

Literatur in den Sprachen Berlins 2023

Wiam El-Tamami

»can't go back the way we came«

Im englischen Original

can't go back the way we came

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Lesvos is the third largest island in Greece. It allows endless opportunities for exploration. Its landscape is one of pine-covered mountains and olive groves which blend with regions of volcanic stone and sea. The birthplace of the ancient poetess Sappho, the guitarist Arion and the musician Terpanros.

Mytilini is the capital of Lesvos and is built amphitheatrically around the harbor on the site of the ancient town. You have a choice of museums, the Archaeological, Byzantine, House of Lesvos, which has a rich folklore collection, and the Museum of Costumes and Embroidery.

Text accompanying a map of Lesvos

(distributed by Billy's, a tourist car rental agency)

Welcome to the Greek island Lesvos.

You must register with the authorities first at the port of Mytilene.

By bus takes about 90 minutes. Walking takes two days.

Please stay with your traveling group, and don't get into separate vehicles.

Keep your luggage with you at all times.

Do not sleep or rest on the roads.

Text accompanying a map of Lesvos

(prepared by MercyCorps, Internews, actionaid)

One

I.

She came on the overnight bus from Istanbul.

She slept through the night, then woke with a start in the early hours, knowing somehow that they were about to arrive. It was raining in Ayvalik, and hours still until the ferry that would take her to the other side. She sat in the echoing bus station, empty like a tin box with the rain drumming down, in a coin-operated massage chair that no longer worked.

As the time for the ferry drew closer, she lingered in a dusty cafeteria by the port, the only place to shelter from the rain. There were three others: an older German couple with backpacks, and a skinny man around her age, thirtysomething, with a khaki duffel bag. She wondered if they were tourists — unlikely in this weather? — or if they were crossing to Lesvos for the same reason as her.

On the ferry, she sat next to the man with the duffel bag. Connor. Irish, married to a Turkish woman, he'd also come down from Istanbul. They had both moved a lot over the course of their lives, slowly, over time and distances; they had that in common. They talked about making homes in many places, meeting people everywhere who feel familiar.

As the ferry began to move, she watched the waves, the grey uncertain sky. Her heart started to hammer as the mainland slipped away and we were suddenly out in the open sea. Over the past few years, a panic reflex had stolen into her body, in reaction to things she'd never given much thought to before: flying; being out at sea; loud explosive noises, like fireworks.

She tried to distract herself. She ate the oatmeal she had packed, offered Connor some fruit. He asked her where she was from and, as usual with this question, she made him guess for a long time.

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The beauty of the island as they approached. Ruins of a castle on a green hill.

But this was not the way most boats came.

II.

At Immigration, she was picked out of line. An officer, surveying the arrivals, called her out. Was it her dark eyes, her skin, her hair, or the green passport she was holding in her hand? He asked her questions, searched her small backpack. She told him brightly that she'd come to Lesbos to visit a friend. She showed him her visa and gave him Eleni's full name, address, and phone number.

He disappeared with the information for long minutes, then reappeared and waved her politely back into the line. The officer at the counter stamped her passport with a smile. She stared at a shortlist of countries in red, pinned up on a board behind his head.

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She caught up with Connor outside the port. The harbor swept a long semicircle behind them, the sun peering out, now, to glitter on the water.

They plunged into the old town of Mytilini. Small wooden shopfronts, cobblestone roads. Without consulting a map they found ourselves on Ermou, the main market street. They asked about Eleni's shop, and two lefts down a narrow alley they found it: a family emporium of buttons and knickknacks and yarn.

And there was Eleni herself. Spectacles perched on nose, a fuzz of red hair framing her small face. The two women hugged, warm and immediate. They'd never met before.

They walked uphill through the town, the three of them, talking and laughing and hurrying over the cobblestones. Past a tango school where Eleni danced and organized milongas, past an old church under excavation, past an Ottoman mosque, now in ruins.

