

Elsewhere, Far From Here

By Alberto Manguel

Elsewhere, far from here! Too late! Maybe *never*! Charles
Baudelaire, *A une passante*

Ulysses turned his back on the harbour and followed a rough track leading through the woods and up to the hills towards the place where Athena had told him. A group of men were idling around an oil barrel in which a fire was burning. He muttered a greeting and stood for a moment with them, trying to warm his hands. Then he entered the town through a crumbling stone gate.

Athena had wanted to be paid in full before leading him onto the ship, and then the captain had asked for further payment before allowing him and the other four men to crawl into the wooden crate and cover themselves with the raw hides meant for export. The customs people, Athena had told him, hardly ever bothered inspecting a cargo of hides. Afterwards, he'd tried to wash himself off in salt water, but the smell of dead animals still clung to him like a wet cloth.

All the years he'd been away, he'd remembered the way home in snapshots: the house of the Englishwoman, the oak tree inside a ring of stones, the sloping wall which he and his friends used to climb, pretending it was a mountain. Now he let his legs carry him, like mules that knew the way. Straight on, then left, then right, then left again. He looked about in wonder.

Was this the place? Were these the houses he knew, built this way and that? Were the shutters painted that colour? From the many places he had seen he carried images that were not his own, and now they overlapped and stuck to the half-remembered sites in a confusion of impressions. As a child, it was all clear-cut: a word for everything around him, a tag for every event, for every person. Not now. Already the harbour looked

different: loads of fruit from the Caribbean, tractors from the United States, blond men from Norway and Iceland. Places he knew faraway. Not here.

A scent of benzine filled his nostrils, and a purple-coloured dust blew in the air as it never had blown in his childhood. A pale, young, helmeted man stood in a doorway, gently caressing a gun. A 4-x-4 roared past him and then turned towards the old cemetery. A black man with salt-white hair, blind in one eye, opened and closed a high window. A woman with snakes in her hair sat on a stone bench, shouting curses to the passers-by. A group of children dressed in smocks were throwing stones at a pack of dogs. Even the dogs looked strange. Who were they, these people who'd never belonged here, whose stories were told elsewhere, in languages he never learned to speak, in places where he'd been a foreigner? He stopped by the fountain where his mother and aunts used to fetch the water before the aid workers built the neighbourhood pump.

The Sibyl of Cumae, two thousand years old, was coming up the street with her shopping basket. He recognized her immediately. Huffing and drooling, gobs of spittle forming at the corners of her mouth like foam on an ancient sea, her face, shrivelled and bristly, framed by her kerchief, as he remembered it from Cumae, where he had gone to ask her a question, her body bent over like one of the small old trees that grew in the harbour. She struggled up the street clutching the folds of her black dress.

"Sibyl! Sibyl!" called the children, and laughed. One of the boys threw a stone at her, not meaning to hit her, as if he just wanted her to say something, to answer back.

He then ran to his friends, laughing but also frightened. Ulysses remembered that his mother had told him that the Sibyl lived far across the water and that, once a year, she caught a little child and drained its blood. This kept her young. Ulysses didn't believe his mother, but when he'd approached her in Cumae he'd still been afraid.

"Sibyl! Sibyl!" Ulysses heard a girl call, taller and older than the other children. She had a mane of curly black hair and firm breasts that showed under her shirt. "Sibyl, tell me, can you teach me how to do it?" And she laughed louder than the others.

"Shameless!" a woman shouted out at the girl. "How can you say such things?" And she turned to Ulysses as if to seek his support. The children laughed again, proud of their leader. But the girl had nothing more to say and ran off, and the children followed.

Instead of turning down the street that almost certainly led to his house, Ulysses followed the Sibyl until she reached the marketplace. This too was not as he remembered it. Now, next to the food stalls, there were sellers of polyester dresses and jeans, radios and electric clocks, Russian shoes, German cutlery and Rumanian china. There was a stall that sold tapes and played music: Aldo Freni, Ben Trent, Valentino. The Sibyl stopped to buy grapes which she would swallow whole because her toothless gums couldn't burst the skin, and bread whose crust she'd first cut off with a knife she'd brought to be sharpened. In Cumae, Ulysses had seen her throw the crusts to the ravens outside her door before she'd turned back in and not come out again. He'd left without asking his question.

