

DAZED

MARIE TOMANOVA'S HIGHLY PERSONAL PHOTOS OF HER CZECH HOMETOWN

Emily Dinsdale
October 6, 2022



Marie Tomanova, "Self Portrait (Shadow)" (2018), *This Was Once My Universe* (2022) Photographer Marie Tomanova

The origins of the word "nostalgia" derive from the sense of longing for a home that doesn't exist. Home itself can be an elusive, precarious concept – what seems fixed and solid one moment can melt into air the next.

Marie Tomanova grew up on a farm in a rural border town in the Czech Republic, where she dreamed of being an artist. After a disillusioning spell at art school in Brno – where she encountered misogyny and derision from sexist tutors – Tomanova was forced to reconsider her plans for the future. She made the hard decision to leave her hometown of Mikulov for America to pursue her burgeoning interest in photography. "Leaving for the US was such a bold move," she tells Dazed. "I'd never left home or travelled so far before."



Marie Tomanova, "Pum and Gabi" (2019), *This Was Once My Universe* (2022) Photographer Marie Tomanova

But the bold move paid off and, during the ensuing years, Tomanova established herself as a photographer in New York, shooting editorial campaigns for her favourite magazines, showing her work in numerous exhibitions, and producing two photobooks – *Young American* (with an introduction by the acclaimed Ryan McGinley) and *New York New York* with a foreword by Sonic Youth’s Kim Gordon).

Recently, Tomanova returned to visit her family and childhood home for the first time in eight years. During the intervening time, she’d nurtured a fantasy of “home” – a nostalgic dream interwoven with the fabric of time, place, memory and longing. When she actually arrived back at the family farm, her emotional construct of home collided with the reality of the place she’d left behind. “Because I returned as a totally different person I had a hard time fitting into my teenage bedroom settings and the family role I left eight years earlier,” she explains in a conversation over email. “It was all so overwhelming... realising that I have changed and home has not.”

She worked through this disorientating trip by taking pictures. It became a way of navigating the bewildering experience, of anchoring herself in the present, and making sense of the past. Now, these images have been gathered together in a book called *It Was Once My Universe* [published by Super Labo]. Presented alongside words by art historian Thomas Beachdel, the book provides a moving reflection on family, memory, distance, and the passage of time. While it offers an account of Tomanova’s deeply personal and specific experience, it also relays a sense of something more universal – the impossibility of returning to a time and place that no longer exists.

Below, we talk to Marie Tomanova about *It Was Once My Universe*, the images she found most painful to reflect on, and the experience of finding that home is just the same as it always was but you yourself have changed beyond all recognition.



Marie Tomanova, "Chairs (Mom and Willy)" (2018), *This Was Once My Universe* (2022)

Please could you tell us the story told in the images here?

Marie Tomanova: It is an ode to coming home and seeing my family again after eight long years in the US. It was a moment for which I'd waited so long, but being back home felt very different from what I expected. I felt displaced. I felt like a stranger in a town that I knew so well. It was emotional and confusing and it unfolds in the photographs.

The book is not narrative or chronological in any way. When I started thinking about taking photographs in Mikulov in late 2018, I was originally thinking of creating some sort of diary. I was also going to write everyday. But when I arrived at our little farm in the Czech Republic, I forgot all about this diary aspect. I didn't really write, I just shot. In a way, it was all I could do. I felt like I needed to rediscover my home, every little corner of it and also redefine who I am.

What aspects of this story do you think are very universal and what are your most cherished details of the book that are incredibly unique to your story?

Marie Tomanova: I don't know if I can speak for anything universal, but I think going home – or the *idea* of home – is one that people can understand in their own ways.

I was surprised at how difficult it was for me to go home; to fantasize about home, and for fantasy and reality to not match. I had some sort of ideal about returning home... a feeling of comfort, or safety, or closeness, or warmth, or love, or of some deep satisfaction of being. But, in going home, I didn't feel that. My fantasy and reality collided in some fundamental way – it was real and unreal. It was uncanny.



Marie Tomanova, "Almost New Year" (2018), *This Was Once My Universe* (2022)

How do you relate to your younger self? Do you feel compassion for this dimension of yourself?

Marie Tomanova: Wow. I look back and see how lost I was, in all aspects of life, without direction and just running around with friends and lovers. But I also admire my 'younger self' as having courage. I longed for such a change and challenge. I loved adventure and I still do.

After being away in New York for so many years, what were your first impressions of home and the world you left behind?

Marie Tomanova: I was in shock. Everything seemed the same... I perfectly understood it but also I did not understand it. Does that make sense? The only way I was able to interpret everything was through the act of photographing what was around me. My home was a place I had to rediscover, piece by piece, little by little.

What were the most important realisations or things you gained by moving to New York?

I think I gained myself by moving to New York City. That may seem like a big statement, but I think it is true. Now that I've gone through the process of putting together *It Was Once My Universe* – thinking about it and being with it – I realise just how important it was for me to leave home.

Are there any images here it was painful to reflect on or that you felt hesitant to include in this collection?

Marie Tomanova: All of the images were painful and made me uncomfortable at first. I am always excited to get film back from the lab and I look at the little thumbnails in the East Village walking home, but these images I didn't look at that way. I let them sit. I guess I needed to be ready.

I realised that I had a hard time looking at 'Chairs (Mom and Willy)' (2018). Maybe it encapsulates my time away, or some deep feeling about family, or home... I don't really know. That could be a special thing about a photograph, it goes beyond words – it describes feelings, it *shows* them.

Please could you tell us about an image in the book that you feel is particularly encapsulates the story of this book?

Marie Tomanova: For me, the image that has always stood out, the one that I always thought was the key image that sort of summed up everything was 'In Dad's Sweater (All That Is Left)' (2018). I was so happy to find the sweater in my old dresser on the day I arrived, and so it was one of the first images I took behind the house, in a gloomy afternoon light. My dad died two days before my 16th birthday, and I used to wear this sweater as a teenager a lot and it is so precious to me. It really is all I have by which to remember him. And so for me, to go stand in the field behind our house in his sweater was a way of seeing myself back home.

To what extent do you agree with the old adage 'you can never go home again'?

Marie Tomanova: I agree with this so much. Those words echo and reverberate in my mind. After eight years away, I did go home, but that going home was never really going home. I suppose that is what *It Was Once My Universe* is about. And I think the 'was' in the title is the most important distinction.

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/57132/1/marie-tomanova-photographer-this-was-once-my-universe-book-interview>