

FOREWORD BY TADE IPADEOLA

IN THE JAWS OF SOTON CENTRAL



RANKA PRIMORAC

In the Jaws of Soton Central

by

Ranka Primorac

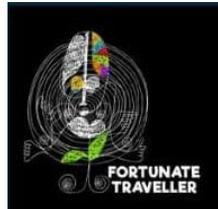
With a foreword by

Tade Ipadeola

Series Editors:

Rebecca Jones

Tópé-ÈniỌbańké Adégòkè



...Characterising places

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Foreword: Life in the Maw and Beyond

Life beyond the merely itinerant is a sentient exploration. The sense of place, of space, the deployment of the faculty for reading – and interpreting, ambience, is a large part of the project of all who move through the spatial dimensions and time. The psychic evolution of humankind owes much to movement and to the meaning made from movement. This is another way of saying that we all have a stake, sometimes ineffable and sometimes ephemeral, in this whole phenomenon albeit some of us bring more concentration to it than others. Ranka Primorac is clearly one of those individuals who bring both conscious and unconscious resources to this experience. In this slim volume, we get glimpses of the mind sifting through history and data to bring her audience some of the most pertinent of the germs of experience.

We begin at So'ton Central, a metonymy for all portals of departure. We begin in the maw of movement and emerge wherever our synapses lead. From Southampton Central Train Station, we travel into old Yugoslavia, into Zambia, by way of language into Nigeria, into old acrimonies and rousing desire, unto stages of consciousness and landmarks paved over with the concrete of 'development'. Ranka's is a subtle, provocative journey and if we allow ourselves to travel with her, we can all extend to ourselves the pleasures of many thought experiments beginning and berthing far from one ancestral cartography.

Memory, meaning and mettle mix in the nonlinear world of these remembrances and remembrancers we tease ourselves with. When the day is over, sometimes even before, right in the midst of urgent life, we have those little luxuries which a toy doggie from eccentric interests represent. The fabled focus of a John Wick is real perhaps for those who inhabit monasteries and who thus are not frequent users of train stations and airports. For the most of humankind in the 21st century, we move in tandem with the need to make a living or to get away from the necessity of making a living.

We begin where we are, as Czesław Miłosz once observed, in the maws of life, as Dubravka Ugrešić more specifically observed, and we make of our lives what we will. The practiced love of travel will come to some of us as seasons of life turn, for some of us it will be the vicarious pleasure of places far away and long ago where echoes of Dambudzo Marechera and the apertures of Ranka Primorac furnish virtual company. Whatever our lot, we can learn a little more about ourselves, about others, about this one world in which we have the good fortune of sharing experiences with others. We can learn a little bit more about the examined life and how travel aids or undermines it. The imagination is stirred in the recollections of Ranka Primorac here contained and the surprises there makes it doubly worthwhile to go where she leads.

Tade Ipadeola,
Ibadan, 2021

In the Jaws of Soton Central

1.

Jaws

I live in the jaws of Soton Central. (Or I used to, before the apocalypse.) Kind of like a latter-day Štefica Cvek. What I mean is, like the heroine of the 1981 novel called *Štefica Cvek in the Jaws of Life*, by the ex-Yugoslav writer Dubravka Ugrešić. Back at the start of the cold-war eighties, Dubravka parodied the romance fiction imported in translation to our Balkan backwaters from the glamorous West, by telling the story of an ordinary girl in an ordinary town, who is looking for love. Štefica wants to meet Prince Charming. She gets a string of hilarious encounters with men who offer to fill the role, and women who offer 'reliable' advice. Her first would-be lover, The Driver, leaves her with a strange gift: a wind-up toy doggie that endlessly snaps its sharp metal jaws and won't stop barking even when thrown into the bin. What can I say? Living in the unglamorous West all these years later often feels equally exhausting. In Ugrešić's novel, the very name 'Štefica' sounds funny. It does not seem romantic, because it's too obviously local. 'You have a nice name,' The Driver tells Štefica. 'Others might call themselves Stephanie, or something, if they were you.' At Soton Central, 'Ranka' might be equally out of place, perhaps? To anyone culturally equipped to draw the parallel? Which is, precisely, the rub.

