

LANDSCAPE STUDIES

Nora Goerne

She was heading towards the north. A weekend entirely immersed in nature was waiting for her, and she thought that she deserved it after many weeks of work and tense city life. She had booked a small room on an organic farm, situated far enough from the peaceful village to be considered a part of it, and surrounded by olive trees. The first one to greet her when she arrived was not the host but the cackling of the chicken and a tousled shepherd dog that was securing the ground against unwanted visitors. Apart from that: (Apparent) silence. Such a soothing treat against the loud and busy streets where she was walking every day. She took a deep breath to take in as much of the fresh, unpolluted air as possible and walked around the masonry houses. Some other guests, a couple in their early fifties, obviously foreigners, were relaxing by the swimming pool and pointed the way to the farmer.

Her room had a true rustic charm and reminded her of her grandma's, the old woodwork furniture combined with the white embroidered tablecloth, and the way that the blanket was tucked tightly under the mattress. She never understood why one would make the bed like that. She opened her bag pack that she had bought especially for this trip and put on her hiking shoes and clothes. Her camera was tied between the

two straps of her backpack, ready for adventure, ready to shoot.

When she walked out, there were only a few clouds on the blue, impeccable sky, as if someone pinned them on the horizon just for her enjoyment. Quickly, she was moving away from the farm, striding in the direction of the hills. Every once in a while she stopped to look through the viewfinder of her camera and took a few shots to test the light, the colors, the «photogeneity» of her surroundings. In summer, it will all be dry and a lot less appealing. It is good that she had gotten a few days off in spring, shooting here in summer would be pointless, especially now that there was even a magazine for ecological tourism interested in her trip. The road was still paved but lined with two low walls on each side so that cars had to stop to let each other pass. But in comparison to the stressful traffic in her city, not that many cars were on the road. Only some tourists, that were probably also fleeing from the city and the occasional tractor. Apart from that: Nothing, only nature.

Or well, almost. The grass seemed to be well maintained and she saw some cottages, too. Behind an old olive tree that already started bending towards the ground, she found a small wooden shed, abandoned. A perfect motive, fuelling the imagination. Aperture priority mode, ISO

sensitivity: 100, White balance: sunny, check. She took a couple of pictures and started walking again.

The road was splitting; in the distance on the right, she could recognize the copper red and brown roofs of a small village. She followed the path on the left uphill. Leaving the grass fields with olive trees behind her, she saw that there were now a lot more bushes and smaller fruit trees growing on each side of the path. She tried to climb on an apple tree (something that she had not done for at least fifteen years) and next to a pile of rocks, she found some blackberries and raspberries. Her lunch could not get more organic as picking a bunch of fruits in the wilderness, she thought, when she sat down on an old stump to rest a bit. From here, the view over the large valley was already astounding. The landscape was glowing and shimmering like a silk scarf in all different shades of green with colourful stains on it. White and red from the villages, purple and yellow and magenta the flowers, blue the river on the upper end of the valley and white the sheep that were grazing in the distance.

After eating all the wild berries that she could reach, she took her tripod and moved around like a hunter on the prowl. A bit to the left, no, a bit more to the right. On the lower left, she saw an area that was rather yellow, brownish in shade. Probably there had been a fire some time ago. More to the right. Click. Down, down, and a bit up again. Click. Moving the camera below eye level brought some flowers into the picture and it created a nice foreground for the image. Click. It's all about perspective after all. Click. Click. She was not really happy with the pictures. They seemed like typical tourist pictures in need of a strong Instagram filter. She started hiking again and arrived at an intersection. One road was paved and led steeply to the top of the hill. The other one wandered rather meanderingly around some lush green bushes. Unsure

whether the path on the right would also lead her to the top, she asked two locals that were descending the hill from the left. The person answering was a man probably in his 50's and had a tan that spoke of many hours of strenuous work in the field. His hair that was partly hidden under a cap was of a dark mud-brown colour with many grey strands in it. «I don't know where the other path leads to. I always take this path to go to the top», and he pointed to the path on the left. He had taken the young man that was standing next to him by his hand even though he was about 15 cm taller but he buckled one of his legs and cocked his head to the left side. The face of the young man was narrow, with a salient nose, many freckles and his mouth was opened a bit, showing his crooked teeth. Why would someone living in the middle of nowhere always take the same path and not explore the surroundings? She drew her camera close to her face, but the old man mumbled a goodbye and pulled his son with him. Well, if the villagers did not want to explore the path then she would.

