

WHEN WE WERE THERE

Amy Lilwall & Rupert Loydell

'A lifetime of travelling has taught you that nothing is as bad as it seems at first, that every curious space you have ever spent time in will become part of your own inner landscape.'

– Cees Nooteboom, *Venice. The Lion, The City and Water*

'There are many stories, not one; stories that do not yet know their place; stories where the compass is spinning in every direction.'

– Rod Mengham, 'Stephen Chambers: Spinning the Compass'

'A road trip with the imagined passenger does not need a destination'

– Amy Hempel, 'Cloudland'

'A city is only a city when over the course of time so many contradictions have accumulated there that it defies explanation'

– Cees Nooteboom, *Venice. The Lion, The City and Water*

ATHENS

Smog and endless ruins. I was grubby and tired from weeks of travel, two days of sunstroke and map-reading mistakes. We camped on the outskirts, a bus ride out of town, locked our helmets to the motorbike and went to play at being tourists. Everything was crowded, hot and dusty; I couldn't speak a word of Greek. History blurred into history, the past became the past. I found an abandoned army jacket in the quiet lanes on the wrong side of the Acropolis and brought it back to England, wore it for many years. My big adventure sometimes turned sour: it was a joy to leave this city and drive into the hills, be back on the road. We headed for Mycenae where we had a campsite to ourselves and sat in the only bar being shown photos of the archeological dig by a wizened old man keen for us to buy him drinks. Later, it was the sight of lemon groves and blue water I would remember, days kicking our heels by the sea, failing to learn to windsurf as we waited for the ferry from Patras to Ancona.

Out of place, out of sorts, views back across the years

ATLANTIS
(for Natasha)

The answer is never, an underwater swansong which got away. But I would have liked to visit caverns without sunlight and to have swum offshore before the island sank. The gods declared otherwise and civilization ended; we question and conjecture, draw cartoon visions of crystals and impossible technology, rippled dreams and desires. The city blueprints were a shimmer of sunshine and air, construction a hymn of impossible architecture; an attempt to create a self-serving myth. I love the liquid city that never was, each week we watched the scratchy video you borrowed from the library, wondered about submarines and scuba gear, and why this film was so ignored. If I could I would gift you air and light, time and story, to transport you there; would conjure a forgotten civilization into the past, who would patiently wait to be discovered. Welcome to the citadel.

Who would but think and hold their breath

BABBACOMBE

I know it's not a city, just an area on the edge of a seaside town, but I had many happy holidays there as a child, and it seemed bigger and more exotic then. We'd take all day to drive from London, pausing for breakfast near Stonehenge and lunch at the Fleet Air Arm Museum before finally turning into my distant aunt and uncle's drive. We'd unpack and walk to the cliff top, treat ourselves to fish and chips on the way home. One of the small islands out to sea became Kirrin Island from The Famous Five, a book series I was immersed in when six or seven; several years later I'd sing my heart out in teenage epiphany in one of the rocky coves. There's something about returning to places that offers a safety net under all the unknowns; I still like to holiday where I've been before. When we moved to Devon I sought out aunty and uncle, who I hadn't seen for years, and was distressed to find the winding cliff paths had all been declared unsafe and shut off. But we took our daughter to the model village, on the cliff railway, and to meet relatives so distant it hardly counts.

Faded grandeur, long summer holidays, palm trees and blue skies

BARCELONA

Intestinal architecture, brutalist streets, and Miro's painted blobs. The view from his gallery up in the hills was amazing, Merz's igloo was made of glass. There was a minimalist pavilion, and a whole park of shadows and mosaics, with a lizard in a pool. The Tapies Foundation had wires stroking the sky, there were curved windows everywhere you could not see into, and a cathedral still being built without a plan. You liked the fishes in the aquarium, and we learnt to eat at lunch then persuade a local bar or café owner to cook you an egg before the night arrived. You liked the tiny bed the hotel had put in our room for you, liked the little dusty park nearby, with its dirty pond and cafe, stacks of unused chairs. It is not a place I will rush to go back to, that trip's memories are further south, at a relative's house, and on the beach nearby where you started paddling before gradually discarding your clothes. You live to different rhythms with a child, learn to rise early and not stay up late, to curtail museum visits and always carry food.

Long incline down to the ocean, thousands of unexplored streets

BOSTON
(for Bob)

It is a very English city, uptight and over-polite, well-dressed and softly spoken. The airport seems only a short ride away from downtown, so short in fact we've been known to check our bags in then catch the subway back to town. One time you came and met us and entertained my daughter with the bronze ducks in the park, then took us to see 'the world's largest toy shop'. The previous visit we'd been to a shopping outlet to buy baby clothes before she'd even been born! Mostly, however, we've only been passing through, on our way to see family further North, coming to stay with you out in New Hampshire, or flying home avoiding New York, which for a time seemed nasty. They know how to ruin lobster in Boston, know how to make great beer, know how to big up whale watching, know how to look after the past and place it around green spaces and fresh air. I watched my daughter splash and paddle around a massive children's pool, reclined in the shade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum courtyard, visited private galleries and got lost with you in Harvard. Now we only occasionally email, something slipped away. I never knew Boston that well.

