



Ida Börjel

European waistlines

Swedish poet Ida Börjel confronts us with our favourite and most insulting national prejudices about ourselves and our European neighbours. But does she confirm them? In a series of insidious linguistic displacements and only seemingly naive phrases, the preconceived notions start to move. Measuring the European waistlines is not a standardizing measure.

"We want to say the following, in order to clarify who we are: Sometimes existence itself can feel like a newcomer. Existence can sometimes offer a certain cringing pleasure and beauty. Birdsong, bottles of wine, and the opposite sex in nature are such great gifts that they can be comprehended as newcomers. As a sheer gift there are friendships with big shots and wives of big shots and scholarships. Then nature is good. From all this altogether we demand, we request, to become newcomers."

Erik Beckman, *The Newcomers*

A story to grip

I am the strong, well-composed Austrian brain. My thoughts are settled and collected on a regular basis. All surfaces have been monitored again today. Head and thoughts are in place; face and mind are set. The Austrian family is clean, sharply fused together. Will the Danes moisten their faces before dinner? Can the Belgian hand ever become truly clean? Austrian hands are completely clean and precise all over the dinner table. The Austrian mind is strong and clean with no squeamishness about it. The Austrian mind is firm and steady when the bell rings for breakfast, lunch, and walks. The Austrian air is pure, healthy and composed. British air is foggy, Danish moist, Italian sticky with the press of sweat and smutty insinuation. Austrian secrets are kept. One Austrian mind can always trust another. Austrian sons are clean, silent, and good to hunt with. Young Austrian boys have faces with defined features and no blemishes. I am the Austrian stablekeeper and I have everything in place. The Austrian stableboy comes and goes. He is a well-informed sturdy young man who does not shrink from heavier loads. I grease the saddles, the reins, and the halter. I put the bridle in the animal's mouth. The Austrian horse stands ready, vigorous, poised to set out for the forest, over fields, charging away from it all in quest of the shy and evasive prey. Italian people are family-oriented spendthrifts. When French people visit forests they do not know how to hunt any boar. Irish people hunt themselves. Austrians have the ability and the presence of mind to keep an eye on it all. In Austria there is no

need for any polished mirrors to confirm that the Austrian face is strongly held together and never will come loose

A story with a trick

Danish people are round friendly thirsty people who have nothing against any dogs. Danish dogs are round friendly creatures with little spots on them. The Danish dog always has a trick to perform in a bar. I am the Danish pubkeeper and my house is your house. Spanish dogs are lazy creatures that get too much sun. Swedish dogs are slim, brushed, and fussed-over creatures with long complicated pedigrees. Swedish dogowners are always talking about comparisons of their dogs' pedigrees and the condition of the fur. The German dog does not have a trick to perform in the bar. Danish dogowners are warm thirsty people who share thoughts and drinking in the bar. The Austrians would not share a thought with their four-legged friends. The Danish dog does not need a leash. Danish dogs follow their owners as an owner follows a dog to a bar. Swedish bars are disinfected powdered places with stooily chairs and watery American music. The Danish pub is a cosy dark place with funny stickers and posters. My Danish woman comes in. She is a warm bright colourful being with good strong laughter. The Austrian woman the Portuguese woman and the Finnish woman do not have a laugh worth mentioning. The Danish woman comes bright and colourful to my bar. Her laughter is strong, good, healthy. The Danish woman turns up with a fine thirst to deal with. The little round Danish dog performs its trick for her at the table in my bar. The Danish woman laughs and raises her glass to all that see her and hear