In the Jaws of Soton Central

'Soton' looks & sounds like 'Satan', obviously. (My email address, which features the word, has caused some unseemly giggles in foreign parts.) In fact, it's an abbreviated name of the university town to which I commute for work. Or used to. The main railway station – Soton Central – has a newsagent's (good for picking up mags with charming princes and their lovely wives on the covers), a snack shop with overpriced mayonnaised sandwiches, and a clear view of brutalist concrete structures towering above the platforms. Inside most trains, economy class seats are crimson red: the colour of exhaustion and anger. I am a fortunate traveller. I have a job to which I clearly remember commuting. It is here, in the crimson in-between land of public transport and time irrationally spent online, that Tope found me. He has made me ransack my old slow Samsung for paired pics from other travels, and write down scattered thoughts culled from the jaws of Soton, in the breaks between other things, on the run.



2.

Comings & Goings

Parkiće

Positioned snugly between Medveščak and Rockefeller streets, the *parkiće* (little park) is unique in town in that it has three tiers. The rectangular grassy surface with benches and a graffitied wall connects to a winding footpath carved into the side of a hill. Take the footpath and you'll get to a more secluded set of benches on a grassy slope, and a clear view of Medveščak's red roofs. (Best, at this point, to ignore memories of long-ago teenage alcohol consumption & inexpert groping under summer skies.) Keep walking uphill, past the sand pit and swings, now fenced off to protect the kids from dogs & gropers. Turn right. Leave the park behind. Cross the road, take two flights of steps, walk past some residential housing, and you'll come to a school. The local primary is named after the poet called Ivan Goran Kovačić. Google him: he was a gifted & gorgeous revolutionary who died young in World War Two. A communist freedom fighter, he wrote a long moving poem about a war-crime victim who digs himself out of a mass grave where he'd been left for dead by home-grown fascists. This sounds gruesome, but the poem soars confidently above the gory detail on the wings of its own firm faith in post-

revolutionary utopia. That school building, though? Was not built with revolutions in mind. If anyone wanted to occupy any part of it or withstand a siege, they wouldn't stand a chance.

In the Jaws of Soton Central



Ranka Primorac



The Faculty of Humanities

To get to Uni from the Avenues is easy. Cycle up Second if you dare (via Cork and Upper East is best if you are scared of being mowed down by an emergency taxi or an army truck), then Mount Pleasant. Take the lower entrance to the campus. Follow the road; there you are. Chain your bike to the railings. Stand up under the arch of the street-facing building & behold the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

Enter. Climb upstairs past African Languages and Literatures, until you get to English. Remember the palaver about renaming it in the wake of Ngugi & co, which came to nothing? To see the names of lecturers on office doors, you'll need to peer past the chipped burglar bars. Imagine the place under a siege, as the warring sides in an unnamed conflict 'got down to the grisly business of pummelling each other with napalm, rockets, machine guns, booby traps, land mines, and the trusty shaving razor.' They say that the poet Dambudzo Marechera, who wrote these words, was once arrested for walking all the way down Second to the city centre, all by himself, carrying a placard that dissed the colonial authorities. In the long run, a dude like that, he didn't stand a chance. (In a parallel universe not too far away, dogs & owners cross the grassy crest of the little park's top tier and walk slowly down Rockefeller, back towards the hospital.)

3.

Eavesdropping

Monde and Marina both wore red the last time I saw them in person.

