

'Foreign bread has a bitter flavour'

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Elaine Feinstein reviews *Nobody's Home* by Dubravka Ugresic tr by Ellen Elias-Bursac

Eastern Europeans coming to the West are among the most visible migrations of this new century. They are no longer in flight from persecution. Not all are in pursuit of Western goods.

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These are not exactly exiles; cheap flights can always take them home on a visit. Yet as the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova wrote more than half a century ago: "Foreign bread has a bitter flavour." Many are caught up in a profound homesickness for a world that has disappeared.

In this collection of rapid, sure-fire sketches, the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic looks at their situation with wit and affection, sympathetic to their sense of never belonging to the societies in which they work. She tells a charming story about a dead Gypsy who visits his wife as she dreams, and complains that he can find no peace even in the cemetery because the German dead keep demanding that he go back to wherever he came from.

The many migrants from former Communist bloc countries now in Western cities make Ugresic doubt whether the West has conquered the East or the other way round.

The lingua franca of these refugees is often Russian and those who speak it find instant fellowship when they meet one another. It is a mark of their unhappiness. She calls her own compatriots from the former Yugoslavia "cuttlefish, who emit a black cloud of misery whenever you touch them". Ugresic is particularly sympathetic to oddity and loneliness. In a Moscow market, she is conned into buying a blue fish in a pickle jar because the stallholder persuades her the fish is lonely.

One of her most amusing set pieces gives an account of the Literature Express, which took a hundred writers across Europe to visit 18 European cities. Several got off the train where they were not supposed to, some nearly drank themselves to death, none died. For all of them, the changes in their old homelands were troubling, and evoked a strange nostalgia for their own lost memories of the East.

In the stores of St Petersburg, there were now Danone products. On Moscow television, there were advertisements for Ariel detergent. The product was recommended by an actor with a heavy German accent.

Ugrasic too is affected by "ostalgia": for Ukrainian borscht, for instance - she buys a bowl of it herself from a Jewish

shop in Berlin - for harsh Eastern-style cigarettes and former treats, such as a can of condensed milk or the bobopretzel sticks of her adolescence.

Her talents have made her a global star, and so she can write amusingly about many cities: New York, for instance, which she loves, from the pavements where the homeless sleep in wooden boxes to the elegant shops selling transparent blouses on Fifth Avenue.

And Amsterdam, too, where she marvels at the Dutch skill on bicycles, and contrasts this unkindly with their lack of agility in conversation, noting that the Russian ability to talk brilliantly was honed during long winter evenings, in camps, or in queues.

Ugresic makes fun of those who insist that writers are entitled to write only about the nation they grew up in; that a writer has to carry a bundle of his own local knowledge wherever he travels. She points out the absurdity of this now the nations of the world are mixed so irrevocably. She relishes that mingling. For her, the ideal contemporary writer is a Mr Bhattacharya, an Indian born in Calcutta, who lives in New York and writes about Europe.

Ugresic feels some ambivalence about the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia, and resents the dismemberment of that country. She left Croatia voluntarily, but she remembers with gratitude that her university tuition was free, and that abortion was legal. For women, life was often better there than it would have been in Western Europe. There was equal pay for women there when female workers in Switzerland earned 25 per cent less than their male colleagues.

This book is part memoir, part shrewd observation, part travel writing at its best. Each section opens with a loving quotation from the Russian satirists Ilf and Petrov, and Ugresic writes with something of their impish genius.