

CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Mediterrania, a meditation

Uri Costak



Illustration by [Carole Hénaff](#)

*May there be many summer mornings when
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;*

Ithaka, by Constatine P. Cavafy
Translated by Edmund Keeley

(1)

- Jan Martin, what do you think about our journey?
- How do you mean?
- What was it like for you? What can you remember?
- You were afraid of losing the camera bag, that someone would steal the camera, the laptop ...
- There are things that went unsaid. We could say them now.
- That's true. But there isn't anything nasty. There's no sex, no dead bodies ... It turned out well.
- But we changed, don't you think? I'm sure that I at least changed. Do you think there's enough there to ask someone to read our story?
- Perhaps the question you should really ask is whether there's enough there to bother to write it.



Detail of Encyclopaedia Britannica's Atlas

His father has a big Encyclopaedia Britannica atlas, with the names in English, everything in English, where the boy often wanders in a daydream, imagining the countries he will travel to. A world full of adventure. Childish adventure, of course. There are no women (yet), no drinking. On one of the maps in the atlas, he left the pencil trace of a journey round the entire Mediterranean coast; a trace whose thin, straight lines (you can still see them, 30 years later) join cities, key strategic locations, places to stay. From Barcelona the line goes up to Marseille and joins Genova, Roma, Napoli, Bari, Athina, Izmir... and carries on round, like the hands of a clock, until it comes back to Barcelona where he lives, where he imagines, people waiting for him.

When was the first time he thought of this journey? He definitely remembers being just a boy - but was he the one who dreamt it? Did someone else tell him about it? And why Mediterranean? He is a boy in love with the German side of the family. He likes the *Ferrero Rocher* that Grandma Renate brings at Christmas; sitting next to Uncle Manuel in his Mercedes; telling the class that he is "half German" and then joking about his second surname or badly speaking the four words that make him different from the others. *Wunderbar, Weihnachten, arschloch, bis bald...*

But maybe, it must be, it definitely is: Fornells, Menorca. For all his life - up to when his parents split up when he was twelve - he went there every summer, for at least a month. That's where he learnt to go out alone, if you can call it that when there is always food on the table when you get back, a cuddle, a hot shower; where he learnt to appreciate the weakest - one of the gang is a handicapped boy, Felip, who brings joy to everybody; where he stops being afraid of touching a girl - wild with black curly hair; and especially where he sees his parents and their friends and how happy they are in their nights of talk, wine and guitar until dawn and their days of boats and kids and beaches - Ferragut or Binmel-là (the big little one) when it blows from the south and Santo Tomas when the *tramuntana* is blowing. Everything feels so natural but at bottom it is so privileged.

Fornells, he has seen it now, recently, while the world had stopped and he had another

chance to rummage round in his own baggage, is what he longs for and looks for in everything. In his work, in his friendships, in his family, in his relationships ... He really, really needs them to have that Fornells spark (that spark of happiness) within. That's why, and he's not so much pleased as relieved to have seen it, he gets close to whatever is closest to Fornells and flees headlong from whatever is furthest from Fornells.

Now, fifteen years after that journey, thirty-five years after drawing the first line, when he sits down to write a piece for *IDEES* Magazine, he wonders how a twelve-year-old boy could have imagined such a journey. He hasn't read about anything like it, or seen it in a film. Most likely, it must just have been play, pure chance. But, years later, he thinks that basically if we helicopter over the map and see the sea as a centre, if we imagine that it is a thing, with volume and form, or body, flesh, soul and spirit, at that point it also becomes a circumambulation and the journey could, in some sense, now be thought of as a long meditation. A long meditation on Mediterrania.

As the years go by, the sediment from that dream, unlike other dreams that fade or lose their impact, like silt on the banks of a river, builds up, day after day, in the deepest recesses of his being. And the longer he lives - the more he reads, travels - the stronger the pull becomes. And because that's how it is, or because that's how he wants to see it now, the pull is real. And such a pull is like falling in love, when you are really caught you can never be uncaught.

He has to admit, however, that sometimes he is not certain whether the boy he is talking to now wanted to carry this great trek inside him or, really, he just wanted to be given a medal. A fine line, doubtless a porous line. In the end, it is clear that a journey this challenging, is not something (and we must include the desire for adventure) that he can just skim over, skim through. One way or another, he has to take it seriously.

