

# KOSCHEY'S DAUGHTER



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**A**s an artistic researcher, I have spent years exploring migrant dramaturgies of belonging, and being focused on trying to determine what “home” means for queer refugees. It is a personal question, of course, rooted in almost desperate need to define the answer for myself. The majority of my research participants either see home in other people, or do not see it at all. For them, it is never about a physical space, be it a country, a city, or a house. However, unlike

my interviewees, my understanding of home is still attached to a place. Not necessarily to a specific one, but to an idea of it. A place that can actively affect a person. A place that can hold you, or lose you, or even change you.

When I think of a place that lost me, my motherland, Russia, comes to mind. It is, however, the same place that still holds me as well. Famous for holding people against their will, it grips me by my roots, my



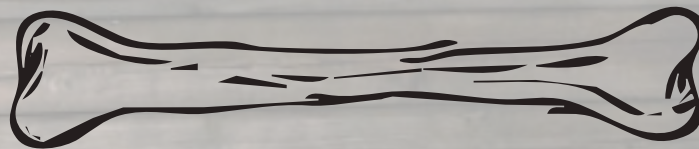
family ties, my friendships, and memories. What I am describing are people and stories, but are there any actual places that still hold me? My former apartment? My childhood home? As French historian Pierre Nora argues, memory attaches itself to physical spaces only when the living connection begins to fade (Nora 1989). Following Nora’s logic, I feel like I am trying to attach symbolic meaning to certain places as a way to preserve memories that are no longer sustained by

everyday life. Perhaps what I strive to remember as “home” is already a form of nostalgia. If so, then what is it exactly that still holds me?

**S**omeone once told me that they could never leave Russia because the graves of their parents were there. I did not understand it, at all. Why should I be tied to someone’s graves? “But who is going to take care of them?” asked that same person. I thought that it was extremely unfair - why

should I care about the dead until I, myself, die? Why is it so inherent in my culture code to wait and suffer, suffer and wait? As writer Svetlana Alexievich notes, life in post-soviet countries is shaped by a shared experience of endurance – an idea of necessary suffering passed down from generation to generation (Alexievich 2016). In Russian, there is a word related to this: ‘terpet’ - to wait, to endure, to suffer. My country still holds me with this command: ‘terpi’ - wait, endure, suffer. But if I am still being held, can I truly say

that my homeland has lost me? Maybe the physical space that is my country has lost the physical being that is my body, but the idea of it still holds my soul, tied to the roots growing through my ancestors’ graves. The state which reminds me of professor Svetlana Boym’s thoughts about exile not breaking our idea of home, but changing it into something like a ghost, something we imagine and long for but can no longer truly have (Boym 2001). And maybe I do not even want to have it anymore, but the haunting persists.




**N**o matter where I physically am, Russia is still somehow ever-present. It is a place that holds me, it is a place that lost me, but is it also a place that changed me? No. Being outside did. Growing up as a queer person in a country where queerness is not just invisible, but punished, made me learn the word ‘terpi’ not only as a citizen, but as a body that did not belong. Only after I had left my homeland did I realize that survival was not the same as living.

That queerness, when not criminalized, could be something joyful, something expansive. Thus, every “outside” place changed me, shaped me, glued all the pieces of me into one – until I became a collage of everywhere I have lived, loved, and breathed. I am, as critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha puts it, “in-between” - a product of the third space, formed not despite displacement, but through it (Bhabha 1994). And I feel almost whole, almost complete, almost home. But my soul...



Vera Boitcova during a performance in 2016. Unknown village, Russia. Anonymous photographer.

There is a folk Russian fairytale about Koschei the Deathless. Undead king. He put his death into a needle, and the needle into a duck, and the duck into a rabbit, and the rabbit into a wooden chest, and he buried this chest under a large oak tree. Whoever gets to the needle and breaks it, will find Koschei's death, and, thus, will defeat death itself.

The story resonates. My needle in a duck in a rabbit in a chest is still under some Russian oak tree, probably, in the graveyard of my ancestors. And I can be almost whole, almost complete, almost home. But my soul... But my death... Is still there. 



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## References

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