

This Way Back

Joanna Eleftheriou

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Joanna Eleftheriou's nuanced essays ask if one can ever truly go home again.

Eleftheriou's entries illuminate life at crossroads, handling Queens, New York, versus Cyprus; tradition versus modernity; and respect for the bonds of family versus living for oneself. A Greek Cypriot American and a lesbian, Eleftheriou's return to her childhood home was characterized by these clashes, and she carved out a unique place for herself in the land. Though she felt a deep connection to Cyprus, the land where her father was born and chose to die, its cultural norms and traditions held her at arm's length; she was a stranger in her childhood home.

The essays entice every sense and expound upon the beauty of the island and its culture. Eleftheriou describes the making and taste of *kólyva*, a wheat-based dish served as part of traditional mourning practices, and how the smell of jasmine wafting from the trellis in her father's garden "would welcome summer visitors with its sweetness, and at night, bid them goodbye."

Alongside such edenic passages, Eleftheriou acknowledges the inevitable serpents that marred the paradise. She recounts a classroom reenactment of a mass suicide from the Souliote War, when a group of women threw themselves to their deaths rather than face sexual violence from an invading army. Of marching in Cyprus's first gay pride parade in 2014, she recalls abuse hurled by onlookers, and how a Greek Orthodox priest told her during graduate school that "being gay was not a sin, but more like being deformed." The enduring split of Cyprus into Greek and Turkish sections becomes a metaphor for the dichotomy within Eleftheriou herself as she struggles to craft her own "Greekness."

Heartfelt and heartrending, the essays of *This Way Back* encourage perseverance on the rocky path to self-discovery.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (September / October 2020)

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