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“What Vanishes and What Remains”

Blue Portugal ⊕ *Other Essays*

Theresa Kishkan

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2022, 208 pp. ISBN 9781772125993 (paperback)

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“... a map of my own reflections, main roads and secondary roads, river systems, mountains, and beautiful circled stars for settlements”

(Kishkan xi)

Initially, I made the mistake (or maybe not) of starting to read Theresa Kishkan’s book *Blue Portugal and Other Essays* straight from the first essay, rather than from the Preface. This omission resulted in my long deliberation on the hybrid genre of (not only) this collection, or rather on the intangibility of generic boundaries in this case, and how the recent confluence of memoir and life writing with nature writing, creative writing, critical writing, and/or travel writing has grown steadily in popularity, among both practitioners and critics, since the so-called memoir boom in the 1990s (see, for example, Rak 2013). However, returning to the Preface halfway through the collection slowed down my train of thoughts, as Theresa Kishkan could not be clearer and more precise about envisioning the generic qualities of her collection. Not only is she vocal about privileging essay as the most fitting form for *Blue Portugal*, but she is also very particular in explaining why, taking the opportunity to provide a small lecture on the essay, including its etymology. Indeed, personal essay is a more apt form for this collection because, as opposed to memoir (which may also be fragmented, hybrid and experimental in its form), it “shares a sensibility” (Kishkan xii) rather than a more prominent focus on one’s life. Kishkan is interested in the essay because of its

generous capacity to hold a writer’s interests in subject matter, as well as moments of poetry, phrases of song, recipes for really good soup, analysis of data, interrogation of known facts, how these can be braided in a simple three-strand arrangement of ideas or



themes or a more elaborate imbricated confection that allows stray tendrils, and how the writing can use the entire page as a kind of open map, a musical score, or a grammar of pattern language. (xii)

Theresa Kishkan has been a published writer of both prose and poetry for some time now, writing from her home in the Sechelt Peninsula, northwest of Vancouver, BC, Canada, which she shares with her husband, the poet John Pass. Biographical information is not indulgent in this case, as it informs the personally framed essays in *Blue Portugal* and both John Pass and larger family (both distant and close, past and present) feature as sometimes more, sometimes less active subjects of inquiry in most of the essays. Family, landscapes, places that claim their dwellers and are claimed by them in return is one strong narrative strand that loosely links the collection to both traditional nature writing and what has been recently called “the new nature writing” (see Smith 2017) as well as to travel writing. So, Kishkan moves through different landscapes as she travels within Canada or to distant countries such as Ukraine and the Czech Republic in search of her ancestors’ stories, observing and reflecting (as a traveller should) on foreign customs, villages, locals, foods and drinks. She also interweaves various nature metaphors, most notably rivers. The essay “How Rivers Break Away and Meet Again” is structured as a series of poetic recollections of favorite rivers (“the rivers I love, the ones I dream about,” 60) but the atlas, cherished since childhood, contains not only river systems but also a “strange geography of our bodies” (60), and those river systems are juxtaposed by Kishkan to the system of veins and arteries of a human anatomy. Some sections in this essay even play with a more experimental typesetting (perhaps under the influence of the poet’s perspective), in which paragraphs aligned left and right alternate, remindful of a meandering river.

*“Maybe we are cloth, we are the very fabric of being, the world recorded
on us like blue dye, the sound of woodpeckers echoing in the trees just beyond”*
(Kishkan 18)

Another narrative thread that weaves in and out through the entire collection is the metaphor of quilting, sewing, patchworking, dyeing, batikting (alongside home cooking and food preserving) – all of these activities traditionally associated with women’s crafts and arts. Feminist scholars, particularly those in the US, have been theorizing the relation between the needle and the pen for quite some time. Most notably, in the 1980s and 1990s, Elaine Showalter pointed to “metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web” (“Piecing” 224), arguing that the quilt



has become a central metaphor of (North) American women's writing, and the art of "piecing" something from old scraps and turning it into something new mirrors the "decentered structure of a woman's text" (*Sister's Choice* 161). As Showalter claimed elsewhere, piecing is "the art form which best reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the dailiness and repetitiveness of women's work" ("Piecing" 228). Kishkan continues and transcends this classic association: she moves smoothly between crafting words and crafting all kind of fabrics, both carefully selected. In "The Blue Etymologies," she explicates, with scientific precision, the various etymologies of her favorite color, blue (recurring playfully in several essay titles), and its different shades, as well as kinds of cloth and techniques of dyeing and batiking fabric, making quilts, decorating them with pearl buttons (their history appearing in "Anatomy of a Button"), and creating complex patterns. It is particularly indigo blue which becomes a symbol relating to multiple stories of her life and memorable revelations, such as experiencing entoptic phenomenon as a consequence of her eye injury. One can see how these activities cannot be separated, one complementing the other. The metaphor of "scraps" is also extended: scraps of fabric and cloth mirror the "scraps of my years" (5), and the scraps of memories are interrupted by scraps of poetry and citations.

