

Amy Lilwall, University of Lincoln & Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University

## *from* **WHEN WE WERE THERE**

### ABSTRACT

*When We Were There* is a collaborative sequence of short prose-poem haibun whose subject is ostensibly the 40 cities of their titles. Unlike most gazetteers, however, they are not about the architecture, geography or history of a place but are personal responses which implicitly consider how we relate to and interpret the places we visit, remember, travel through or around.

### KEYWORDS

travel

place

memory

collaboration

prose poetry

## Contextualising *When We Were There*

Following three previous prose-poetry collaborations, *When We Were There* endeavours to find a new approach to this form. We became interested in subverting the concept of a gazetteer to include the tangles of memory and emotion that places trigger within us, drawing upon Psychogeography and the idea that places contain traces of the past, be that historical or social artefacts, or some kind of resonance of human activities and feelings. This resonance is at the core of our project, as is the transitional nature of place and the fallibility of memory, concepts which relate to creative non-fiction and its blurring of storytelling, memoir and the invented. In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields notes that '[e]very artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art' (Shields, 2010: 3) and suggests that maybe we have run out of of made-up stories to tell so are turning to actual events. In contrast, Carole Angier, in *Speak, Silence: In Search of W.G. Sebald* (2021), appears outraged that Sebald turns out to have poached and recycled whole biographies of people he knew, attempting to legitimize them by changing names, and by using found photos with misleading captions. Shields, however, notes that

[f]acts quicken, multiply, change shape, elude us, and bombard our lives with increasingly suspicious promises. [...] No longer able to depend on canonical literature, we journey increasingly across boundaries, along borders, into fringes, and finally through our yearnings to quest, where only more questions are found. (Shields, 2010: 31)

Longing to escape the confines of our own back yard has become a cliché of our times, it is with this in mind that we allow the vibrancy of place in the mind to take us elsewhere. Karen O'Rourke defines Psychogeographic writing as 'an alternative way of reading the city' (O'Rourke, 2021) and in this collaboration we have chosen to identify the maps

formed from our brightest memories and transfer them to the page. Philip Sheldrake comments that '[i]t is appropriate to think of places as texts, layered with meaning. Every place has an excess of meaning beyond what can be seen or understood at any one time.' (Sheldrake, 2001: 17). Our palimpsest of experience merges with the palimpsest of physical place, teasing out personal significance from layers of meaning. Following one's map of memory is unique to the writer yet an experience lived by all; as is the responsibility of the psychogeographer, we question the 'right' way of navigating a city. Guy Debord advocates the 'drift' as an essential component of psychogeographic experience (Debord, 1956) and it is this that allows each line to transcend time, accuracy, clarity and reality to create a complex interaction with place. To quote Will Self, we become 'ambulatory time travellers.' (Self, 2007: 15)

Sheldrake goes on to suggest that:

Memory embedded in place involves more than simply any personal story. There are the wider and deeper narrative currents that gather together all those who have ever lived there. Each person effectively reshapes the place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place. (Sheldrake, 2001: 16)

Compiling this haibun collection has been an exercise in experiencing place through feelings and the power of hindsight, capturing pictures that render each new place sensitive to the currents of the past and present. Stockdale notes that, 'Within the hazy fringes of shifting time there are ghost-like qualities haunting the text', (Stockdale, 2022) and to quote Walter Benjamin: 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.' (Benjamin, 1950: 247) Debord elaborates, noting that '[t]he variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke.' (Debord, 1955)

Previous collaborations have consistently drawn us to the prose poem. The form simultaneously directs the reader towards specific meaning and allows for interpretation; it is playful, generous and complete. Most notable, however, is its capacity for storytelling. Rachael Barenblat reflects that '[t]he writer of a prose poem does away with the expectations of verse, and is thereby freed to borrow from other forms of discourse and create something new and surprising.' (Barenblat, 2005) Writers such as Barenblat and Tony Leuzzi consider the difference between the prose poem and microfiction, the latter commenting that the move away from the traditional ingredients of story, and an inclination 'to lose control, to dispense with gravity, to bark at the shape of air, which is without color or shape until I've barked at it. The end result may meet some (or even all) of my requirements for a flash fiction but this is purely coincidental.' (Leuzzi, 2003) As Leuzzi suggests, the story is often still visible; rather than formed of a defined beginning, middle and end, it exists inside, as Santilli terms it, the 'implied contexts', noting that

Despite commentaries that classify the prose poem as an experimental branch of free verse, the form of the genre is unequivocally prose [...] The way in which the prose poem achieves a high level of intelligibility within a minimal number of sentences is, I believe, made possible by the absences that it accommodates. As a fragment, the individual prose piece is an inevitably elliptical text and always stands in relation to a larger absent whole that represents the sum of its unselected contexts. I give the term 'implied context' to this active space of signification. (Santilli, 2002: 22)

In *When We Were There* the 'absent whole' Santilli refers to primarily takes the form of relationships between the writer and the place or the writer and the 'you' or the 'they'. The specific images spill their meaning from the confines of the line to indicate complex story. An example from 'Babbacombe' demonstrates this: 'We took our daughter to the model village, on the cliff railway, and to meet relatives so distant it hardly counts.' The

narrative advances logically, yet the story is present in the gaps; outings which wouldn't happen with adults alone, family links neglected.

Campbell McGrath suggests that

A prose poem is essentially a shortish piece of imagistic, lyrically written prose that employs poetic structural strategies, in particular poetic closure. [...] A prose poem is not written in lines, but in prose sentences – it surrenders the poet's most valuable tool, the line break, but in return gains access to a broader palette of syntax and sentence structures. I find prose poems particularly accommodating to poems with a strong narrative line, or a lot of landscape detail – a lot of hard-to-digest data.'