A story with flesh and emotion

All is body and sun. Spanish people gather at the marketplace in the evening to meet. Spanish people are full of warm pounding blood and strong connected emotions. Italian people are short-lived. Italian people stay strong for a couple of hours but will not last the entire feast. Spaniards last as long as it takes. Finnish people last without a comment. They last but are not worth talking to and feeling. They sit silent and do not move to anything but the Finnish tango. The Spanish move and dance with everyone. The Spanish move is the origin of motions. The Spanish body is the one that dances. The Spanish sun is the sun above the laughter. The Spanish heart is the heart always pounding and the Spanish hate along with the Spanish love is our Spanish reality. We dance everything together I dance in orbit beneath the sun. French people put up an act the Greeks are acting. The Spanish meal is a complete meal, the Spanish siesta is good heavy sleep. The Spanish woman wakes up to dance some flamenco. The Spanish man wakes up to pick the calf among the calves to kill. Blood from the Spanish meat dries up in the Spanish sun. The Spanish sun dries up everything that was and does not leave anything wet for tomorrow. The British sun leaves everything soaked. British people are resentful anaemic people with umbrellas. Spanish people meet up in the evening with warm tanned skin to heat. The Spaniard stays up late and does not give in. All is body and sun. All is heart and sun and blood

A story of cold and heat

Juha comes to see me. It is the morning after, in the fresh raw frosty Finnish air that always holds the body together. Finnish people will not bend to anything. Finnish people are kind-hearted imposing white-haired people with a fine sense of humour to cope with the climate. Juha drinks a little from the bottle to

strengthen his blood. He needs it to keep warm and upright. We drive through the green infinity of the Finnish woods. Always good to hide in always good for berry picking and construction. We built the Finnish sauna and maybe we drank something strong. Name the ones standing. No Dutch person would remain standing. No British would keep standing in the Finnish delta with their kind of blood. Look at the Spaniards swaying, the Danish slidings the Greeks to and fro. I am the Finnish woman and I stand straight-backed with pleasure outside the Finnish sauna. Aino passes by. She expresses herself well in a closed form, keeping her eyes to the side. Yes we know contrasts, yes we know what cold is and we know heat. The contrasts urge blood through the aorta and keep us alive. Once I was in Portugal on a vacation. There were no contrasts worth mentioning. I remember Portugal as if it were raining although it was sunny. In Finland the weather never causes any hesitation. We are the Finnish survivors. Who else has anything to mention about survival? The Finnish nature is icy snowy and covered with tall Finnish spruces that go on for now and ever. And somewhere between the trees stands the Finnish sauna by a lake. I step in to sit, maybe drink, and notice how blood twitches with life in the body

A story that passes

All of my sisters my mother and the mothers of my mothers wear short skirts and tiny lace bras. In France everything is smell and language. We do not express ourselves much with words that contain a k. Swedes and Germans incessantly utter words containing k. They are dull boring obeying repressed people with no interesting smell about them. We don't really concern ourselves with h either. The British keep on pronouncing, and the Danes. The Germans start talking with the intention of getting it said. French people speak with strongly lined fascinating mouths in motion. The lips of the French speaker spin a thread to the other's mouth and pull it closer like a kitten. We invented the kiss and made something more out of conversation. Jean-Jacques comes to the café after his lesson. We stay to talk and then. We talk to continue the movement of mouths. Finnish people talk to return to silence. The Austrians speak in order not to commit any wrongs. Swedes talk to agree. The British write to give clues to a riddle. Luxembourgiens would rather not write. Everything is there, in the nuances of the face opposite — a thinly drawn line between incident and lull. Jean-Pierre comes by. French people never cease to happen. French people dare to take themselves seriously, Jean-Jacques does not sweep over the room with a grin. Jean-Pierre draws his words in a bow, I take a few steps into it leaving the subordinate clauses hanging leaving the verbal forms hanging and the punctuation marks in the palate over the kiss