The Sibyl filled her basket and began the long walk back to her house, a small house on the edge of town. The door was very low, barely high enough for a child; the three small windows were shuttered. Outside there was a wooden bench, weathered and warped, set against the wall. There the Sibyl sat, her basket by her side. A canary sang through the shutters. "Poor innocent little bird!" said a young couple, passing by. "Locked up in that darkness of hell!"

In Cumae too, the Sibyl had a house very much like this one. Every evening, except in the depth of winter, the Sibyl would sit on the wooden bench and wait. On the Sibyl's street, no boys played soccer in the evenings, no girls played hopscotch. *When she's walking*, Ulysses thought, *she looks alive, funny with age, an ugly doll. But now that she's sitting, she's as if made of wood, like the bench, or of stone, like the grey house.*

Ulysses waited. From the Sibyl's house he could see the whole town stretching out from wall to crumbled wall and beyond, to the harbour from which he'd come, far in the distance, to his house hidden behind a new grey building crowned with a billboard advertising a supermarket. Athena had led him back, but was this the town he'd left? Again he felt lost. The many years of wandering dragged behind him like the wake of a ship, and were now wearily familiar in the suffering they'd brought; he'd grown accustomed to them as one might grow accustomed to the pain of an old wound. Every

new port, every new encounter had made him feel alien in a different way and his senses were now attuned to certain expected sights and sounds and smells: the crash of a door slamming in his face, the raised eyebrow of the bureaucrat fingering his passport, the brackish odour of a meal offered by a kind soul through the bars of an detention camp. A man he'd met on one of his attempts had said to him: "Once an exile, always an exile."

He had tried to redo his life in many places. In one, he had been kept imprisoned in a cave-like room, like sheep to be fattened and devoured. In another, he had worked and slept in an underground factory, among clattering machinery, surrounded by men and women who had forgotten even their names. In a third, he had been allowed to stay only if he swore to leave again after a certain time and not claim any of the benefits of an ordinary labourer. In a fourth, he had been forced to hide night and day from the immigration police, and if anyone asked he said his name was Nobody. Twice he had become a whore. In the most dreadful place of all, ghost-like souls past all hope whirled about him in howling droves and told him of the terrible things that had happened to them. Officials with bored faces went around taking down their stories and collecting them in cardboard files.

After Cumae, he'd seen the Sibyl in several of those places, staring blankly among those who had lost all memory, huddled among the *sans-papiers*, wandering among the ghostly asylum-seekers. She had appeared in the midst of them all, or had sat to one side, brooding, or had shuffled with the crowd waiting endlessly in queues to fill in forms, furnish documentation, explain, cajole, plead. He'd seen her once, with two other old women, dragged handcuffed onto a plane between armed *gendarmes*: she had said nothing, but the women were sobbing and screaming, and the other passengers had been very upset. Another time, she had stood among the neighbours watching a small African boy being taken from his school to a waiting car, his teacher shouting curses at the abductors. Then too, the Sibyl had remained silent.

The Sibyl now sat on her bench, her basket by her side, as if she had been sitting there since the beginning of the world. Ulysses looked at her and, for the first time, she looked back at him. He imagined what the old woman saw: an old man, in dirty rags, possessing nothing, belonging nowhere. A question had been shaping itself since he'd left home, in the early years of the war, and after his first death, and then after the second, and

later towards the end of the fighting and the city's fall, and all throughout the cursed voyage back, after every new marvel and every new terror. His tongue now mouthed it, mumbling. Then he spoke it again, more clearly.

On her bench, the Sibyl lifted her ancient head. Her breast heaved with an asthmatic wheeze, strands of grey hair which had escaped from under her kerchief blew now against her face and stuck to her wet jaw. She lifted a hand to her mouth but didn't touch her lips. She uttered a low moaning sound, between a grunt and a cackle, let out a whistling sigh, and then a shriek so shrill that the people, coming now up her street in an every-increasing crowd, failed to hear it.

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