

A SHIP IN FULL SAIL

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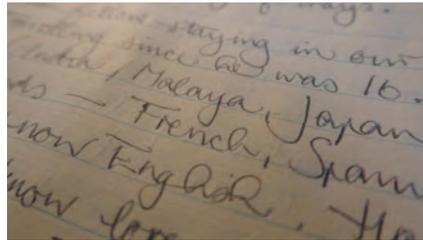
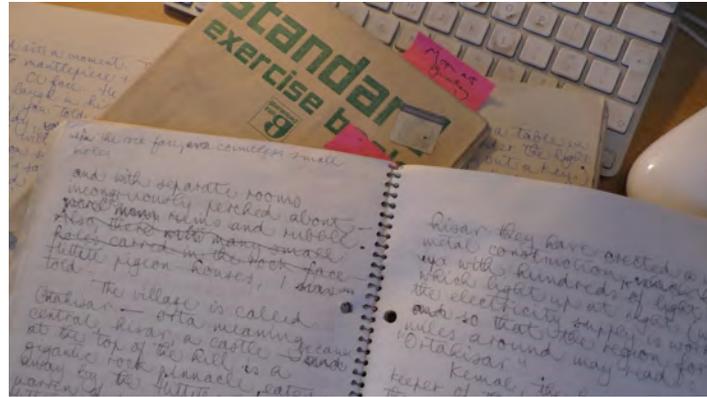
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**for Tamara
and for Bella**



**Since I first wrote them, many of my handwritten travel diaries and notebooks
have hardly seen the light of day. Reading them now, decades later,
I'm drawn back to vivid times.**

PART ONE: DESTINATION INDIA



Hotel Gülhane Çınar, Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul.

Sunday February 14th 1971

A large room, with a wood-stove and windows looking onto the busy road that winds down the hill to Galata. Eight beds in the room, the one closest to the door occupied by a German. I forget his name. He is thirty-one and has been travelling since he was sixteen, to North Africa, India, Malaya, Japan.... He has had seven girlfriends – French, Spanish, Italian, Yugoslavian, and now English. She is expecting his baby, which will be his sixth child. He is waiting for her to come from England. Then they will go to a village in South India to have the baby. In six months or so they will travel on to Japan.

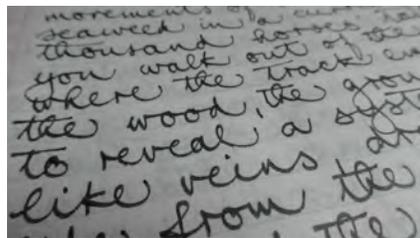
We talked about the notion of home. For myself, travelling is about going out from a deep reference point, which is a love of home and a sense of belonging there. He has none of that, and seems to be happy in his rootlessness. He takes life day by day, and seems to be at peace. He makes it quite clear to his girlfriends that he has no long-term sense of commitment, and guards his freedom to move on. That's always clear from the start.

I think I'm very different. I love travelling, but feel that there is a deeper alternative for a life, to do with commitment, love of place and community. What will happen to the girlfriends – and to all his children?

Freedom. Our generation is experimenting with many versions.

Home, the long hot summer of 1976

It was so beautiful walking away up the valley in yesterday's late evening, the whole land wide and warm from the day. England is so dry and yellow now this summer. It would be good to take a series of photographs of the landscape – it may not look the same again for a long time.



The squat shape of the little copse above Diana's last night, opposite Bull's Cross, dark dark blue, and the billowing line of the wheat field in front of it. I stood on the old track on the brow as a gust of wind passed, playing with the corn – great swirling movements of the stalks like seaweed in a current or a thousand horses' tails. As you walk out of the gateway where the track emerges from the wood, the ground has worn to reveal a system of roots like veins, drawing what life they can from the dry road. Thistles, campion and scabius, dry now. The wheat strangely flat in one or two patches, like God's knee.

Autumn 1976

I went up Wickridge this morning in the mist with Ali. She found earthstars in the beech wood. Then we saw all the trees that blew over in the violent storm, writhing in the mist, damp rotting bark, the whole wood primeval.

Shapes of fences, walls and bushes in the mist. The two Scots pines in the big field, which is all turf now, only appeared – towering shapes – as we came right to them. We stood between them, all else in the world greyed over.