A story with a breeze

The lads come by with their flutes. We take off across the moor. Sheep move about like soft clouds in the valley. The Irish sheep is a good fine thick-woolled sheep with a good sound in its throat. I swiftly send my sheepdog to keep the sheep together. The Irish girl jumps up and down playing with a ribbon in her hand. The Irish girl is a smile and life in itself. Good strong winds sweep through the surroundings. We gather around salted sheep-meat with good chewing-resistance to eat together. A strong warm feeling comes from the sense of the Irish woman. The German woman does not have any sensuality in her. The Frenchwoman has no sense at all. The Dutch woman has altogether too much in mind. Irish people are all in all good waterproof people who would not sell Ireland for anything. I walk over the moor and maybe I bring my flute. Judgements fall the decisions fall. Even the

Irish sheep must be political. An evenly strong questioning wind reaches us from the open sea. Then comes the flute and singing. Irish flutes are wilful virtuous instruments with many ideas and games in them. Austrian flutes harbour no winds. French flute-players just suck on the flute, the Swedes break it into pieces. Portuguese people do not play today, they play tomorrow. The Irish flute knows what it takes to get there and to stay. And as the Irish woman starts to sing the wind does not weaken no the Irish people stand proud for everyone with or without a flute to belong together

A story al dente

I bring power and trinkets for my mother. I walk where my brothers can spot me. In the evening I collect them and put them in the house. Italian sisters are big-mouthed sisters who need to be collected. French sisters are sharp-mouthed and are not collected. They are obstinate self-focused people on high heels. The British sister refuses to be collected, she collects herself and stays indoors. Full-blooded black-haired Italian sisters with expressive eyebrows always have something to say. The Swedish sister cannot think of anything to say. She giggles and smiles and lingers in the setting sun. Danish sisters have little needles with them to make me keep my distance. Portuguese sisters are too sleepy to pay attention to any collector. Italian sisters sit up straight on chairs and drink good strong sweetened black Italian coffee straight down. The coffee-habits of others are not worth mentioning. The Swedish people drink coffee but they only drink a lot. The Italian coffee is strong rich and the thing to start the day with. I am big enough to take care of my sisters. I am big; I can take care of them and make sure that they are well. I carefully collect them and bring them to laughter. They let themselves be collected and there is nothing frightening about the sisters then. I collect the sisters. I show my mother I can. She is so gorgeous, she is the ocean and the mountains and the earth as well. She stirs heavy casseroles with a ladle. I collect my Italian sisters with a power to be witnessed. We gather around the table. All members of the Italian family know how to eat and to sit with substance and presence. That is when the Italian mother puts out her pots

A story without fuss

The Luxembourgian borders are easy to survey. We live inside and behind them. Luxembourgians are clean precise people. Luxembourgians have ironed clothes made with seams that will not give way. Luxembourgian people are people without ugly faces names and numbers. Austrian people are not unsoiled enough to wipe away their tracks or features. Austrian people smear themselves in the forest with blood from the flesh of the boar. Luxembourgian people are wealthy educated people with no fuss about them. All the countries altogether keep on fussing outside the Luxembourgian borders. All Luxembourgian homes are clean vacuum-cleaned surfaces to stand on. Greek people walk barefoot on the kitchen floor over the bathroom floor and out in the hall. Luxembourgian men do not walk in any mud and never ever show any filth under their fingernails. Luxembourgian babies are clean white silent. And then we won the Eurovision song contest. I am the nameless faceless numberless Luxembourger. I sit down at the kitchen table after work with a glass of wine in my hand. The sky expressionless: mute. On the other side of the street in the opposite house a man is sitting. He is probably about my age and looks pretty much like me. We avoid looking at each other. The first thing I check as I sit down after work is whether he sits in front of me or not and I know he does the same. Cars pass by. Sometimes I get up almost straight away, most often I sit a quarter of an hour. The sky immovable, stiff. Quite

quiet. Like a lid over thoughts. At times it shall happen that we remain seated for hours, both of us

