On Vagrancy

Isabell Eberhardt

unknown

A subject to which few intellectuals ever give a thought is the right to be a vagrant, the freedom to wander. Yet vagrancy is deliverance, and life on the open road is the essence of freedom. To have the courage to smash the chains with which modern life has weighted us (under the pretext that it was offering us more liberty), then to take up the symbolic stick and bundle and get out!

To the one who understands the value and the delectable flavor of solitary freedom (for no one is free who is not alone) leaving is the bravest and finest act of all.

An egotistical happiness, possibly. But for him who relishes the flavor, happiness.

To be alone, to be poor in needs, to be ignored, to be an outsider who is at home everywhere, and to walk, great and by oneself, toward the conquest of the world.

The healthy wayfarer sitting beside the road scanning the horizon open before him, is he not the absolute master of the earth, the waters, and even the sky? What housedweller can vie with him in power and wealth? His estate has no limits, his empire no law. No work bends him toward the ground, for the bounty and beauty of the earth are already his.

In our modern society the nomad is a pariah "of no fixed address." By adding these few words to the name of anyone whose appearance they consider irregular, those who make and enforce the laws can decide a man's fate.

To have a home, a family, a property or a public function, to have a definite means of livelihood and to be a useful cog in the social machine, all these things seem necessary, even indispensable, to the vast majority of men, including intellectuals, and including even those who think of themselves as wholly liberated. And yet such things are only a different form of the slavery that comes of contact with others, especially regulated and continued contact.

I have always listened with admiration, if not envy, to the declarations of citizens who tell how they have lived for twenty or thirty years in the same section of town, or even in the same house, and who have never been out of their native city.

Not to feel the torturing need to know and see for oneself what is there, beyond the mysterious blue wall of the horizon, not to find the arrangements of life monotonous and depressing, to look at the white road leading off into the unknown distance without feeling the imperious necessity of giving in to it and following it obediently across mountains and valleys! The cowardly belief that a man must stay in one place is too reminiscent of the unquestioning resignation of animals, beasts of burden stupefied by servitude and yet always willing to accept the slipping on of the harness.

There are limits to every domain, and laws to govern every organized power. But the vagrant owns the whole vast earth that ends only at the nonexistent horizon, and his empire is an intangible one, for his domination and enjoyment of it are things of the spirit.

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Isabell Eberhardt's father was an anarchist, and he brought her up as an anarchist. She lived the life of a drifter and vagabond and died before she was 30 of illness. She left behind some inspired writings. Isabell Eberhardt, 1877–1904.

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