Drifting apart, someplace else to be, visiting for the day

BRATISLAVA

The old town is eroded away by the tide of newer buildings, but that doesn't matter; I feel at home there. Strangely, you feel like the foreigner; they know you are from the East as soon as you speak. We return to the Slovak Pub each time as they serve the best bryndzové halušky and it's fun to watch tourists as they try to work out what's on their plates. The restaurant is behind a large stable door on a grimy main street of squat prefab shops and once grand old houses. I made up my mind that I liked Bratislava better than Prague. There is graffiti and communist architecture and litter in the streets. People live and work there which is hard to believe about the toy-street set design not two hours away. I closed my eyes in the lift to the UFO. It was so high and constantly juddered by the bridge below. You wanted to go on its roof and look over the edge; I felt very boring. Only in Slovakia have I noticed that people talk to you for a mere second before they smile. Two languages means two personalities. I like the one you have at home.

Car parks, narrow sloping roads, white incisor castle

BRUGES

The outskirts are red-brick houses, low like a northern industrial town. We walked from the station to the city centre. You can walk that far now – there was a time when you couldn't. We were served coffee at a B&B that didn't serve coffee to the public. We felt awkward – but unwilling to refuse the kindness – and drank it in an empty dining room with breakfast crumbs on the parquet. You bought turquoise jeans in C&A, the changing room assistant told you to put your unwanted tried-on trousers back on the rail. We raised our eyebrows at each other, the way we do. We stood in the main square watching the horse-drawn carriages pull around people like us, in wide rimmed hats and sunglasses. I don't know what I expected from that city, but it certainly wasn't a palimpsest of style. You had been there once before, when you were a young girl. That was interesting too, the fact that the city was largely unchanged since your first visit. That day, we survived on cake if I remember correctly. They were too thick and yellow to ignore. I am hazy on the details... Did we go on a boat trip? I don't think so. Did we buy souvenirs? I don't have any. There is a photo of me sat on a low wall by the canal with a big smile. I think I must have liked it there. It's amazing how places exist in scrapbook patches in one's memory.

Water, brick, apple cake, jagged gingerbread buildings

CANTERBURY

A nesting city, with the cathedral at its centre. The large, private school exists behind stone walls and gates. The road beyond the wall is cobbled and boutique-y; there is a neat greengrocer's and a shop that sells coats for small dogs. Narrow streets lead from it to the pedestrianised thoroughfare, thick with tourists and shoppers in the day and clip-clopping young people at night. The next road is the ring road. I often wondered why they built the new flats there, with balconies that face its widest section. Come to think of it, the flats are not new anymore. Crossing the ring road is not a good idea when you are alone, late at night. Well, certainly to where we used to live; do you remember when we were burgled? There is an underpass that I would hesitate to use even in the day. I was braver back then. This outer layer of the city is silent now. I pass by the petrol station that looms and creaks. It has the only 24-hour shop within walking distance of the centre. We used to be proud of this fact when we went out at 2am for cigarettes. I see the firework shop on the corner of the road where we lived. It is still closed.

Gardens and gondoliers, cathedral ghosts laughing well into the night

COVENTRY

'Sent to Coventry' – oh, how we laughed. But it was where I'd been assigned, it really was my destination. I motorcycled there and slept on a sofa for three weeks until several of us rented a house together. Every other Friday we'd travel from the suburb where the community centre and men's hostel were into the city centre to collect our volunteers' allowance from the council office. Some of the people we worked with had never been into town, certainly not to Birmingham or London, trips I regularly made to see an aunt or visit home. It was the first of several rough places I lived in, a shock to my middle class upbringing. At night groups of bikers roamed the streets picking fights with scooter boys, others fought anybody they deemed foreign, gangs ran shouting through the shops on Saturday afternoons. But there was new music brewing, bands to see, safe refuges around the city if you knew where to look and how to get there. I'm still in touch with several friends from those days, though wonder what happened to good looking Steve and his girlfriends, and Honey Monster Guy, whose dad was a famous science fiction writer.

Broken cathedrals, backroom gigs in rundown pubs, cheap synthesizers and guitars

DUBLIN

A city that is light on food – we were so hungry that night. The plane was late so we arrived late at the hotel. We sat at the bar and stuffed ourselves with mixed nuts. You didn't mind – the bar tender was from Košice and chatted to you. He gave us a steaming tawny glass and a slice of clove-studded lemon. When I think of Dublin, I think of barrels, I think of that picture we have where you are in your smart jumper, standing with a tumbler in your hand in front of a tall stack of whiskey casks. In December, warm amber fills the windows, the fairy lights, the glasses. It is reflected from the wet pavement and shines on the body of an acoustic guitar. We did all the things you're supposed to when you are in Dublin – we didn't even try, really. I had been before, fifteen years prior, and remember moving across it from right to left, strangely. This time, the reels in my mind consistently send me in the opposite direction, parallel to the river that fingers its way in, straight and purposeful. I wonder what that means.