Monde was sitting on Norah's sofa at the University flats in Roan Road, talking about writing. Norah and I listened, laughed and nodded. I thought, secretly, that Monde was a natural-born superhero. She has been an editor, a publisher, a writer, an animator, an activist, an organiser, a speaker of truth to power. She once edited a short story collection titled *Eavesdropping*. Another time she helped to run a whole university in a far-flung part of the country, for years, on no budget at all.

(The other day, Monde showed up in my inbox out of the blue. She wrote: 'It's imperative to check on each other in these strange Corona virus times. I hope you're well and will stay safe until this, too, has passed.')

Marina was in a pizza place, wearing her new shades from Tokyo because she knew I'd want to take a picture. We talked about Brexit. Marina started out as an artist by pasting her drawings to the public walls of our city: those strange, unsettling sketches of humans with animal heads were hers – now mostly gone, but the streets remember. She now exhibits in art galleries. She once did a

performance with a female pop singer who'd married a Serbian footballer, and took small-town flak for it for months. Another time she came close to falling off a derelict crane while working on a façade-sized mural.

(When she lost her home in an earthquake during the early weeks of Covid in 2020, I went to Marina's inbox and typed trite, well-meaning things about how art can help to combat misfortune. She told me to shut up. She said: 'Nemam pojma šta ću. Dat ću si sad tri mjeseca... da malo vidim.')

Ranka Primorac



4.

Medusae

Medusa, one of the three Gorgon sisters, was apparently toxic from the start. She had wings, and live poisonous snakes for hair. If you looked at her face, you were instantly turned into stone. Via an ingenious use of a mirror-like device, the ancient Greek hero Perseus cut off Medusa's head, then paraded it around as a trophy & new-age weapon.

There was nothing toxic about Alexander Calder. He was a big burly man who loved doing things with his hands. In the 1970s, in a converted farmhouse in Connecticut, he made large and colourful mobiles, metal jewellery, playful household objects and gigantic metal sculptures to be displayed in public open spaces. One of Calder's early wire mobiles is called Medusa. It is a little-known fact that this Medusa is gender non-specific. When I saw it in Paris, I knew at once that it had a secret sibling on an inconspicuous wall in my part of Europe. Don't let the melancholy gaze fool you. Look closer. That fringe: snakes in training.

Ranka Primorac



5.

Distance

To go to the next level in London and Addis, try your best to:

looksharp

stand tall

(louche is fine)

don't fall

limber down

mind your head

watch your back

or you're dead.

Ş'ótán?



6.

Grace Car Wash

'Chinua Achebe was right when he wrote that the beautiful ones are not yet born!' roared Pastor Bruce at his flock.

He was making, mid-service, a point to do with the imminent visitation of God's grace, and (quite rightly, given the circumstances) did not bother with the minute detail of literary authorship. When Chongo drove over a bollard opposite the Grace of God carwash, I remembered the pastor's words, because Chongo is as beauty-full as the sun, and the man has not yet been born who will not drop everything and rush over to winch, push, start, re-start, spruce, guide, and finally wave off the delinquent car and its driver, after she has asked, tearfully, for assistance. The car had ended up stranded atop the bollard, positioned diagonally across the sidewalk. Luka and I were in his taxi, leading the way. We'd gotten lost in the maze of unmarked streets near Alliance Française, where we were going to a hear lecture by a visiting Prof from Hong Kong. It was something to do with the psychic mechanisms of second-language acquisition. We now knew for sure that we'd be late.

Which, in the end, did not matter. The Hong Kong Prof lectured with panache about the need to learn a second language, before realising at question time that most members of his audience spoke three or four languages fluently. Chongo made copious notes. She is happily married, with three kids whom her husband would be putting to bed that evening. A young mother in the audience had brought her own baby along, and second-language acquisition soon gave way to a heated debate about how to bring up future generations to be lovers of reading. Luka made friends with a Rasta in the back row. I exchanged cards with the Hong Kong Prof and ran into an old friend from the University library on my way to the loo. It was a mellow, accommodating Lusaka evening. On the way back to my hotel at the Arcades, we drove past the deserted Grace of God carwash and, for a brief moment, I could imagine Chinua Achebe himself smiling at us benevolently from on high.