And now, knowing himself a little better, with an explanation for everything, he thinks: Yes, what that boy wants is for a story like this to be one of all the things he thinks he has to experience if he wants to have a worthwhile life, a life that could be lived millions of times and still be worthwhile. Because, in reality, that's what it's about, he realises. It would be shoddy not to give back what he has been given for no apparent reason unconditionally before even starting.

So day after day, year after year, he remains open, ready, greedy for adventure, for experience:

They have to leave, him still madly in love, and they left when he was sixteen. And he remembers how his tears fell into the soup his mother had made and how he ate his own tears, with the soup. And how, with that completely unexpected intuitive action, there and then, his suffering ended...

he needs to work with the best and learn what he can from them and that's what he's done, up to now, in radio (with Manel, Anna, Gemma and Jordi), in print journalism and communications (with Xavi, Eugeni and his father), in advertising (with Josep Maria, Jordi,

Pipo)...

and he has to do the jobs nobody wants to do and of course learn whatever he can, and as a teenager he delivered pizza on a scooter, and although it wasn't for very long, he knows what it is to clean other people's toilets...

he has to be at the top and lose it all and that's what happened to him when he was thirty (job, house and partner all in the same month). And realise - or understand - that in reality losing everything, was the same as winning everything back, even though right then it might seem impossible to believe ...

he has to go back to live with his parents, for a while, defeated, years after he closed their door behind himself for the first time...

lose friends, find new friends...

blow another man (he didn't like it) and make love with amazing women (each amazing in her own way)...

get married, yes, get married (at least once), really connect, even if just for a short time, because when you marry the most beautiful woman in the world, it's never for long. And hold her in your arms while she sleeps. And, content, feel her rest happily on you...

and he has to be deceived, and he has to deceive, and he has to fight and win, and fight (against five or even just one) and lose...

get home in the early morning without knowing how...

and also write a book...

and plant a tree...

and his son....

the best thing of all is his son.

He still want to do so much... and of everything he wants to do, even though it might not seem as important as all those things, at that point, when he is just over thirty, before the journey, and very deeply, very deeply:

he wants to look at the Mediterranean from Alexandria with his own eyes, walk through Kadare's Albania, Oz's Israel, through Mahfuz's Egypt..., tread once more the streets of Troy; pass once more through the Damascus Gate, the Acropolis, get lost in the medina at Fez and the kasbah in Algiers, discover Leptis Magna, let the sand of the deserts first conquered by Alexander run through his fingers.... Stand in front of the Pantheon, in Rome, and say inside himself (but out loud):

Yes, we are from the same family,
we have drunk the same water and
we have swum in the same sea.

We had it all, we couldn't see it.
Save us, oh gods, from ourselves.

I. Stroll round Naples, Cairo. Feel the dance, the chaos, the order; order within the chaos. And drift. Drift from here to there and from there to here. Like at home. Like a kid.

II. Eat some prawns in the harbour of a small town in Algeria and while you take the head from the body, suck and then peel the little beast to eat it, think that these simple actions could unite us all. Heads full of cadmium. Bellies full of cadmium. Shit full of cadmium.

III. In Libya, enter Tripoli's vibrant central market and have the sensation of going back to a time when deals are sealed with a handshake and are forever; and be in the perfect place, moment and even country.

IV. Remember the Syrian students they chatted with, on the journey from Aleppo to Latakia, and think that if they have survived today they would be 35. Maybe they are mathematicians like they wanted to be; maybe they died in an Islamic State attack, drowned crossing the Mediterranean or maybe they got their hands dirty for the President... What a disaster, we had no idea.

V. Carve on a stone, if he has to, always remember that it is better to live like a humble peasant working in a poor plot of ancient Thessaly than to die young, the quintessence of glory and fame, waging another man's war against Troy.

VI. Imagine the *paideia* for his children: walk quickly two days a week round Collserola, read Cervantes, the poems of Cavafy or Foix, think about how the world is, using the Socratic method or the way Rumi thought about it, it doesn't matter, think about it... Educate their taste, honey and wine, music, learn geometry together. And most important of all: remember that there is no harder job than a bird's job - it's no small thing to have to teach your children to fly.

VII. Say good morning, miremengjes, bongu, inidēti āderiki, boker tov, dobro jutro, sabah alkhyr, günaydin, buon giorno, kalimera... and show that even though we look alike, each could be mistaken for the other, we don't understand each other, we don't speak the same language. A smile, yes, crack a nut, have a coffee, offer a drop of water, as well. But we've got more chance of being good lovers than of making a couple.