High street Christmas shine, hot whiskey, night

EDINBURGH

I would know I was in Edinburgh if I was put there blindfolded. The smell of the brewery gives the city its salty air. It's a smell that one shouldn't like, yet it allures. Princes Street falls away to the park on one side, the silken shoe of the greying castle on the hill. You could always tell a tourist from the way they got on the bus; trying to pay the driver – but of course, that was me when I first moved there. My student cell led from a corridor that was so long and dizzying it seemed to pitch. At least, that's what my memory has done to it. We went out in winter without coats so we didn't have to queue for the cloakroom. The thought now makes me shiver. I had met friends for life, in fact, I left my guitar there when I dropped out of university. You learn, as you get older, not to leave things with people in far away places as you never go back for them. The strongest friendships freeze in the past.

Skipping class; pipers at Waverly station, I remember you all

EXETER

The year we moved there the newspapers said it was the best place in the country to live, and for a while it felt like a proper city. There were hidden parks and routes to avoid the high street, pubs by the river, even an Indian grocer who stayed open late. There was a cinema, three bookshops, and we quickly made new friends. Gradually, however, the world shrank and we started to ignore the cathedral and river, forgot about that marvellous first summer we spent exploring with nothing to do. We moved from flat to house to house over the years, mending the roofs and shaping the lawns. We finished doing up our Victorian terrace a few months before we moved away: your study painted the colours of the seaside, our new wooden shed where the asbestos garage had been, the playhouse built of scrap wood beyond the kitchen door. I miss it now but back then I couldn't wait to leave, had been restless and bored for too long. I was the last to leave, after a night camping on the floor, can still walk through the house we left behind when I shut my eyes.

Itchy feet, the need for change, places that once felt like home

FLORENCE

You'd think I've been so many times that I'd be bored but apart from hypocritically wishing there were less tourists that will never happen. There is always a new painting to make friends with, a building or facade to see. Turn into the sidestreets and find the shade, revisit a cathedral and look again at who is buried where or how the angel interacts with Mary, announcing his great news. We have walked the children until they became teenagers, eaten ice creams in impossible colours, and skirted crowded areas using diagonal paths and streets. There are still small parks and squares to be found, new restaurants whose waiters are delighted to see you, there is plenty of sunshine and love to spare. We have learned to visit one day at a time, get an early train or park outside the centre; and we have been lost too, have driven through the pedestrianized cathedral square at midnight on a seemingly endless diversion, then waited for a driving ticket and fine that never came. In the evenings, the pavement gives out slow heat as the city fades into pink and grey, with only the rustle of angels' wings and the clink of wine glasses to hear.

Dreaming backwards, recalling the soft embrace of marble and air

GDANSK

We booked this city break and you packed two headlamps (in case one died) and I laughed and laughed. Gdansk knew how thrilled we were and threw its best bits in front of us as we bounded through it. Or maybe we were just excited by the smallest details. We could see the Motława if we knelt on the hotel dressing table and craned our necks. On our first night we found a galleon and we sat inside, drank grog and talked about men; the brewery fermenters shone like foil. At lunch we sipped deep hot chocolate in a dolls-house patisserie that used to be a water mill. It was impossible to feel cold in all that indulgence. I fell asleep while you read about Einstein's theory of relativity. I wonder if you ever slept at all. You went to the very top of St Mary's church but I had to stop halfway and come down. A year later, I was cross with you, but you had given me a job and shown me how to charge my car battery. You were only ever good. Now we hardly speak which makes me very sad.

Best friends, a street of amber stalls, night air fat with twinkles

GLASGOW

(for Chris)

Wasn't what I'd thought it would be. Wasn't like the few hours I'd once spent with thirteen others early morning, waiting for a bus and train connection to the Outer Hebrides. Was cultured, light and civilised, though some of the pubs didn't have any chairs and sometimes I couldn't understand the accent. The record shops were great and you knew every one. I found a rare LP for 10p with Richard Thompson on guitar and sold it back home for 800 times what I'd paid. You and everyone else lived in flats, floors of handsome brown apartment blocks; near enough to walk into the city centre. We ignored the No Entry signs and walked into the Art School library to admire the curved and fretted wood; we saw some weird performance art, indie bands and contemporary dance. You were the perfect host, nothing was too much bother and you made my visit a delight. Last time I visited the city was for your wedding. I stayed with other friends on a (literally) flying visit; witnessed your vows, heard a zen speech, and was glad that I had come. Soon after, you moved to Chicago for many years, now you live outside London; we still swop music and ideas.