(McGrath, 2020)

The brevity of the prose poem contains morsels of 'landscape detail' and 'hard-to-digest' data – particularly landscape descriptions, in this collaboration – in a way that propels the narrative rather than pauses it. The 'broader palette of syntax' creates familiarity in abstractions, and narrative in the lyric.

This brings us to the haibun. Considering it as a midway point between poetry and prose, the haibun seemed a suitable form for this collaboration. Originally a short prose poem followed by a haiku, the haibun allows for only a snapshot or moment of experience that obliges the writer to condense and focus their experience. In the western(ised) haibun, that we have used, the haiku becomes a sentence without closure. Our version takes the form of approximately 200-word blocks of text, each followed by a final line which summarises, tangents and flies off into new ideas and associations. Visually, the arrangement of space places emphasis around the haiku, declaring it to be the truth that remains beyond the events experienced in the prose paragraph. Fink describes the line space as 'a wonderfully white space' that 'take[s] on properties of a sentence, yet without quite reaching that level of declaration.' (Fink,

2005) For Rasmussen, '[t]he space between the prose and the haiku is kind of a long pause, one where the reader shifts mental states from reading a story to entering the sparsely styled world of the haiku.' (Rasmussen, 2007)

The form lends itself well to our gazeteer, notably for the play on fictionality that although, as Ray Rasmussen explains, 'can be a dream or even a fantasy episode,' is often, 'reality based as opposed to fiction.' (Rasmussen, 2007) We offer readers the opportunity to experience a succinct montage of details that relate directly to the writer's most vivid and precious recall of a given place. The restrictions of the haibun, even in its westernised form, naturally lead the writer towards summary, juxtaposing moments from an undefined period of time to suggest movement through it. Paul Munden observes the 'elastic treatment of time' as a potential trope of the prose poem, elaborating that,

It is startling [...] to find within a single paragraph – the prose poem – shifts that might be more familiar in the breaks between paragraphs, or, even more characteristically, between chapters, and not necessarily those adjacent to each other. In narrative terms, prose poems that exhibit this treatment of time are actually compacting it, and quite radically. (Munden, 2017)

*When We Were There* endeavours to recreate the disorientation of dream while maintaining the aura of reality. The fictionality of the haibun, seeks to bring the reader closer to the writer by allowing the emotion to override the events to present a different kind of truth. Rasmussen elaborates that '[h]aibun tend to be accounts of personal experiences in the present or past that the writers have had, that somehow stand out in their lives, that are deemed worthy of writing about (call them "haibun moments").' (Rasmussen, 2007) The final haiku brings this truth to the fore. Sheila Murphy explains the charm of this pairing here:

For me, the relationship between the prose passage and the haiku that follows is the key to the form. Therein lies a spectrum of kindredness and tension. As discoverer of that relationship, the writer is gifted by surprise as the image starts to clarify within the figurative pan of water being touched to urge forward a kind of small song. (Murphy, 1998)

Our gazetteer is an attempt to answer some of our own questions about our own lives, yet with the awareness that '[a]s a work gets more autobiographical, more intimate, more confessional, more embarrassing, it breaks into fragments. Our lives aren't prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art—underprocessed, underproduced—splinters and exploded.' (Shields, 2010: 27) What we have written is a writerly version of our own visit or visits to each city, a chance to re-experience and reflect upon a place, but some parts are invented or researched; all of it is subject to the workings of memory, time, regret, nostalgia and the desire to produce 'good writing'. Working collaboratively provided contrasting and complementary voices as well as critique, encouragement and surprises.

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# *from* 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. 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; 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 here 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.

Find me on the narrow sloping roads, by the white incisor castle

## BRUGES

The outskirts are red-brick rows, 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 unwanted items 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, in wide rimmed hats and sunglasses. I don't know what I expected from Bruges, but it wasn't the palimpsest of style we found. You had been there once before, when you were a young girl, and the city was largely unchanged since your last visit. That was interesting too. 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.

Let's eat nothing but cake and admire the 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 layer 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 no longer new. 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... Now, this outer coat of the city is dark. I pass by the petrol station that looms and creaks. It has the only 24-hour shop within walking distance of the centre. We were 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 to 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 of you wearing your smart jumper, holding a tumbler 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 an aroma 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. 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. It's probably all contactless now. 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 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 head torches (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 became bad-tempered, 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 wanted 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 traffic lights. Everywhere was bright, the water made it so. The buildings had large, serious windows for all that daylight to 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.

I see you striding through compressed light, beside the mirrors of water

## 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 swapped it for a plot of land. I remember the pictures of the foundations for your house, the glass staircase, the Belfast sink, the red door. I miss you, you say, when will you come? Soon, I reply. 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

Amy Lilwall was awarded her Ph.D. in 'The Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research' by the University of Kent in 2019. She is Senior Lecturer of Creative Writing at the School of English and Journalism at the University of Lincoln. *The Biggerers* (Point Blank, 2018) is her first novel.

Rupert Loydell is Senior Lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride* magazine, and contributing editor to *International Times*. He is a widely published poet whose most recent poetry books are *Dear Mary* (Shearsman, 2017) and *A Confusion of Marys* (Shearsman, 2020). He has edited anthologies for Salt, Shearsman and KFS, written for academic journals such as *Punk & Post-Punk* (which he is on the editorial board of), *New Writing*, *Revenant*, *The Journal of Visual Art Practice*, *Text*, *Axon*, *Musicology Research*, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, and contributed co-written chapters to *Brian Eno. Oblique Music* (Bloomsbury, 2016), *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Music in Twin Peaks: Listen to the Sounds* (Routledge, 2021).