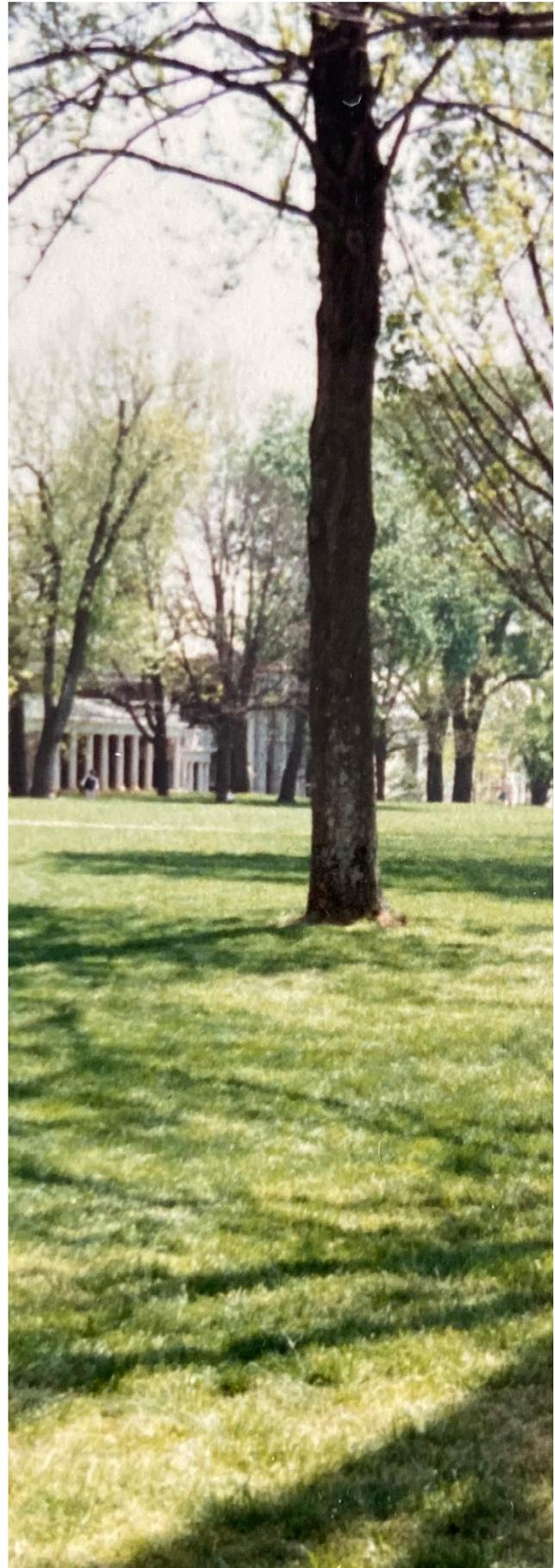
We'd moved on up, from duplex to split level
 aluminum siding that groaned in the night,
 the immigrants' dream realised, in flight
 to a 30-year mortgage, fixed
 on Flagstaff Road.

But I wanted to run from sad shopping malls,
 the endless Journey
 and Bruce and Bon Jovi
 defining this accidental spot where I'd been born.



So I'd jog down Pine to Pennypack Park,
and sprint the forest for miles.
Last time I was in Philly though
I didn't get that far.
Stuck in Center City,
where cobblestones have witnessed much,
I watched a souped-up three-wheeler
pull up, park on yellow
engine running, rap blaring, the gangsta walked off
like he owned the whole town.
The cops were never gonna bother
him or his lady love, his gold chains signalling
he was in charge at 13th and Market
as she sat there blankly
stroking her chihuahua
with metallic fingernails
waiting to go home.

I've got the streets of Charlottesville, so many faces,
University of Virginia, '91 or '88,
fraternities no longer debate the penalty
for the odd car dumped in Mad Bowl,
convertibles out in force for the Foxfield Races
that parade of a thousand coats and ties,
then back to the Tavern
where students and tourists and townspeople meet.
But not really. White lies.
There was always us versus townies
and which side of the Tracks
where Dave Matthews crooned
to anyone who'd ask
if it was worth it,
or if truth came by Lynyrd Skynyrd
or foresight from R.E.M,
ragged student apartments signalling the end
of the world as we knew it.
Rugby Road, Main Street, University Avenue
The Stadium, The Lawn and not-even-kidding-you
Nameless Field.