Friendship without effort, picking up where we left off

HAMBURG

Both times we arrived by boat. The water sparkles throughout the city like silver thread through patchwork – I hadn't realised that. Both times we booked a bus tour because your legs were tired and that's when I noticed. The second time, there were five of us and you couldn't walk nearly as far. I think you were sad about that. No matter, go on without me. We didn't, but now I wonder if you would have liked some peace. We marvelled at the wedding-cake houses around the lake, the brick mills on the canals; the size of the cinnamon rolls. The quirkiness of the city revealed itself to us via punks and cat-cafes and colourful bowls of food. The taxi driver read a ragged paperback when he stopped at the traffic lights. Everywhere was bright, the water made it so. The buildings had large, serious windows so all that daylight could take shelter somewhere. In the evening, leafy streets were strung with lights, the night curved over us, bouncing the city hubbub inside it. Now you can walk further than you have done for years and this warms our memories no end.

Butter pastry, mirrors of water, compressed light

LIEPĀJA

There is a statue by the beach that looks out to sea; she is waiting for her husband to return. The sand is pocked with shadows from where the sun hits it sidelong. Sometimes the sea is so alight, you can't look at it. Along the coast is a town where blackened, windowless buildings surround a gold-roofed church. We covered our heads to go inside but it was locked. Before you left England, you whispered to me that you had fifteen thousand pounds in your suitcase. You bought a flat on the fifth floor of a building with no lifts. The window ledges were thick enough to sit on and watch trams amble back and forth below. I came to visit when C was a puppy and you trained him to jump over a chair. Later, I came when you had baby E and then baby K. You built a cabin where you grew tomatoes, then snails. I liked it but you sold it and bought a plot of land. You sent me pictures of the foundations for your house, the glass staircase, the Belfast sink, the red door. I keep saying that I will visit your house but the world is not safe now.

Empty beaches, quiet supermarkets, daylight well into the night

LONDON

Lived there long enough to know it's home and always will be. Lived there long enough to miss it and know it will never be home again. Lived there long enough to get lost when I go back, failing to find shops and clubs and bars which I thought would always be. Lived there long enough to miss the friends who've died or moved away, lived there long enough to explore new places and not go back to childhood photos and stories. Lived there long enough to enjoy not thinking about school, to openly sit outside the pubs we had to skulk in when we were under age. Lived there long enough to still miss walking by the Thames, long enough to sniff my way across London without a map, long enough to know there's no other city like mine. It isn't mine any more, but let's pretend. My bike and skateboard, my school and friends, the concerts I attended, my first kisses and first beers. My patch, my neighbourhood, my aspirations and daydreams. My paper round, my Saturday job, my summer jobs, my first LPs, the time I moved away. Lived here long enough to know I didn't live there long enough, know I should have stayed.

Birthright, family, heritage, tube trains and yesterday today

LOS ANGELES

It's a cliché but it seemed true when we were there, everywhere was concrete and cars. You thought nothing of driving 50 miles to see friends, 30 to take us for a meal. You worried about our safety, if we knew where to go, were bemused when we asked to spend an afternoon watching a surf championship or visit another museum. Years later, Brandon said there was plenty of life downtown, plenty of locals who didn't drive, it was mostly what people decided to do and we believed him. Our hosts lived differently, we spent our week inside cars until we got to our destination, then drove back to the suburbs where your beautiful house had a convenient electric garage door and hummingbirds ate oranges in the garden. I mostly remember the freeways and our friends, an exhibition where curators had recreated Sam Francis' studio, hung hundreds of tiny works around the room, in the same place they had been before he died: splashes and pours of glorious colour in contrast to the bleached sunshine outside.

Petrol shimmer, heat haze, no pedestrians or peace

MILAN

(or is it Madrid?)

Who else would have a date with thousands of music fans in a football stadium? I always get the two places that begin with M mixed up, still do. Which gallery is where, which country eats so late I couldn't face it... Mostly, I remember acres of cathedral roof and the nearby shopping arcade, vaulted ceiling and marble floor, clear warm skies and a chance for the two of us to be alone. I don't know if we saw some art or just walked around together, then caught a bus out to the stadium to collect guest tickets. We queued for what seemed like hours, then got directed around the back to a discreet window with no line. Our tickets were there as promised and later the lights lit up the sky and our friend's words flashed on the biggest screen we'd ever seen. The whole city stamped their feet, cheered and clapped, and sang along. Before we flew home we visited a toy shop and brought peace offerings for our time away, bribes to help put aside our guilt for leaving you back home.

