

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*

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 Treves 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 through 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

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