In the Jaws of Soton Central



Island

The fat tourist lady with the David Lynch t-shirt fell off her paddleboard at least four times before she was half way across the lake, and Martin was getting worried. She had come to the tourist resort with her frail old mother two days earlier. She said she'd always wanted to try upright paddling. And this morning, she particularly wanted to see up close the translucent grey cloud that hung above the tiny island in the middle of the lake, even though Martin had explained that the cloud would likely evaporate before long, as it did most mornings. Still, she had insisted that she wanted to try, and now Martin was wondering whether he needed to mount a rescue mission.

He greeted a Japanese family who wanted to hire a boat and explained the basics of rowing. (Face away from your destination; move the oars in synch; come back in an hour, or it's five euros extra.) Next there were two returning boats — one had got caught in the rope boundary around the hotel beach and needed untangling — then two more boarders to send off and the stripy beach towels to distribute around the still-empty deck-chairs. (What was that silly joke she kept making – that she worked for the devil himself?) The Japanese teenager dropped his phone into the lake. Martin felt a toothache coming on. An American couple wanted to know whether it was true that Melania Trump was originally from the village on the other side of the hill. A tanned blond bodybuilder looked crestfallen when Martin explained that he could not have a deck-chair for his Alsatian. The wispy grey

cloud had long dispersed and the surface of the lake shone like liquid silver. And then he saw it: the awkward tourist in the black t-shirt (come to think of it, she had hair like David Lynch, too), finally upright on her board, paddling stiffly into the rising sun.

Ranka Primorac



Still life

Prayer meeting wedding book launch sports club function baby shower karate
tournament braai funeral committee meeting chilanga mulilo choir practice
church service steps rehearsal garden party bridal shower.



[Spotting an expert assemblage of stacked chairs,
outdoors or indoors at the end of a long day,
may or may not mean that you are in Africa.]

Notes

1. Dubravka Ugrešić, *štefica Cvek u raljama života* (Zagreb: Konzor, 2001 [1981])

2. Ivan Goran Kovačić, 'Jama/The Pit', transl. Alec Brown,

<http://www.almissa.com/povijesnitrenutak/jama.htm>, accessed 3 May 2020.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2001), pp. 1995-2000)

Dambudzo Marechera, *The Black Insider* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990), p. 24.

3. 'I have no idea what I'll do. I'll give it three months... to see how things go.'

Monde Sifuniso (ed), *Eavesdropping* (Lusaka: Zambia Women Writers Association, 2000)

Warm thanks to Monde Sifunison and Marina Mesar for giving me permissions to write about them and publish their pictures in this piece.

6. Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988 [1968])

Offcuts from the Jaws

She had not touched her *waterzooi*.

Teju Cole

In the Jaws of Soton Central



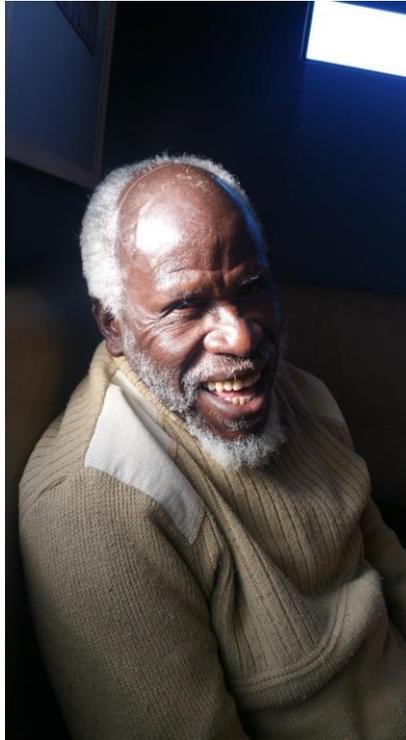
Amos Tutuola and Dubravka Ugrešić, Iowa City, 1982. (Photo courtesy of Dubravka Ugrešić)

In the Jaws of Soton Central

All 6,000 of them. They stood in six rows of Strike
Force strength each, at ramrod attention.