A few days break, your favourite band, seems so long ago

NASHVILLE

Yeehah! I wish we'd seen more of the city and had a chance to buy some tat. After all, now I am forever without Elvis Presley socks or a Dolly Parton mug; what is a man to do? When we arrived we sat in a bookshop coffee shop with our painter and musician friends. Debbie warned us that sometimes singer-showman Steve got approached by over-eager fans. But when what we assumed was one came over it was Sue who was his target. 'I am not who you think I am,' produced a doubtful 'Are you sure?' in reply. 'I think I know who I am,' said Sue, 'and I've just flown in from England.' 'Ah, ok,' she said, and walked off with suspicious looks behind. We laughed about it for several days, shared the story with Steve's band, even as we avoided downtown and any hint of country music. Did we miss anything? I still don't know, am still unsure if Sue is not a woman in disguise, famous in another life.

Tourist queues and autographs, places we had heard about but never went to

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

It is an adventure waiting to happen, an industrial gathering that I want to explore. At the moment it is a student suburb where my daughter lives, a nearby park and glimpses of bridges above water. It is late night walks after dark, looking at the closed doors of shops and resisting the lure of a micropub with its own ales and the offer of only six seats. It feels like another country when you get there, having driven for hours, stopping for lunch in Birmingham or York, braving the slow traffic weaving between traffic cones and speed camera for miles and miles on end. It is at a distance, it is a shopping centre by the university, a market hall, your small studio in a maze of academia, it is your city, your place, your adopted home. I do not need to know but would like to. There must be walks by the river, and you have mentioned an independent cinema. We have visited the modern gallery, had lunch at the restaurant up top, but there are smaller venues too; bands and art shows, places to frequent. You will find them all, I know.

I hope you are happy, keeping well, can dream some paradise

NEW YORK

I am reconstructing a dream of tall buildings in a city where they perform miracles, a place full of secret energy and events, my favourite place in the world. It is funkytown, it is chin stroking jazz and litter blowing down the streets, cheap jeans and hipster bars. Down here on the ground you can only look up, up there on the viewing platform I can't bear to look down. Once it was snowing on the fortieth floor but not even raining down below, once I watched you slide off a barstool onto the floor, suffering from a combination of jetlag and gin. First time, I skateboarded everywhere and watched free films in Central Park, lived off bagels and juice; other trips we stayed in a hotel where every room was painted by a would-be artist (submarine interiors, magic signs or kaleidoscopic dreams) and the shower was tepid water from a rubber hose. I have walked from north to south, have walked across the island and back to where I know. There is always something new to see, somewhere new to go, paintings to reacquaint myself with in the galleries and museums on free visit nights. This dream will never end.

When God comes back he will reside here with all the tourists and strangers

O

Paraskeve exits the boat. She looks at the chimney smoke as it feeds into sepia clouds. This is a rooftop city that is at its best when one can see equal proportions of sky, rooftops and sea. Paraskeve will only know this when she leaves and watches this, exact view receding. But this won't happen now. Not today. She drags the pavement backwards as she treads and lets the street envelop her. There are cyclists around – she can hear their bells – but no pedestrians. The deep brown street doors remind her of coffee beans and, as she thinks this, she notices a shop window and an aproned barista beyond it, pushing at the brass buttons of a cash register. She wants to see properly. She crosses the road at the same time as a low-flying, patchwork hot air balloon. She only feels its shadow before it disappears over the rooftops; her eye is drawn to a cup swirled high with cream. Behind her, six men in black uniforms head down the street towards the port. She listens as their echoes intensify under the clock-tower arch, then continues up towards the town square. Crows wait on the steps of the theatre.

Home yet unknown, bold yet furtive, closed brown doors

OSLO

Oslo is lost in my memory, unattached to anything meaningful. I went to the city but I don't remember it, may as well have not been there. The girl I met took me to a student bar for an hour and then it was time for me to leave. It was a quiet place, time moved along but not much else. I took the bus to Moss to see the grey houses and the grey water and the grey light and realised I couldn't afford a hotel room. I slept at Rygge airport on a bench, under my coat, and ate peanuts from the vending machine. When the lights came up in the morning, I walked around the canteen and took pictures of the plates of prawns and salmon, then left, wishing I'd booked an earlier connecting flight. I remember the security guard talking to me in Norwegian and I was pleased that I blended in. Looking back, I don't think I could have done anything differently, but Norway still holds all its secrets and pulls me back towards it as if I have left a piece of myself on that airport bench.

Lost in transit, grey bus journeys through pine forests

PARIS!