A story

Everything has a function to connect together. You may not always manage but you have to try and do what you can to make people and things function. I am the Swedish farmer and my tasks do not leave a moment to spare from morning until dusk. The Swedish woman is beautiful with soft blond hair on her body like the cornfields. She has blue eyes that make one see if she is lying and she knows it. Most things go on in their usual way. My Swedish woman puts the dinner on the table and at my side a beer is placed. We do not use spice and we do not say much. The Italians the Spanish use too much spice; it is not good for the blood. A spice too strong makes blood rush to the head and that is not a good thing to get involved with. One has to tend one's lot in life and not become a load and a burden. I work the soil, I bend it and turn clods, herd cattle and tell my wife that if she wants to she is free to work naked in the flowerbed. The space surrounds us. The silence. One has to try to take care of oneself and not surrender. But sometimes I feel the weariness of the ground under my feet and the seed does not take root in the mould. Then it may happen that I go to the cows at night. I walk between their deep breaths. I let the calves suck the salt off my hands. And then I can see whether something has become of what I have done on earth

A story with a boat

The sun lays its pattern over the city. Portuguese people are good level-headed people with sun above. I will not be bothered. Others bother. Spanish people are loud sensation hunters with flapping gestures. The French being sits still in long sentences for a space of time. Then her nerves start to quiver. Who decides what is of weight? I tell them I signal that I am not willing to drive them in my car. British people jabber like monkeys in a cage. I find myself a good shady spot to lie down and rest for a while. If it matters what matters. The Portuguese bus comes when it comes. And if I want to take the Portuguese boat somewhere I can do it when it does. But if I go away I would do so just to come back not to stay. I shut myself out from all that talk of direction and course. We are a couple of taxi drivers driving a gang of sailors down to the harbour. The sailors eagerly wave the flag and strike up a chorus. German people, British and French say they are up to something. I say I need not become. I am. A ship drifts by itself towards the coastline. The sailors hook their arms as they go up the gangway, smiling with evenly white teeth. I tell my Portuguese partners that if something really needs to be counted then why not count the waves the fish the wind

A story to unfold

The German mother is the mother of all things. The German mother knows when to take part and when to leave it open. The British mother fears her sons and daughters. The Danish mother will not leave her house without a cigar. The German mother always picks which clothes her family should wear so that she can spot them easily in a crowd. I stand to be brought up like a good steady German mother. I stand to know the difference between this and that. The German mother stands determined in the kitchen door. The German mother knows the difference and the shapes and the limit. The German mother knows what belongs in which places and does not need to say it out loud. I practice to be the mother of all intentions. I practice to separate emotion from it all. The

Swedish mother always puts feelings into everything and cannot separate the mourning from the joy. The French have it all mixed up. The Luxembourgian mother cannot grasp anything wider than the Luxembourgian border. I stand to practice to be the German mother. I learn each particular place for things to put in the kitchen or in our hall. German children need strong decent steady German mothers to show them how to cope with it all. German husbands need firm muscular flesh in big amounts to keep calm in the house. German mothers do not need each other to talk to. They stand without hesitation keeping watch over the hall. German mothers do not take any spirits to sweep away the day before night-time. They have their hands full and need not cry or understand it all, how it has become

A story to go

I can do what I want but what. If someone lies there asking for help then I help. Afterwards I go skating on the canal. I let it go. I am the Dutch bachelor and I have had much practice in skating on the ice. I have played hockey, I have gone racing and touring too. I can go as fast as I want and anywhere I want. No one will stop me. I can stop myself. When the British reach a certain point they cannot stop themselves. Spanish people do not stop until the feast is over. The French only stop to start again. The Portuguese do not stop because they have not started. The Luxembourgers stay within the Luxembourgian borders. The Belgians stop and start at intervals behind the Belgian curtains. I can start and stop whenever I want. I can die or live the way I prefer. I can go where I want but where is that. I skate further and further on the ice of the Dutch canal. I go fast and slow as I please but what do I please. Dutch people are nice open-minded people who always lend a helping hand. We are good decent people who do not cause any trouble as long as we can do what we want. The question is not what or when but how. I go fast, I am confident, but there always seems to be someone behind me or ahead. In my language there are many open surfaces, firm and fragile above the abyss, where one cannot say much about anything. I skate three four hours a day. Sometimes it feels as if the ice is going to crack. I go a bit further