Eddie Iroh

Ranka Primorac



Taban LoLiyong, Grahamstown, 2017

In the Jaws of Soton Central

(Comment: No Comment!

Let's go for more gallantry.)

Taban LoLiyong

Ranka Primorac



Lusaka Showgrounds, n.d.

I know that, from the bottom of this grave,
Angoulima the Great Master sees everything.
But, never mind.

Alain Mabanckou

Ranka Primorac



Oumou Sangare, London, 2017

This happened and it didn't happen:
A man threw a key into a fire.

Helen Oyeyemi

Sources

1. *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 143.
2. *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 155.
3. *The Last Word* (Aylesbeare: Mallory, 2006[1969]), p. 58.
4. *African Psycho* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2007[2003]), p. 39.
5. *What is not Yours is not Yours* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2016), p. 125

About the Author

Ranka Primorac is a lecturer at the Department of English, University of Southampton. She teaches and writes about African literatures in English. Together with Steph Newell, she edits the Boydell & Brewer monograph series African Articulations. She is a fortunate tweeter and traveller, and once organised a conference on local cosmopolitanisms at her home institution. She posts pictures of small things on Instagram as [@wot means switch](#)

About *Fortunate Traveller*

Fortunate Traveller is committed to publishing and promoting nonfictional, itinerant narratives. We believe in travel, and its transformational and enlightenment value, when combined with a responsibility to represent people and places ethically and thoughtfully. We encourage cosmopolitanism and people who travel, have distinct experiences and bring back their narratives.

We believe true travel can be much more than just being away or on vacation. We are as curious about places and spaces ordinarily perceived as just representations or ideas on the atlas as we are curious about destinations that are thought of as being well-trodden. We are characterising these places and bringing them alive through the narratives of travellers, road-trippers, hikers, seafarers who have gone on journeys and have experienced something different and unique they would like to share.

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Government Pikin: An Anthology of NYSC Travels Vol 1 ed by Sami Tunji and Sanusi Anselm

'What we have here in this collection then is a record of these pieces of movement: dozens of young Nigerians making the first incursions into a new space, through this particular programme, and discovering more than just the new places and the stories it brought, but parts of themselves. There are not many of these stories that get set down, but which older Nigerians will continue to tell their descendants at home as part of their coming into adulthood. There is value in that, as much as there is in this printed account from these contemporary writers.' –Kòlá Túbòsún, author of *Edwardsville by Heart*

Displacement and Rediscovery by Uzo Dibia

'I came to this travelogue as I was completing Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* – a semi-autobiographical account in verse of origins spanning Nigeria, England, Ireland, Germany and Brazil. *Lara* was recommended to me by a brilliant American student-poet in Cardiff. Coupled with Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, which I had also just started reading, it created the matrix within which *Displacement and Rediscovery* was experienced – our apprehension of self in a world of strangers, typified no less by the travails of the bearer of the Nigerian passport in different airports around the world.' –Niran Okewole, author of *The Hate Artist*

A Handbook on Travel Writing

Travel writing is many things to different writers; but what does it mean to actually travel and explore both landscapes and people, how does a writer bring back a narrative from their journey and set it down thoughtfully and ethically; what opportunities are in the genre and how can a writer harness them? Can travel writing tell the stories of the dispossessed and those who have little say over where they travel, as well as the stories of those who are privileged to travel where they please? These and many more questions peculiar to the genre of travel writing are what our facilitators – Emmanuel Iduma, Rebecca Jones, Kólá Túbòsún, Ranjit Hoskote, Kene Nwatu – discussed in our online travel writing masterclass.



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