

Susanne Christensen The Fishing Trip



There's a fish hanging down from the ceiling. It's a beautiful fish, all shiny silver and with one drop of blood dripping from its nose. Yet another dimension is added to the show, the dimension of smells, the salty fishy smell hits the audience who are slowly filing into the small dark closet-like room. There is only space for a few people in there and we're on the programme only twice so it's *très exclusive* and we like it like that. After some fighting with the other two, we decide my piece is going to be in the middle since it is the longest text. I'm dressed in my dad's waders, a shirt in a red pattern and across my eyes I have a long black stripe, I'm not sure why but it looks cool. I'm wearing a headlight and behind me there are slides of me splashing through water at the seaside near Copenhagen. The small room is covered in blue light and the slow rhythmical music of the Scottish band, Boards of Canada, creates the backdrop for my voice reading a long poem, *The Fishing Trip*.

As students of a small creative writing course in Copenhagen we had the brilliant idea that reading a text to an audience should somehow be multi-sensual. All we had was a week to prepare the performance that would be part of a public show by the small school we attended, a school with other kinds of creative courses as well as ours. We had no theory, no experience of performance or theatre so it was all made on instinct and I think it actually worked out well in the end - within the limits we had.

Later that spring I find myself part of yet another strange show. I've been asked to come for an interview at the Danish Writer's

School, *Forfatterskolen*, an hour of being grilled by eight prominent Danish writers and intellectuals. I'm in a state of panic and choose to view the interviewers through my burned-out social worker's eyes and reduce them to their unavoidable bodily conditions, their bodies are like mine: they shit, bleed, have orgasms, get sick, die. So I'm free this way, I think, and start off enthusiastically explaining about the beautiful fish hanging from the ceiling and on every question I say "yeah! yeah! yeah!" like some sort of beatnik on speed. I wasn't accepted.

The first time I walked through the Nordnes Park of Bergen I was surprised to find a gigantic totem pole there. I knew the style of it very well, the symbols of the eagle and the raven. This totem pole was from the Pacific North West, though my guess was a little bit further north: Alaska. I travelled to Alaska in 1997 to be part of an international volunteers work camp there and fell in love with the rough and rainy mountain landscapes. Now in Bergen, a place with quite the same climate and scenery, I find out by moving a little closer that the totem pole is a gift from Seattle, official friendship city of Bergen. But there are other reasons for this sudden feeling of recognition and connection, geographical as well as personal. The *déjà vu* I experienced whilst studying the art of the Inuit Indians of Alaska has historical references too. Looking at a map of the North Pole it's obvious how closely connected Greenland is to Alaska, much closer than to Denmark in its culture and art, although Greenland is supposed to be part of Denmark.

Walking a little bit further through the park I started to feel tired, my Danish feet were not used to steep climbs like this from walking through the pancake landscapes of Denmark where the highest point is called Sky Mountain, *Himmelbjerget*, though it's not much bigger than a small hill. But I was lucky, I saw a bench and rushed to sit down for a while and relax my weary feet. On this bench I saw a small sign, much to my surprise, declaring that this was a gift from the official friendship town of Falkirk to Bergen City. A less conspicuous gift than a totem pole, but once again giving me a strong sense of connection. Scotland is yet another place I stayed in for a while some years back, so once again my personal history is being connected in strange and surprising ways geographically - and historically as well.

I remember visiting the (quite tacky) Viking Museum of Largs on the west coast of Scotland not far away from Glasgow, where I stayed looking for work for a while. When the museum guide discovered I was Danish she pretended to be very scared, I was representing the evil imperialist power of the Vikings who travelled from Scandinavia to Scotland and Ireland to kill and conquer. She of course only did this to make the kids laugh and I didn't feel much like a scary Viking at all.

But what is up in Bergen? Fishing is up! I'm fishing for a future, I'm here to write, I am here to study the art of writing, I'm here... and I... don't know why at all. I don't understand the language, but I like fish cakes and brown cheese, besides all I know is what and where I *don't* want to be, my ideas of what's up next are quite vague, but yeah - I want to write.

The Fishing Trip wins a short story competition much to my surprise and joy. A university literary magazine in Oslo all of a sudden decides that this is in fact a short story and

not the long poem I always thought it was. The text has no full-stops. What breaks up the text is the word "click", like the sound of a camera taking a picture or of the phone being disconnected. At the "performance" in Copenhagen we changed the slides with each "click" and in that way the sound of the slides changing was actively part of the reading. I was into that kind of thing, long expressive flows of text. Full stops were like death. I wanted movement above all.

Staying in Norway for another year I had the chance to read *The Fishing Trip* at a real theatre. During my study in Bø in Telemarken the class went off to Porsgrunn on a two-week drama workshop on text with the actors of Grenland Friteater. There were not many students specifically interested in drama as such and we were only a small group that stayed there through the whole workshop. What a pity. A specific interest in drama is not the point. We imagined drama as classical drama and some didn't see the point which I think was the great chance to let go of the text and let it out in a room with more dimensions than the page. Of course this represents a loss of control for the writer, the aesthetics that you've decided on are no longer in your hands and weird things happen. That's a great and exciting and maybe even scary trip for a writer, into the open space. But I recommend it, I learned a lot from working with the actors - tools I can put in my suitcase and bring along with me on future travels.

So small in size that non-Singaporeans laugh in disbelief when I tell them you can drive across Singapore on its east-west

SUSANNE CHRISTENSEN (Denmark) was born in 1969 in Copenhagen. She has been a social worker, student at the Academy of Writing in Bergen, Norway, and student at the Writer's Study in Bø, Telemark. She is now literature student at the University of Bergen.