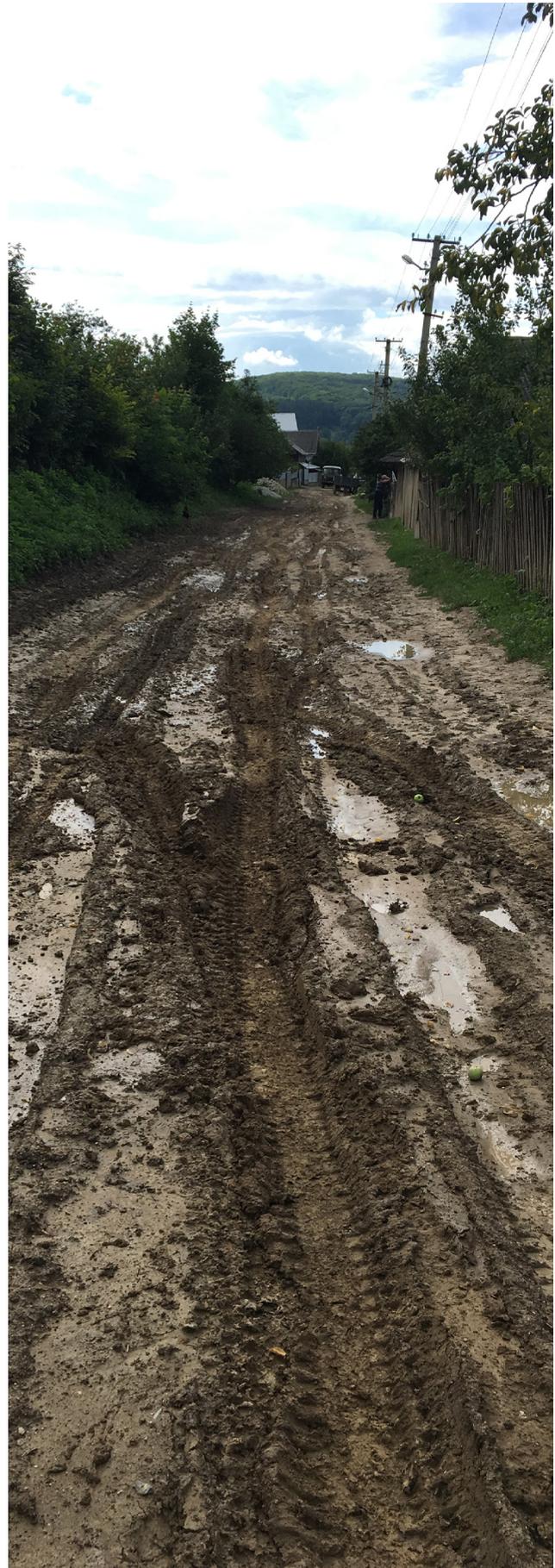
Lovers passing colonnades
 where cobblestones have witnessed much,
 promising to return married and rich enough
 for their college town.
 Last time in Charlottesville though
 I didn't get that far.
 Stuck at reunions
 I watched a love-of-my-life
 eye his German army wife
 as he pontificated like he owned the whole town.
 I was never going to bother
 him or his lady love, their golden rings signalling,
 the barricades would be up
 and trouble if you interrupt,
 as she sat there blankly waiting
 for him to wind up
 so they could return
 to wherever they call home.

I've got the streets of Paris, like a proper cliché,
 Avenue Victor Hugo in the 16th arrondissement,
 thanks-but-no-thanks to Madame Dupont
 I made lifelong friends with my new brother Laurent
 who passed notes under my door.
 I came to comprehend *madeleines*
 though my addiction was *pain au raisin*
 that extravagant wheel of pastry
 when we lacked francs to go around,
 and one cup of coffee by the Sorbonne
 bought us three hours in from the rain.
Vaugirard, Odeon, Rue de Varenne,
 I fell for all of it but never fit in
 with accent or boyfriend or necessary act,
 but Xav and I worked out a silent pact:
 me as arm candy in return for a ride.
 Scooting round and round the Arc de Triomphe
 I dreamed of an *appartement* one day
 in the 7th, with tall windows and faux balconies,
 or in the Marais,
 but not with him.