Without looking again at the villagers, she started hiking up the hill. The path was not paved but only covered with pebble stones and not very even. She noticed that more and more plants were overgrowing the path while she was walking. Discovering unbeaten tracks, that is part of the experience. She took her camera, ready to take a grand landscape photograph. It was most important to find converging lines to give the picture a certain depth, perspective and drama. The curved path she had rambled on would create an interesting vanishing point, and the sun was pinned to the upper left vertex, following the rule of thirds perfectly. Click.

Still she was not happy; the photograph was at best average, probably already captured a million times before. Once she had read on the internet, in *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, a word

for her frustration: «vemödalen». The frustration of photographing something amazing when thousands of identical photos already exist—the same sunset, the same waterfall, the same curve of a hip, the same close-up of an eye—which can turn a unique subject into something hollow and pulpy and cheap, like a mass-produced piece of furniture you happen to have assembled yourself.»

After walking a couple of minutes, the supposed path slowly started to disappear and quickly she was walking in the ankle-high grass. Luckily, she had put on her waterproof walking shoes, but she was still feeling some drops of fresh morning dew on her leg. The grass grew higher and quickly she was blazing a trail between bushes and brakes. With amazement, she started to notice some of the flowers that were growing on the shrubs. She took her camera out again, time for the macro lens. A rather high purple flower had caught her eye. The violet and purple blossoms looked like small liqueur glasses that one had attached in a triangular cluster to a long stem.

She had to think of an encounter that she had had many years ago when she was still living abroad. An encounter with a self-proclaimed poet with whom she had spent a night. When I am writing, he said, I have to feel the story. How could the reader otherwise feel anything? And in the same way, I have to feel my surroundings. Seeing is not enough, he explained, artists of any kind need to train and use all of their senses to experience life at the fullest. She still felt sceptical about what he said — how should that apply to photography that only concerns itself with visuals? Still, here outside she could appreciate not only the visuals but also the different smells and sounds. The flower she was photographing had a sweet and strong, heavy smell, like honey wine. But how could she show that in her photograph?

She continued hiking, but it was becoming more and more difficult to walk uphill and soon she had to climb over some rocks and had several scratches on her legs from thorns and nettles. But turning back now? It would be even more difficult to walk downhill because of the sloping ground, and she wanted to reach the top of the hill before noon. The strong shadows of the mid-day sunlight would give her pictures an unwanted harsh look.

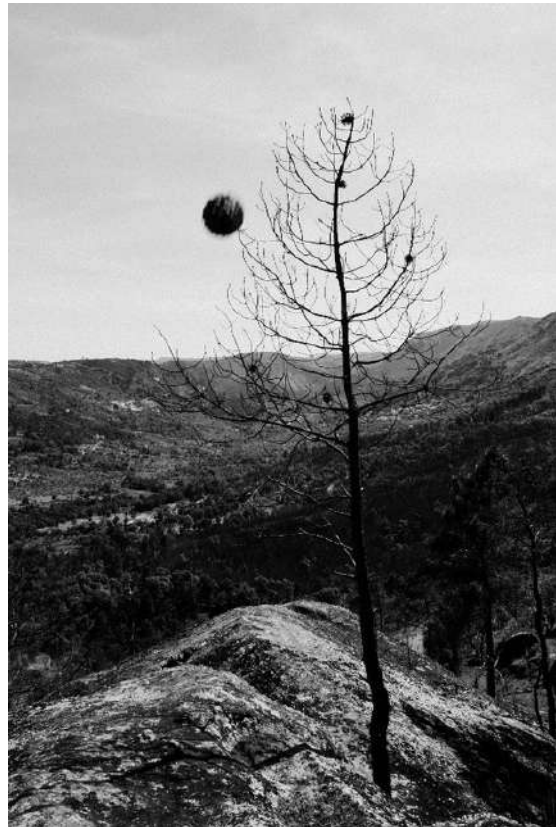
She was confronted with a steep slope. Maybe if she managed to climb here, there would be a better, paved track, she thought and grabbed a few branches to climb over a rock. However, it was not getting any better. She tried to walk to the left when she heard the sound of a small spring. She sat down to splash some drops of water on her sunburnt face and her scratched legs. She felt exhausted but the ice-cold water gave a tickling sensation to her tired feet, and it was nice to rest for a while and to listen to the murmuring of the creek. Maybe what the poet said did not apply to photography but to experience nature at the fullest, it was indeed important to not only look but also taste, smell, listen and feel her surroundings. It seemed that the only possible way that day was climbing uphill.