I came here fifteen years ago, my heart in pieces in my pocket. There is a French language school on Rue de Trevise where I enrolled for two weeks. I fixed myself in museums and along the banks of La Seine. I took photos of strangers and ate jewellery-box cakes in les Jardins de Luxembourg. I watched chess players in the March light. It was St Patrick's night when we slipped away from the pub and rushed along the pavement. We decided to swap shoes – do you remember that? I had heels, you had trainers. The Sacre Coeur was closed for the night, so we scaled the fence and found the carousel inside. Someone was there, sitting in a teacup like a character from Alice. We took something from him – wisdom, I think – then went up to the cathedral with it. As I remember, the stars hung low and pointy in puffs of red-tinged cloud and we were inspired to dance (a waltz?) to the crackling drum and bass from your phone. You wrote your number on my arm... Now Paris exists beyond the window of Gare du Nord, above the Eurolines station at Gallieni, at the top of the escalator at Montparnasse. It is a place that exists while I rush through; maybe I will need it again one day. I have no idea who you are.

Red windmill sails, Haussmannian streets popping with neon

PHOENIX

It is a grid. It is air-conditioned. Its is ordered. It is hotter than I have ever been. It is the strangest place I have ever stayed. It is running from the car to the restaurant or mall. It is dry heat sucking the sweat so it cannot cool you. It is the view shimmering. It is Linda driving a jeep, top down, fast enough to blow away the heat. It is Sheila's hospitality, her art and books. Her haibun, her way with flute and words. It is desert culture, it is lizard skin and snake boots, it is misters spraying evening meals where it is 90 degrees in the shade. It is my eyeballs bubbling, it is Southern cooking in pans and on griddles, it is wood smoke and distant lights in the clear air. It is a 4am start to see the Grand Canyon light up at dawn, it is warehouse bookstores and the worn-out summer house that Frank Lloyd Wright designed. It is the small condominium pool that was not cool enough to swim in until dusk, it is writing friends we haven't seen for years.

Charcoal canyon drawings, experimental poems, slap of heat and miles of sand

POITIERS

I first discovered the umbrella maker's shop when I was a student. I vowed that I would buy one when I was richer. That year makes me think of low evenings, cups of vin chaud and my grey pea-coat. It is a city for autumn and winter. In the summer the students leave and it sleeps. Ramshackle, beamed houses of all different heights laze along the sloping streets, their shutters almost closed. Large, maisons de ville with their long, rectangular windows and light brown walls also doze throughout the day. I have been in enough of them to know that they are mostly split into bedsits for young people. In the evenings, the conversation swirls out through the open shutters and down onto the street. That was us once. We used to cram against your kitchen window and smoke menthols. Some Sundays, we'd go to the market and buy fresh tourteaux – goats milk cakes with blackened tops – and little pyramids of cheese. There is too much to say here, the city's pieces come from different jigsaws. One day I will return for my umbrella.

Quiet grandeur, another chapter, another life

PRAGUE

We ambled over Charles Bridge and back again, looked over the many, many heads up towards the Orloj. Renaissance, Gothic, Baroque. I tried to find the imperfections and found one hidden restaurant with chipped floor tiles and grease in the air. We ate cheese and beer and mustard mashed together and thought we had discovered the real Prague. I took you to the Kafka museum and wondered how the ticket vendor could bear to sit in underground darkness with rows of fizzing televisions. It reminded you of a console game you don't really play. We found an old cinema with an open lift. The security guard warned us to get out at the top – 'otherwise it will...' and he gestured with his hand to show it turning upside down. We hopped out just in time and ended up in a rooftop bar where they filled the beer glasses mostly with Pilsen foam. We leaned against the wire barrier taking in the different levels laid out like a cruise ship's stern. In the middle of the Danube is an island that pumped with house music, that time. We looked over at it from the bridge and agreed it was most incongruous, but I think we would have gone.

Birdsong in paved backstreets, finding the unfound

PREŠOV

The town centre is somewhere to escape to. We take the bus from your house on the outskirts of the city and get off by the theatre. From there, you tell me where you used to go when you were younger: the posers' restaurant where they served you beer in a sundae glass; the club you sat in with friends on a trip back from England. We were like kings, you said. Then the medical faculty – you are still friends with your classmates. There is a pyrozki shop on Svatoplukova that you remember going to with your mum. It costs 10 cents for a pyrozki and the flavour depends on the day. When we go, it is jam day but any of the flavours would suit me fine. In summer the Hlavna is heat-hazy with blots of outdoor seating. In winter the smell of medovina pervades log-cabin market stalls and brick-vaulted cellar hideaways. You see people you know, then lament their weight gain, their baldness. We're not what we used to be, you say. There would have been no homeless during communism, you say. It's sad to see the city so quiet, you say, but I suspect that time didn't wait for you and you don't like that. How can you not smile in this city of orange roofs and pastel walls?