The Wall was already coming down fast,
places beckoned beyond this France
and Xav would never leave his maman's chateaux
or the Rue de Commerce.
Last time in Paris though
I didn't get that far.
Streets seething yellow, I'd seen it all before,
holed up near the Jardin I played lady love
to my husband's retirement quest
peering through the vitrines of *agents immobilier*
as I watched the Mideast hawkers
unfurling their wares
waiting patiently for a sale
so they too could go home.

I've got the lanes of rural Ukraine in my mind,
where there are no streets or numbers
or names
only deep rut alleyways.
Tractors lie still, the Soviet Union's cracking
like dried mud under its own weight.
We hide our rented Opel in an uncle's garage
though why would *Intourist* agents follow us?
What's so interesting about diaspora?
I dodge relatives, and superlatives,
slip into the house
where my grandfather was born.
Now that's something
– all the same time it's not much:
three rooms, no plumbing,
what do you want from 1904?
Nearly 90 years have passed,
it's still a hovel like so many more,
the lucky few have run off
(Run Baba Run! Run Dido Fast!)
to the U.S.
that novel place where huddled masses
are supposed to earn their lawns.
But most of the world lives like this –
without mod-cons.



I reach the back room,
 spy my photo on the wall
 I am here.
 But why?
 And for how long?
 I don't really belong
 I have no rights, no memories here
 no future.
 Yet here I am.
 And importantly, others think of me
 here.
 All of the sudden I know
 that by any twist of fate
 this might have been home.
 Last time in western Ukraine though
 I didn't get that far.
 Stuck in Lviv
 where cobblestones have witnessed much –
 like my father's birth but not childhood,
 relegated to camps –
 I thought maybe it's genetic,
 this impulse for risk,
 fleeing the frenetic scene like the wind,
 leaving behind regrets
 for a greater unknown.
 But I got grabbed by a slick uncle
 who talked like he owned the whole town,
 said the village wasn't worth the bother
 modern Ukraine deems huts like that a shed
 and his eyes flitted to potential lady loves
 sitting at the bar
 tapping their metallic fingernails
 waiting to go home.

I've got the streets of Washington DC –
 what you do after graduation with your fancy degree,
 early 90s. Group House. Drug dealer chef in basement stench,
 might as well make these digs home,
 at least someone cooks, makes rent.
 I'm working non-profit a few bucks a day



promoting democracy and freedom of press
but already I've the sense it's misshapen, bent –
the politics, the money, the hope already spent on the streets
though they meet at right angles.
We're square at 3rd and H, not far from G,
moderately safe from shootouts, but not really.
This is Capitol Hill
where Koreans lock up early
and I'm living on tuna and Ritz.
The city seethes troubled, misplaced souls,
and I'm drinking Sunday nights to forget
and prove I'm no suited stiff,
still hoping for a lucky break to carry me away
unlike Lana, who's left the world
and found that better place.
But I never found solace in that bullshit phrase
so I thought I should keep trying.
Last time I was in DC though
I didn't get that far.
Driving past Eastern Market, down Pennsylvania, up K,
past Georgetown, we got all the way to the Palisades
to Sherier Place, the porched residence
where many years hence I'd brought home my daughter.
DC and I had a thing – we went at it more than once,
but my kids weren't interested where it all began,
the only house that mattered was the white one
where the guy talks like he owns the whole town.
The feds weren't gonna bother
him or his lady love,
their gilded chains signalling
they can buy their way out.
But one day the clock might strike the hour
when she strokes her chinchilla fur
with metallic fingernails
wanting to go home.

I've got the streets of Kyiv under my skin
buried in snow and dark passageways,
what you get for smoking dope with artists
who wander around for three days.



