

**11 1st steps**

***Eleven First Steps: attempts to begin an essay on women travelling***

1 the edge of taboo

A woman travelling alone marks an edge of taboo. She is perceived as lonely or unhappy or likely to provoke danger. "Alone?" people keep asking in wonder or disapproval. Why not envy? Lonely is not so bad, when you're appreciating a novel, uncharted outside mirroring your inside. Let them think you're unfortunate, you're in a rapture of observation, losing yourself, finding yourself, not mere living but experiencing. You're careless when it's time to be. That's the good days.

2 the idea of women

The idea of women confined to home is most severely damaged by women who not only yearn for what's outside the door, the further the better, they go look for it.

3 travel/writing

Who are all those writers, in cafes, warungs and busstops? Why does a woman who travels alone have her pen ever ready in her hand? The journal is companionable, patient, proof. Travel is the best subject: suspense, significance, sign, language, it's got everything. Embarrassments, expenditures, addresses, moments you were really there. So much writing is done by travellers. So

much travelling is written about.

#### 4 travel interaction moments

Is that book in English? Have you got any books to swap? It's not only shopping that provides a travel interaction moment. Books weigh more than bricks, but we lug them, and still run out. Computer discs? But we'd need a computer - 3 kilo. All this paraphenalia - we need our notebook, our collections of readings. Other interactions: Would you please take a photo of me?

#### 5 my first long trip

My first long trip was by ship from Europe to Australia, from Naples to Bonegila, aged one year, brought by my parents. Not Hungarian or Italian but officially displaced people. That trip provides you one of the basic mythologies of your life. A sense of an absent elsewhere, where another possible life remains, might have been claimed. Think of how many times youre asked where you were born, like every time you fill in a form.

It's an age of refugees, immigrants and an international trend of multiple citizenship, multitudes relocating, multi-cults, cultures colliding and scattering history over each other. It's movement that's commonplace, supposed to be deviant.

A friend of ours went to a movie in Dixon Street and said "there

were asians queuing for three blocks it wasn't like being in Australia at all" and we said "typical Anglo, they say it's not like being in Australia, for us this is what Australia actually looks like". It used to be us making something "wrong" with this picture.

6 Freya Stark was it

Around the time Freya Stark named a distinction between tourist and traveller it ceased to have much meaning. Your travel agent can tell you how to get anywhere and there's surely a guide book. Everyone has return tickets now. Did you hear it costs as much to manufacture dangerous travel adventures as it once took to avoid them. The world is full of travel junkies, for these days any preference is claimed as an addiction. We're talking of travel as choice. Whether you have to go, for business, a wedding, a stopover. Whether you just felt like it: taking a trip "(needed a break)", making a pilgrimage ("my roots"), fulfilling an ambition ("I've always wanted to go there"). Displaced people still travel, that goes on, but that's not choice.

A way to transcend tourism is to go to another country to work. A volunteer is promised two years with something of the duration, discomfort and danger of the travellers of old. Also, you can feel your presence is part of "something worthwhile", for we're still there to demonstrate our better ways. If you doubt this you might achieve some olden-type travail.

7 change is a convention

A convention of travel is that it causes "change". For the better. More profoundly and more expensively than, say, a hairdresser. A person can change only so much before wondering about the limits of the Self. You take your self with you. You leave your self behind. You are not recognised in the usual ways: your clothing, address or occupation don't have the same meanings, and you can change them anyway. Different things are known about you. The essential self and the constructed self: the difference is in what you can discard, disclaim. You come home again and, here, nothing has changed, nothing much.

8 to travel alone is to test

To travel alone is to test the extent of your instinct, strength and resourcefulness. Your rapid judgements are right on the whole. The balance of trust and suspicion teeters and rights itself. You arrive in a city, a youth offers himself as a guide.

9 Isobel Eberhard

Isobel Eberhardt died at twenty-seven in the desert which had been her refuge and her destiny, far away from the life of a conventional French girl of olden days. Her desert was the setting for an outrageous life meeting olive-skinned lovers in robes. And there, dressed in mens clothes, speaking Arabic, smoking kif, she drowned in the desert. There were words like

Foreign Legion, Allah, kismet. For the young woman I once was, such a barely known or understood life was invoked for a guiding spirit.

10 we seek the other

We Other-ize others to notice the ways people are different everywhere, the ways they are the same. We find Others as we expect Others to be. When I began to travel alone it was the mid 70s, my mid 20s, and I started in Bali. There it was easy to find superior charm in the Other, superior lessons from a more admirable culture, more grace, more wisdom.

The Other women do not have our "freedom" still they enlighten us about cultural transgressions: pointing with your finger, using the left hand to take food, sitting with your legs like that, looking someone in the eye, getting too soon to the point. They connect in culture-transcendent ways: holding a baby, swapping clothes, dancing together, jokes, embraces, housework.

11 some of the things we talk about now

Community for us is not geographically based, say you had a fax modem and a dish, where couldnt you live? Post-modern nomadism, you could call it. People like us have a "base" rather than a "home"; put up aentials rather than put down roots. Suppose you could travel from there quite a lot. Suppose you never stop missing an unknown elsewhere. We talk of the cities in the world that have the best coffee. [1994/5]