Pinks and yellows, aging faces, my holiday, your home

RIGA

How many times have I been here? I have lost count. When you bought me a box of chocolates with a picture of the bridge over the Daugava, I knew I had to go. We drank Balsam with hot blackcurrant in the old square with its ice-cream coloured buildings. At sunset we sat in a high-rise bar and watched the gold ignite on the onion domes of the orthodox church. The evening dropped new snow. We happened upon a floodlit park without snowmen or footstep traces and took it in turns to roll down the hill. There was an oil painting in the apartment that we rented. A previous guest had stuck a slice of sausage where the sun should have been. We were delighted when we realised this. Another time, we celebrated your birthday and your elderly father struggled to climb the flights of shadowed stairs. One year, we brought my mother who was pleased to finally see where you come from. Once I passed through alone and held my bag very close to me at the bus station. You moved to Worthing but you have always longed for home. England is too polite, too drab, and constantly misunderstands you. I remember when people thought we were sisters.

Cold bright light, laughter, back when we were always travelling

SAN FRANCISCO

(i.m. David)

I mostly remember you arriving late at the airport, jolly and laughing. Sue kept asking me what you looked like and I couldn't remember; she was convinced we'd missed you, that you had forgotten, that we would be stranded. But 40 minutes after we entered Arrivals, there you were; we remembered each other perfectly well. A friend of a friend, like several others, you'd put me up on a previous whirlwind tour of the West Coast, fed and watered me, introduced me to other musicians, artists and writers, and got me back to the airport when I was scheduled to move on. Your apartment was near several secondhand bookshops, bars and record stores; I stuffed my bag full of paperbacks and music I had been searching for for many years. Now you'd moved over to Oakland, and we were attending a conference. The sun was out, there were so many old friends to meet and new ones to make, but the bookshops had started closing down, the record stores had seen better days. And now you've shut up shop: Clif emailed to say you'd had a stroke and after consideration your life support was being switched off. He'd sat and talked to you, read a poem and said goodbye.

International friendships, long distance mourning, sunshine, bridges, fog, craft beer

SOMEWHERE ELSE

Drove through it, round it, across it, by it; never stayed there, even once. It was just another place we needed to avoid, another marker on the way to somewhere else; the trip was about the journey not the stops. We went over the mountains, down coast roads where it seemed every other car before us had fallen over the edge, round badly-signposted ring roads, on empty dual carriageways, on expressways that cost us good money but saved us hours. One day we got sent on a 300 mile diversion because a bridge was down, saw parts of Yugoslavia where no-one normally went. We drove sideways across Italy: it looked easy on the map. The road atlas became more battered and irrelevant as time went on, we'd kind of got the hang of following our noses, of finding places to stay: quiet campsites with shade and streams, empty B&Bs where we conversed with other travellers about obscure musicians and our favourite songs. Most of these places I have never seen again and didn't look properly when we were there. She kept our travel journal after we broke up and I don't know where I've been.

Pins in the map, forgotten roads, discarded motorbikes and dreams

TALLINN

Our apartment had low beams, a sauna and a view across the snow. We kept telling you it was much nicer than Riga, and you laughed along but seemed affronted. The truth was, I thought I'd opened up a Grimm's fairy tale and stepped into the pages. Gothic architecture, winding cobbles, pink turrets, New Year. It was the first time I'd heard a non Indo-European language, I said to you all, feeling very clever. There was a sword fight in the medieval restaurant we ate in. We listened to the table next to us shouting protests as the Russian national anthem was played. You were very quiet, had already been told not to speak Russian in the street. I sipped beer and wondered how on Earth people could shout in a restaurant; then we bundled into a pub singing Auld Lang Syne and were told to pipe down. Outside, people let off fireworks in the crowd; I didn't feel particularly safe. A wine waiter offered me the cork from a bottle and I admired it before giving it back. You all laughed and told me I had to smell it. We read in a tourist guide that Estonia had once experienced two days of independence. We were six. We are now four. The other two started new lives and I wish them well.

Christmas market, world-weary fairy tale town

TOYTOWN

Toytown is a sprawling city that can pop up anywhere. In Italy and France it was often packaging re-purposed for a week or two, at home it could be a street of cardboard houses or a treehouse and a cave for a family of trolls. Once, on a flight back to England, the spikey penguins moved in to an igloo encampment on a fold-down tray: styrofoam cups with cut-out doors. I helped you build an art gallery, an Eiffel Tower, an Italian house, a futurist house, a minimalist house, a town house, a garage, and stations for your wooden railway tracks. Strawberry Lady never made it back to the Lego box, Mister Beak was a wayward toucan who spent his time upsetting Wolfie and Red Ken; in the other room there were bunk beds for Mia and Babar, a kennel for a floppy dog, and a row of friendly bears on top of the bookshelf. Polly Pockets and Teeny Tiny Families vied for your attention and, before we moved, there was a canal system in the garden with real water and plastic boats that could transport small figures to the sandpit. Toytown is a sprawling city that can pop up anywhere but just as quickly be discarded or abandoned as children grow up, but there are new developments in other homes.