VIII. Read, in geology books, how millions of years ago millimetre by millimetre the Mediterranean rose up out of the rocks, and now millimetre by millimetre it is closing again and in millions of years from now it will just be rock again. The beaches where Cleopatra and Mark Anthony swam, the ports that welcomed the Jews in their diaspora, the bay at Fornells and its lizard island...

IX. To continue to believe, above and beyond my own sadnesses and achievements, above and beyond the sadnesses and achievements of the world itself, that whatever happens we have to protect the idea of the Mediterranean as Jean-Claude Izzo saw it, where a man or woman can arrive in any port and "no sooner than their foot touches land be able to say: Here I am. I'm home."

X. And in spite of it all, feel that we are talking about the best place in the world to soak up the sun.

Barcelona, Figueres, Avignon, Arles, Marseille, Nice, Monaco, Genoa, Rome, Naples, Venice, Trieste, Piran, Split, Neum, Dubrovnik, Podgorica, Tirana, Durrës, Patras, Athens, Salonika, Istanbul, Çanakkale, Smyrna, Bodrum, Iskenderun, Antioch, Aleppo, Latakia, Damascus, Beirut, Sidon, Amman, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Aqaba, Cairo, Alexandria, Marsa Matruh, Benghazi, Tripoli, Gabes, Tunis, Annaba, Algiers, Oran, Fes, El Hoceima, Tetouan, Algeciras, Malaga, Valencia and Barcelona once more.

A few months before leaving he starts to talk about it, but he doesn't know anyone who's made a trip like it. Bits, yes, but never the whole way round. Friends and acquaintances give what they can. They pass him the phone number of a journalist in Lebanon, of a driver in Algiers, the address of a good restaurant in Rome...but not much more. Nobody he knows knows the best place to cross the border between Montenegro and Albania, or how to get a visa for Gaddafi's Libya, or the crossing where the Israelis are kind enough not to stamp your passport...

The route follows the idea of historian Ferdinand Braudel; the Mediterranean is much more than climate, geology, topography, the master explains, it owes its fragile unity to a network of cities formed early in human history that have famously endured. Going too fast, by public transport, taxi, bus, train...an average of three days in each stop, it takes just four months to make the whole trip. Four months dancing through one of the areas of the world with the most conflict and undeclared wars in the whole of history. The "world's laboratory", experts have called it.

That was fifteen years ago. There was no Twitter, no Instagram; Facebook had started up only a few months before. And Trump hadn't yet appeared in his most grotesque persona and when you said *Arab Spring* the only people involved were Israel and the Palestinians. Leonard Cohen was still alive, as well, reciting his beautiful songs for us all.

That's how it goes. He knows. Men and women pass, and pandemics and the dark times that follow them will pass, and even so he hopes, he has the simple inner hope, that in Mediterrania at least, there won't be a night when you can't sit out somewhere under a sky of fixed stars, in the garden of a new inn, enjoying good conversation, a marvellous smile or the healing company of a great love.

Before he leaves, it should be said, there is the company of a new partner, a recent partner, in fact; from just a year ago.

He is completely in love with her and she has promised to wait for him.

Would he have gone without that promise? he wonders, now, as he writes, fifteen years later.

Probably, yes. That's for sure.

But although today we are living through a time of the deconstruction of romantic love, we should not underestimate, please don't, the strength of a promise. He, luckily, is not daft enough to turn a deaf ear at the very moment when he needed not to underestimate her promise, because it is thanks to that very promise that he feels invincible. And for that journey, as for every journey, what was needed one way or another was someone (a little) invincible.



Uri Costak

Uri Costak has been creating content for 30 years. He has been radio scriptwriter for Cadena Ser's *La Ventana*, reporter at *La Vanguardia*, creative director for different advertising agencies and professor in the Master's degree in Creative Brand Management (UPF-BSM), among many other occupations. In 2019 he published his first novel *L'estilita* (Amsterdam), *El estilita* (Ed. Destino), *Stillit* (Geopoetika). He has also started a collaboration with the Civit Art Collection, where he has created three works (graphics, sculpture and installation) that explore the contradictions of the contemporary world. In 2005, which was the European Year of the Mediterranean and the tenth anniversary of the start of the Barcelona Process, he and his brother Jan Martin went on a tour around the Mediterranean, travelling along its entire coast from Barcelona to Barcelona.