Where the hell have you been? my friends are appalled.
 At Kyrill's I think, or somewhere else,
 just taking my god-given right to fuck off
 in this fucked up world.
 But the universe is unforgiving
 so most days I report to the office on Karl Marx
 where the papers say they want the story,
 but not really. A blurb on the zoo will do.
 What's going on, *really*? I'll tell you.
 Steal of the century! What you see is make-believe!
 Can't put my finger on it, prove the sleaze
 with facts or figures, the diseased race is on
 and my silhouette is slipping through history
 to rest behind cracked facades
 and settle for what is of little permanence.
 Streets too are rapidly changing their face,
 one day it's Prospect *Pobedy*, the Prospect of Victory,
 next it's Prospect *Peremohy* –
 a victorious prospect for someone else.
Krasno-armeyska becomes *Chervono-armeyska*,
 only to turn into a big *Vasylkivska* at some future self.
 So much for the Red Army.
 It's all happening now, this future of destruction
 and what sense am I supposed to lend
 to mad streets that double back onto themselves?
 In my broken-paned *kvartira* on *Yaroslaviv Val*
 I dodge my sodden landlord
 and drink and throw parties.
 Last time in Kyiv though
 I didn't get that far.
 Stuck in an airless Airbnb,
 I went to see Kyrill's last show,
 lifetime works at Arsenal, retrospective at fifty-two,
 he used to strut like he owned the whole town
 while I played his only lady love
 though we both knew neither was true.
 Kyiv was our playground but at some point
 we all leave for good
 and perhaps where they bury you
 is the only real signal
 you've finally made it home.



I've got the streets of London too –
first UK try you have to be quick and decide: North/South, East/West
the search is on *The Loot* to scoop that maisonette, Tufnell Park on the hill,
then Kentish Town, with someone else still.
There's always someone else, waiting in the wings
and somewhere else –
home is only a departure point
and a destination time
away from incessant rain and the bleak Northern line –
I make myself comfortable in these cracks
with or without heat or hot water
by Iceland and Pane Vino, Londis stocks what I need
for this tight life, dancing cheque to cheque
never guessing when the melody will be spent.
Last time in London though
I didn't get that far.
Stuck on South Western Rail
I barely made it to Waterloo,
my teen and her friends wanted Camden
to pretend they're not in awe of punks
or afraid of guys in general.
So we went to the Locks
but no one listened to my talk
like I owned the whole town,
about first gastropubs like the Lord Palmerston
or the houses on Hadley and Dartmouth Park Hill
which suddenly seemed ghost rentals
like the chippie whose name I couldn't distil
from the blurred gins of memory.
So I sneaked back alone, a different time
to a different pub, where the same people
slogged back their sorrows,
waiting for last call
still no conversion, signalling
at some dark hour
it's time to go home.

I've got the streets of Manhattan in my soul
no matter how briefly it goes,
you only need a month or so



to become a real New Yorker –
 even a New York minute
 to qualify your new sprinting pace,
 nonchalance at green-haired transvestites
 roller-skating in outer space
 which is Central Park, a million miles away
 from home, which is East Village, of course.
 Ukrainian ghetto, lost family,
 my entrance is coincidence
 I get a tip at Bachynsky's
 braving lines for *kovbasa*
 home pops up, a five story walk up
 not far from *Lys*, the Wily Fox, and *Veselka*, the Rainbow
 in the city that never sleeps,
 and 11th and 2nd or 54th dispense all I need
 pumpkin coffee, cannolis, a salary, routine,
 a million souls scurry without being seen
 and I swear I'm going to make my mark on these streets.
 Last time in Manhattan though
 I didn't get that far.
 Had to buy my son a skateboard
 for enough toddler speed
 to scoot from Tribeca to Central Park
 a million degrees hot, no one wanted to walk
 or eat *kovbasa*
 But we got to the smoothie place,
 then showed them uptown where Daddy and I got engaged.
 Of this momentous occasion, no one cared
 but the Korean grocers on 1st Avenue
 still sold green tea ice cream
 and the ladies at the salon
 sat there stroking their phones
 with metallic fingernails
 waiting to go home.