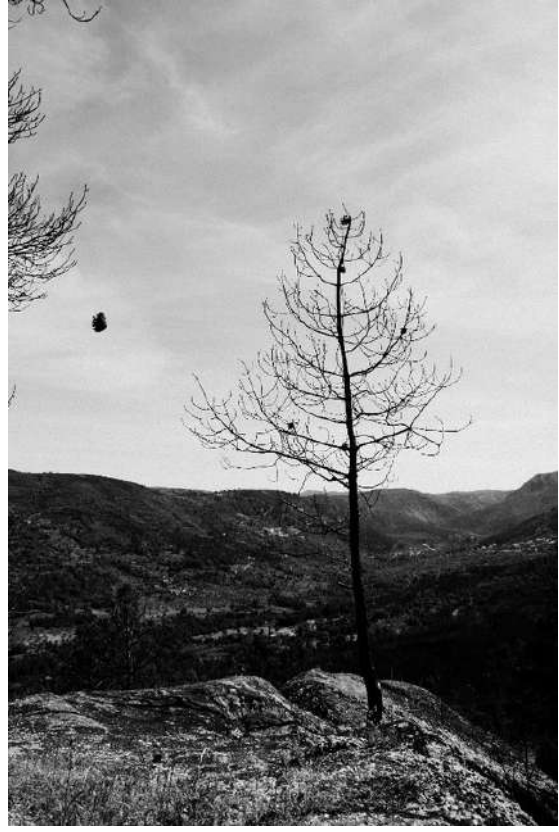
This morning, I got a call from the editor-in-chief EcoTourism magazine. They liked my pictures (they said), but they were not selected for publication. They were too «artsy», and whether «I didn't take any other pictures during the trip that better represented the beauty of the landscape», she asked. I was a bit disappointed, but it also did not come as a surprise. I had tried something different, but that was apparently not what the editors wanted to see. Or the readers. Or both — I don't know. Maybe vemödalen is actually unsubstantiated, and uniqueness is nothing that one has to strive for — at least if someone wants to get published in a Nature magazine.

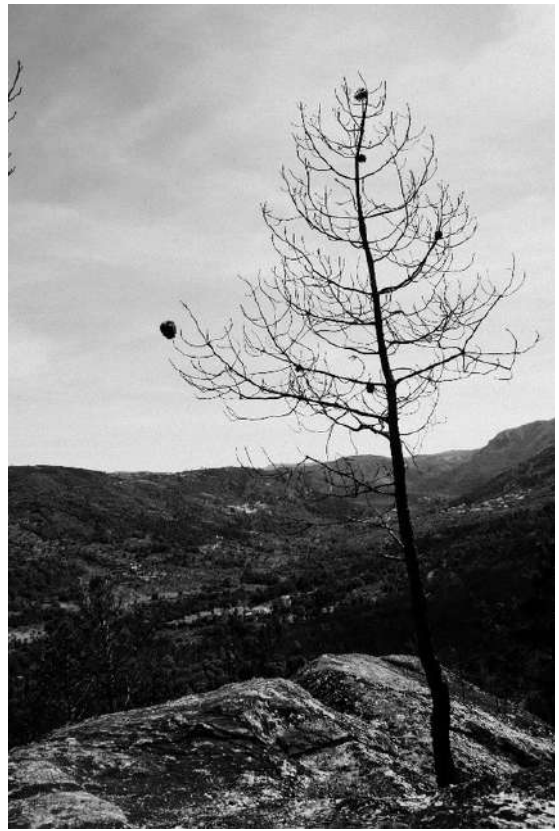
I still remember standing on the ledge, gazing over the marvellous view that was unfurling

at my feet. In the background, I saw a mountain chain, coloured in various shades of green from the different trees and shrubs growing on the slopes and the sun light playing with the leaves. Down in the valley, I could spot several houses. For the standards there, where a village can be made up of three houses, every bigger white dot was probably one village. I cannot remember spotting any animals, but I definitely could hear them. Different birds chirping in the trees, even if I could not name or differentiate the voices, and all of the knocking, hammering and scratching noises that I could not define. Close to the ledge stood a few tall pine trees that were dipped in a dark brown, army green, and the sunlight shining from the back highlighted a

small strip of the tree trunk and drew a strong shadow on the other side. I still remember the resinous woody smell of the trees. And in the middle, directly on the ledge that was blanketed with yellow flowers and moss, there was another tall tree but bare-branched as if spring had forgotten it, and only a few cones were hanging on the thin branches. After the trip, I noticed the same strong smell of pines in the park adjacent to my apartment. I knew that there was a tree, but I had never actually given it any thought. It was not wilderness, and I was occupied with myself, focused on being busy. When I think about the landscape and the trip, even looking at the pictures I have taken, I have trouble imagining that I was part of it.











Photos in cooperation with Nout Van Den Neste