Sealed bags and boxes in the attic, dusty toys on bedroom shelves, muted memories and dreams

TRURO

The smallest city in the UK. We used to wave at each other from our top floor flat – I, as I watched you leave and, you, when you saw me coming home. The town centre is rich yet sparse. I don't remember it ever being busy, do you? The stone buildings look wet even when they are not; the little coloured cottages are shabby in the mizzle but brighten in the sun. In my mind I trace our Sunday routines, from the Catholic church, to the breakfast place where they serve extra-large omelettes and free coffee, to the co-op, then back up the hill. Sometimes there was a tented market on Lemon Quay where we could buy scented candles and craft gin. I imagine little lines following our paths, forever imprinted into the tarmac. One time we walked out to St Clement, all the way around to the flat water at Malpas and back to the town centre. One time you bought me a ring. One time we got married. I used to write in cafés back then; they were all good. Funny how somewhere only feels like home when you move on. We have both agreed on that, I think.

Stone, rain, coffee, space, love becoming comfortable

VALENCIA

You can park your car in the street then reach straight up to pick an orange from a tree. We didn't eat the orange as we concluded that it had absorbed too many exhaust fumes. It stayed on your dashboard until it started to shrivel. You were hungry. You asked me to phone ahead and reserve the paella as per the website instructions. The waiter had buttoned his shirt to the collar and had a low, smooth voice. He brought us a bottle of Rioja from a temperature-controlled wine store at the back of the restaurant and opened it without telling us the price. The paella was too salty – frozen – but we ate it and mourned our hard-earned cents as we left the waiter a tip. We drove past the bullring and agreed that it was a cruel place. There is a glass sea-life centre – a feat of architecture – I went there once without you and ate fish while more fish swam in aquariums around me. I explored a stretch of the sunken park that surrounds the city. Then I walked through the old town, peering into cave-like tapas bars and leaning my head back to see the crosses on church steeples. That was before I knew you – unthinkable now.

Smoggy warmth, orange avenues, future unknown

VENICE

We went to Venice when Dad died, to just be you and I and see how that felt. The red and white poles were the first clues, leaning into dirty water. We were stung by a water taxi when we disembarked. It didn't matter though, you saw the Bridge of Sighs from the outside and were then elated to walk over it. I stood on the balcony of the Palazzo Ducale and watched yachts froth along the canal. We went to Murano and on the return joked about not wanting to see another piece of blown glass. At night, St Mark's square fills with water so that you can hardly tell what is up and what is down. We watched a man carry a woman though it, the water parting splashily at his shins. On the final day, we checked out of the hotel and sat in a fenced garden to wait for our transfer. We must have sat without speaking for hours; I wonder what you were thinking about. If I could play them back I wouldn't ask you, I wouldn't try to make conversation. Silence is good sometimes and I think we knew that.

I'm not sure, He would have, Liked it there, Anyway

WARSAW

When you whisper it slowly it sounds like the wind – in English at least. The waiter brought me a plate with a whole fish on it. It peered up at me and I had to get one of you to remove its head. I think it was P who did it. G and A quarreled and stayed home that evening. Empty dining chairs held their absence. When we sat in the park I asked you, G, how many pairs of shoes A had brought with her. ‘Four,’ you said, without thinking. I suppose it’s not so strange that you would know that. You have always retained details. I had never hung out in a park before. Nor eaten a fish with head. F was tiny then. I think she could stand up and cling to A’s back, pressing kisses into her shoulder. P and P cracked jokes in the evening while I straightened O’s hair. You were told not to speak Russian there too – isn’t that right? We had a flat just around the corner from the Old Town Square and you swore about the early morning singers. You probably don’t remember that; even I had to search for that memory. Later, we listened to them while eating salmon and dill butter on a nearby terrace. M was there. Unusual that so many of us should be together, sitting straight-backed in a row on the grass, watching the rollerbladers. I think there was some tension but with family that’s not such a big deal. There is a high rise with a steeple that reminds me of the Ministry of Truth from *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

Siblings, glass facades, tall wooden door with a cast iron key

YORK

Another city I could live in, where bookshops and boutique shops, museums and a cathedral, cluster together. Our friends live a few miles away, and there are always things to do. One year we rented an apartment by the river and the girls loved their secret attic room, a spiral staircase up to crowded eaves. They rollerskated on the towpath, went swimming at the baths, and we all got lost in the newly opened art and ceramics museum. Months later we watched a video online of flood water creeping up the embankment steps next to where we stayed, but it hasn't dampened our nostalgia for the big sitting room and its bay window where we watched the river traffic over breakfast during our stay. The first time I visited alone, I innocently asked my friend what the Railway Museum was like; he said he'd never been, no-one ever wanted to go. We spent an afternoon breathing in oil and steam, inspecting polished machines and enjoying being together without social expectations or familial pressure. Next trip, our accommodation was nearby and I learnt I could be first in, for free, and see a few locomotives before my family were awake and wanted cups of tea.

Return trips, home from home, other people's lives