 I've got the streets of Istanbul too (believe it or not)
 in an awesome leap of faith
 to close a million-mile romance gap
 though this five-year plan
 won't work better than the rest



even if fiancé owns our love nest
and we walk like we own the whole town.
The streets are skinny, steep and dry
but also fluid, wide and wet,
cars stick at impossible angles while ferries glide past,
the metropolis seethes twelve million souls
trading, praying, drinking black tea,
the green-haired transvestites an anomaly
of *Cukurcuma*, where cobblestones have witnessed much,
yet not far from water's edge
in *Karakoy*, fish and insults hurled,
we live in childless euphoria
on Sesame Street,
RULER OF THE WORLD!
Or as Turks call it –
Susam Sokak, Cihangir.
My spouse-to-be is called away
to conquer foreign terrain,
so weekly I am left alone
to conquer mine and make home.
What's the word for beige in *Türkçe*?
I believe it is loneliness
and *bej* comes in many shades.
Slowly, slowly, millennia sing, and ruins sprout new life
we morph into the megalopolis
of Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul,
no one notes we're here, but we're alive,
it's the felines in charge, so I feed five.
That's the start of home, isn't it?
Your own space, and cats?
Learn the lingo, paint the walls, change the taps
We'll grow old here!
Our future kids won't know what hit them –
Anglo-Ukrainian-Americans abroad!
Home will be this view above the sea
the Blue Mosque's silhouette and Bosphorus sights,
away from the phosphorus lights and calls to prayer
feeding centuries of money-making din,
we'll name them Sophia and Konstantin.
They'll grow up with wisdom and permanence



which we so sorely lack
 but which we hope
 the act of procreation will confer.
 Last time in Istanbul though
 we never got that far.
 We'd sold the flat for an English garage,
 and the *Aygaz* man wasn't near
 and the artichoke man wasn't there
 and the *pide* man on the corner selling pizza and Coke
 in hope of more tourists, looked broken, as cafes rolled inside
 because government officials had spoken:
 you must stay with tradition.
 So only the price weary *balik* restaurant was open
 and the man with the plastic bucket shop
 sitting there waiting
 for the sale of a single mop
 so he too could go home.

Now I've got the streets of this old Surrey town
 under my belt and my New Balance can take me
 down St Mary's Road to boot camp
 and over to Row's for a cup of tea
 then back to Chestnut Hill House, refurbished
 but unlikely to soothe a restless soul.
 What is the final rest stop?
 The soul coughed on staid concerns –
 safe streets, nice houses, the stamp of good schools,
 proximity to rail and air – we weren't fools, we guessed
 a breadwinner needs to commute
 and we might beat that great Duty
 with rising prices, if we're astute.

But the real test is Time –
 when determines where, how much determines which,
 some parts of the equation easy, others a bitch –
 toddlers want parks, a river with ducks,
 mothers want shops and ladies' night pubs –
 we walked through the endlessly middle-class reasons
 bought into it all –
 and the soul said



it's the trees, stupid,
the change of the seasons.
You won't fall where ancient roots hold the earth fast
and soaring branches prop the sky
and from every window tangled silhouettes
of a thousand years ask
what's the value of searching forever?

Dig the soil, clear it out, pull apart but also *plant*,
with blackened fingernails make your mark
on reformed neat plots and past the park
beyond what's permitted, allotted, allowed,
walk the byways of Oatlands, the king's old hunting grounds,
even here dead ends rise, sometimes you must turn back,
no through-roads, no shortcuts, streets that don't quite connect,
but if you let your mind wander
you can get lost yet.

Last time I walked this Surrey town
I got this far:
Is there still no place like home?
Is it only where I happen to be?
Who are these citizens of nowhere, her or me?
Outside the grocery
the same scarfed lady sits,
loved or not, hard to tell,
with blackened fingernails
each day she gives the *Big Issue* its big sell
and I wonder where she lives
or merely spends the night
so sure I could bet my whole life
she too would say yes:

There's no place like it.

We're all waiting – searching –
for anywhere
to call home

(composed: autumn 2019, performed live: summer 2020)