The third narrative strand that I find very much present in some of the essays' recurrent motifs, even though perhaps less visible on the surface, is the vulnerability of an ageing (female) body and mind, susceptible to injuries, fears and anxieties. Several of Kishkan's essays thematize either past or recent injuries with painful and long-lasting effects: a fractured pelvis in her teenage years after a fall from a horse, leading to traumatizing abuse by a physiotherapist (in "A Dark Path"); or a complicated eye injury caused by a relatively innocent fall on an icy road, which resulted in multiple tears in a retina (in "The Blue Etymologies"); a suspected vein thrombosis (in "How Rivers Break Away and Meet Again"); or simply the sadness of seeing her children grow up and leave the home she and her husband have literally built for them (in "Blueprints"). The physical injuries are described with such precision that reading those passages feels at times like reading medical handbooks. But simultaneously the scientific bits always morph into the poetic imagery, the tone mild, soothing, reconciled. One of the most touching scenes is Kishkan's recollection of her glimpse of older women taking an aquatic fitness class before she goes in to have a swim. Though they are "lame," in need of walkers and canes, their legs showing "the story of their lives thus far," in the water they are "light as birds," floating gracefully, looking like "goddesses" (71–72). Kishkan is conscious of her changing body, and while she speaks frankly about her fears and anxieties related to growing weaker, about the loneliness of a body, there is a sense of gentleness in her ageing.



"I know that a body can yearn for the soil of its origins and I want us all to know where that soil might be found"
(Kishkan 119)

The last, recurring motif in most of the essays is genealogy, family history, and the imagined lives of Kishkan's ancestors. It is particularly the story of her paternal grandmother and her first husband, who immigrated to Alberta from a small village near the Beskydy Mountains in what is now the Czech Republic, and her paternal grandfather, who also immigrated from a small village, but in Ukraine. It is the enigma of those entangled lives, little documented and all the more imagined, that Kishkan returns to, over and over again. At the core is the familiar trope of a family archive – old documents, yellowed maps and blueprints, inherited photographs, snippets of oral stories passed down generations – enhanced by modern technologies, digital archives and genealogic tools. But even this leads to fragmentary knowledge and sooner or later one has to reconcile oneself to the fact that not everything that has been lost can be unearthed. Kishkan is persistent in her quest, travelling to distant lands, encountering foreign cultures, reversing the long journey of her grandmother from Czech Silesia to Alberta, Canada, putting the new pieces of the puzzle in place next to the old ones, though many empty spots remain. However (because she's a poet, too?), she moves seamlessly from recording the facts and the process of searching for them, to imagining the stories, sensations, relationships, colors and sounds behind those facts. It is quite intimate to *see* her seeing the small wooden house in Horní Lomná, which she at first believes to be the original home of her grandmother's family, which she left in 1913, only to discover later it had been rebuilt. As she walks along the small river, breathing in the smell of plum and apple trees, she dreams her grandmother's distant life into being. The title essay "Blue Portugal," which records all of this, could be a poetic rendering of one's search for roots and ancestry, one of many. For readers like me, for whom this land is a home, it is a peculiar sensation to be reading about images, places, names, and tastes so familiar and everyday. Curiously, though I'm Czech it took a while before it dawned on me that "Blue Portugal" in the title doesn't refer to geography but to a literal translation of a popular red wine varietal, one whose name returns us to the author's favorite color. What a lovely pun!

Blue Portugal and Other Essays is an intimate collection. Some of the reminiscences and emotions embedded in them may be too personal and subjective to always make a connection with a particular reader. Others are universal and will resonate: trying to make sense of our place, of our ancestors' lives, of how we arrived to where we are – a melancholy, even nostalgia. If there is one sensation that I find surfacing in all of the essays, it is the understanding of and reconciliation with "what vanishes and what remains" (4). Kishkan's writing in this collection will be enjoyed by those



who appreciate a particular poetics of contemporary creative nonfiction, one that is fragmented, interlaced with visual images, possibly experimental and hybrid in style. It will be equally enjoyed by those who like watching rivers, listening to Janáček, travelling by train, and drinking wine!

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