Eleni's was a small stone house. Inside it was beautiful: a living space with faded kilims and woven baskets, and a simple kitchen with an old stone wall. Glass doors looked out onto a small garden of lemon and tangerine trees. Eleni showed her the room she would be staying in, a tangerine tree just outside the window: she could reach out and pick the fruit. She'd seen a picture of this room, the quiet room with the tangerines, and somehow it had pulled her here, pulled her through her fear of coming.

III.

She and Connor left Eleni's and walked around the old town, trying to find him a room. But everywhere there were those signs, in Arabic, Farsi, and English.

لا يوجد لدينا غرف خالية

هیچ اتاق خالی

No vacant rooms

They tried several small pensions. The first time they walked into one, they saw the questions in the eyes of the man behind the counter/at the reception. They realized that here, especially here, they must strike people as an odd pair: this skinny Irishman and this girl-woman who looked an awful lot, probably, like the hundreds of thousands of people who had been arriving on this island since the summer. *No*, they found themselves explaining, *the room is just for one*. After that, she decided to wait outside.

He finally found an overpriced room and, as the rain began to pour, they ducked into a small taverna for lunch. A heavysset young woman was up on a ladder, stringing Christmas lights across the ceiling — though it was only November — while her mother looked on. The two women regarded them with curiosity as they came in.

Neither of them could speak Greek and the women didn't speak English, but luckily a Turkish menu was found. Two dishes arrived: silky stewed aubergines in tomato sauce, and giant white beans in a green pool of olive oil. Simple and incredibly flavorsome. They shared both, mopping it all up with hunks of country bread. She felt her nerves begin to ease now that she was, finally, here.

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They parted ways in the evening. Tomorrow, Connor would be heading to Pikpa, an independent, community-run camp in the south of Mytilini. After some research, she had decided on Moria camp: by all accounts the worst place, the one in most dire need. They talked about Moria, trying to piece together an image based on what they'd read. He talked about the camp being split into two halves, she said something about different nationalities registering in different places . . . then they both trailed off, reminding them how uninformed they were, how little they actually knew.

At Eleni's, before bed, she pulled out the document she'd printed and read the beginning one more time:

Information for Volunteers Moria

Welcome to Moria. This is a registration camp for all peoples apart from Syrian families (who register at Kara Tepe). Most of the people awaiting registration live on the grounds of Moria in the meantime, typically 2-5 days.

Given the hard crossing, most people will arrive wet and lacking the necessities for their days-long wait. Much of your work will involve the identification of vulnerable cases (the wet, the sick, the disabled, the women and children) and helping them. There are special dormitories for such cases, but space is limited. Not a night passes without vulnerable cases being left outside. You will help them find tents or shelter; provide general orientation; give food, water, blankets, and a host of other goods.

Always keep special watch for unaccompanied minors, the sick, and lone women. Immediately report any instance of sexual violence.

You will often be asked to lend a hand with the (hopefully) twice-daily food distribution.

So, your duties are both physical (distribution) and informational (orientation). Being dependent on the satanic orgy known as geopolitics, the information you provide the refugees is always changing. The classification of “war zone countries” is always changing, so it will be important to check almost daily. Keep up to date.

Though she'd read it several times before coming, it still wasn't quite sinking in.

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*(Excerpt from **Can't Go Back the Way We Came**, book project-in-progress by Wiam El-Tamami)*

Wiam El-Tamami is an Egyptian writer, translator, editor, and wanderer. She has spent many years moving between different cultures and communities across Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. She writes nonfiction, fiction, and microstories that blur the boundaries of both. Her writing and translation work has been published in *Granta*, *Freeman's*, *Social Movement Studies*, *Jadaliyya*, *Alif*, *Banipal*, *Craft and Ploughshares Solos* (forthcoming), as well as several anthologies, including *Translating Dissent*, *The Uncanny Reader*, and *Road Stories*. She has received fellowships, grants, and residencies from Art Omi, the Banff Center for the Arts, Akademie Schloss Solitude, the Mophradat Foundation, and the Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa. She won the 2011 Harvill Secker Translation Prize, was shortlisted for the 2023 Craft Nonfiction Prize, and was a finalist for the 2023 Disquiet Prize. She has just finished her first book of literary nonfiction.