

STEPPING STONES

FIRST STEP

Google Maps: Find Directions from Gothenburg, Sweden to Gothenburg, Nebraska.

Sorry, we could not calculate directions from Gothenburg, Sweden to Gothenburg, Nebraska.

Olof Bergstrom knew where he was going. He made several return trips to lead groups of Swedish settlers from Gothenburg to Gothenburg. He told them the land was so cheap that they would soon be independent. They wouldn't even have to learn to speak English because it would be a little Swedish colony. They would possess their own beautiful land, the Platte Valley, the greatest agricultural valley in the world – excepting the Nile in Egypt.

Olof Bergstrom founded Gothenburg, Nebraska in 1882.

SECOND STEP

The stream is fast but shallow. It shudders and stretches like a restless body under a sheet. Jump, balance, tilt. Precarious. Jump again. This stream leads to a river, which leads to the sea, which is where she's going.

She is travelling to a dream with a few tattered bank notes sewn into her dress, pebbles in her pocket, and home is behind her. Small step to Gothenburg, larger step to Hull, giant step to America. But America is a dream, she's not sure it exists at all.

One visit

one single ship

But an entire landscape of sea

with thousands of lanes

– and even more possible places to stay.

Those who leave their homes

through the sea

communicate with the ocean

with all the organs of their body

The ocean implies

that the man does not have a home in the water

- but the water has a home in the man -

And that's how it's always been

– in an entire landscape of sea, a thousand possible places to stay – and in the body itself.

The boat lurches and sways, stinking vomit slides back and forth, someone shouts, someone sobs.

Is this the best she can do? Why not turn back? Home is behind her. Her hand pressed up against the thin, throbbing wall. Her thoughts sucking in and streaming out again like the tide. She's tilting.

A man greets her on the quay. The land seems to sway like the boat. A hand on her shoulder. She's unbalanced. He says something in her ear. Straightens. A smile at the corner of his mouth, as if he has whispered a magic word. The word made no sense. 'Nebraska?'

THIRD STEP

The harbour is spindrift, salt spray, the smell of fish, oil fumes. It is “goodbye and take care,” “thank God you are back,” the family car fully loaded, pills for seasickness, the forklift trucks, the entrails, and the rubble mounds. The wide-eyed children watching the hunt, the black whale carcasses, the swaggering men with wheelbarrows. The harbour is your first walk with your boyfriend, your heart pounding with expectation. Here the elements meet and stroke each other, here there is life and death and all the gaps in between.

I grew up in this city and I still live here. The city is a part of me. I've lived here almost all my life and this is where I have my roots. Gothenburg: it's my harbour.

When I was little my dad worked as a welder at Arendalsvarvet, but then the oil crisis came and the harbour began to fall apart. Dad and my family fell apart too.

I remember going from Gothenburg to Harwich with my football team when I was twelve. My first trip abroad. We collected money for several years. My mother came too, but I tried to avoid her. When the waves were high, I was so sick that I had to be in the cabin, near the toilet.

When I was eighteen I travelled from Gothenburg to another port in England, near London, with another football team. We played roulette and blackjack throughout the trip. I don't remember anything about London. But I remember the ocean and the waves.

High up in the tallest building at the far end of Arendal Harbour, I worked for a summer at an office, shipping goods in containers all over the world. It was mostly boat engines. But I never saw the ships.

FOURTH STEP

Once upon a time, fifty thousand people left Gothenburg a month. That would be like everyone in the Faroe Islands leaving at once. So easy to erase a whole nation, a few boats, a few goodbyes – the steps of tears empty, no one left to cry with or about, only threads, invisible, yet shimmering in the sunlight until they break with a sorrowful sound, snap, when the souls they were attached to arrive on the other side, when they settle, when they forget. Maybe they took a handful of dirt with them, or pebbles to keep in their pockets, to recall. Maybe a domicile is just a mirage, soil doesn't have any language, any religion, or it contains all tongues and all beliefs.

A man looked at me and said, "So, you don't work with anything real?" I replied: "I have done. I worked in the harbour."

Everyone has aspirations about seeing the ocean. There is a hope in it, an escape. No one dreams about moving so far inland, that they can't see the sea anymore. No one wants to be trapped in the middle of a continent like some poor soul in Nebraska, and if they are stuck there, they gather around waters and rivers, veins and arteries that tie them to the primordial ocean. They listen intently for the heartbeat in the chatter of the stream, try to find comfort in it.