A good story is one with a case

A story of interest is always one with murder. Any time is time for tea. It is always nice and appropriate. Tea is soothing strengthening and consistent. You prefer it with milk do you not? You have a cat on the sofa and another at your feet. In that way the British day passes, the year passes. In the summer the roses grow. Then a murder might occur in the neighbourhood. I stand in my promised rose garden pondering some strange things that may happen. All of a sudden Jane comes by for tea. Perhaps I have noticed something odd around here, have I? I act normal and point out some roses to her. Have you seen Alan lately, she asks me. Others yes Alan no. Calm down Jane, now have some tea. Murders and attempted murders are constantly being committed. Wilful murders are found in Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium and among the Dutch. The impulsive ones are more likely to be found in Spain, Finland and the Netherlands. In Sweden they murder themselves. English people are good fascinating people with something going on inside. We wear jumpers and cardigans made of sheep. The clothes are sturdy and complete, keeping it all together and have nothing to show underneath. I stop by the butcher to have a chat. He is a round friendly being with fine eyes and a lot of things seen. When I am about to go home he sums up with a fine raw bloody pun to consider. I dissect it. One of the cats scratches my leg, making a hole in the stockings and the skin. The other kitty comes out of hiding, she purrs and licks me clean. One

takes what one gets and makes something of it, something to go and ponder, something of interest

The only story

I have my Greek pride to hold and not to burst. I walk out on my piece of Greek land and there it is. In the Greek ground the world grew. I grow olive trees in the soil where Greek geniuses once trod. Little neat Greek goats run about, leaving their tracks. The black Greek goat jumps up on the roof of the restaurant and tosses its little head in the peaceful Greek village, affirming it all. So Italian people claim to have history, so Germans and Finnish make their claims. The modest Greek women come walking together in black and they will never forget. Others keep forgetting. Belgian people forget, the Danish do not remember. Luxembourgian people cannot think of anything to recall. I walk, back bent, under the Greek foliage to collect my olives. Greek goats come running. They make the same noise they always have made since the beginning, but who seems to remember? I stand beside my trees and it is the beginning of it all, but who gives pride its proper place? The Italian blood keeps rising the French burst for nothing at all. I stand in the Greek dusk just as they once did before me. The black Greek women silently nod at each other from the donkeys along the road

A story with nothing behind

If you look there you can see. There is nothing to hide. If you look over there you can see a house. It is built. It is a big strong house of the future to be. Things can happen they already are. We the Belgian people are rich with various experiences and have various dishes we prefer. Well, sooner or later we arrange the meetings around the elliptical table for all to be seen. Then we lock the door. Behind Swedish windows and doors the Swedish people sit thinking about their sorrow and pain. Belgian people do not have anything to hide, why should we? Belgian people are fine warm-hearted cheerful people. I do not lie, why should I? Belgian people know the importance of sharing and they know all about parting. Yes, Belgians know partner, participant and peculiar. Yes, we know particular and party. Will a tension arise between the walls? If the curtain is already drawn why keep on pulling it back? See how it fits the window. Finnish people are afraid of going mad in the solitude. Their curtains never fall. The French forget themselves in the dark. The Dutch hide among each other, the Irish among their sheep. The Danish hide inside their bodies, the Luxembourgers within the Luxembourgian borders. On Fridays I play canasta with my wife and my partner and his wife. Belgian people do not have anything hidden, how could we? My wife deals the cards. The colleague mentions something by the way, adding a couple of names. The wives have strong cards in their hands. I mention something by the way and undo the top button of my shirt. The women win the first; win the second hand. The colleague reels off a couple of jokes with an allusion. Later I go with the colleague for a beer

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