1990 notebook

As a small child, in the nineteen fifties, I had the idea that “abroad” was a hoax. Atlases, globes and maps - my parents had them around the place as a joke. There was no way they could add up to anything real. My world was well defined, and anything too far outside of my experience simply couldn't exist. My form teacher, Miss Alison, said that when I smiled, my eyes went into slits like a Chinaman, and she lent me a book of Chinese prints so I could see what she meant. But they were only drawings of people, not photographs, not real. There couldn't be any truth in it.

I don't think it's only a childish trait that leads people to hang onto a line of argument way beyond the point of its annihilation, but I certainly persisted with this one. Finally, when I was eleven and a half, we were to take a holiday “abroad” for the first time, to “Austria”. It was the winter of 1963, and England had snow as deep as “The Alps”. The two-mile trek from our house to Stroud Station was an expedition in itself. With our bags strapped onto sledges, we trudged through high drifts. The train took us to London, then the “boat train” to Dover, where we boarded the ferry. We were leaving our island shores. Even then, unspoken, somewhere in my mind was the question: “Are we really going somewhere?”

The crossing wasn't rough, but there was just enough swell, enough rise and fall as one staggered from huge, sickly green seats to the loo and back, to make me forever wary of ferries. I didn't throw up, but felt as green as the décor. Towards the end, I was out on top in a high wind, leaning over the railings. It was a pitch-black night, but in the ship's lights I could see lacy white foam breaking wide from the bows. Someone threw an empty chip carton overboard, and I watched it as it hit the water and hurtled back away into the darkness. A careless child would go the same way, sucked under in moments. And then I looked bow-wards again, and saw up ahead a line of bright lights,

pitching up and down in the darkness. A huge ship seemed to be dangerously in our way. But then more lights appeared, at some distance from the first, and now I could see that it wasn't ships. They were floodlights, and beneath them were concrete buildings, and lorries. We were evidently approaching Calais Harbour.

“Oh look,” said a stubborn little corner of my eleven-year-old brain. “After all, there is such a place as “abroad”.”

2018

On certain clear days a trick in the atmosphere means that the sky is criss-crossed with plane trails. An ironic beauty, showing how many polluting flights are in the air. Perhaps our grandchildren will look back at this time, the Oil Age, and wonder at our folly. These decades when air travel is using what we know is an unsustainable fuel, preparing what may well turn out to be a catastrophic legacy. In the present, we travel more and more by air. Cheap tickets allow us to go quickly from place to place.

However, I think there's a distinction between a wide view of the world, and a restricted yet deep one. If I look out west from the Cotswold escarpment near home, I can see on the horizon the long line of The Black Mountains, on the border between England and Wales. I go there often, and am privileged to have known two farmers, Cliff and Vi George, who spent their whole lives running a small farm deep in the mountains. Life was hard, and they seldom left their own valley, let alone travel further afield, yet they had a brightness, trustworthiness and integrity, which I loved. They made me think a lot about whether to travel, or not to travel, and as my life has gone on I've come to travel less, valuing intimate knowledge of a place and its community. Travelling can be very rewarding, but staying put can be as well.



But in 1969, as an eighteen year old, the idea of heading off was so exciting. People talked a lot about freedom. In many respects it was a wonderful time, with music festivals, student grants and hitchhiking. There was a general feeling that as a young person you needed to find your own way in the world, without a sense of obligation or burden to conform. And there were new freedoms unavailable to our parents' generation - to chill out and to travel widely without the fear of war.

This is, of course, a one-sided view. There was prejudice, injustice, inequality, poverty, lack of opportunity, riots, and for many a sense of hopelessness. But society is complex, and I was in a particular place.

Freedom was fine, but you needed to know what to do with it. When I left school, I had no firm idea. I liked writing, and thought I would like to study English at university. With meagre A-level results, I applied through the admissions system, known as UCCA, where you could list six universities. I tried two years running, collecting twelve refusals. It was disheartening. I was free, but not really.

I knew that I wanted to find the context of hard work, spending all day applying myself to something I valued. My dad was a landscape painter, working in his studio at home, and there was always an atmosphere of purpose and effort. I tried painting, but never felt I was very good. Within the family, it was as though my dad was the painter, so that option seemed to be closed.

Home was a wonderful, inspiring place, but a place where I felt unfulfilled. I would sit in the beech woods, trying to write poems. I felt a deep affinity with the place, and the turn of the seasons, but I didn't know what to do.

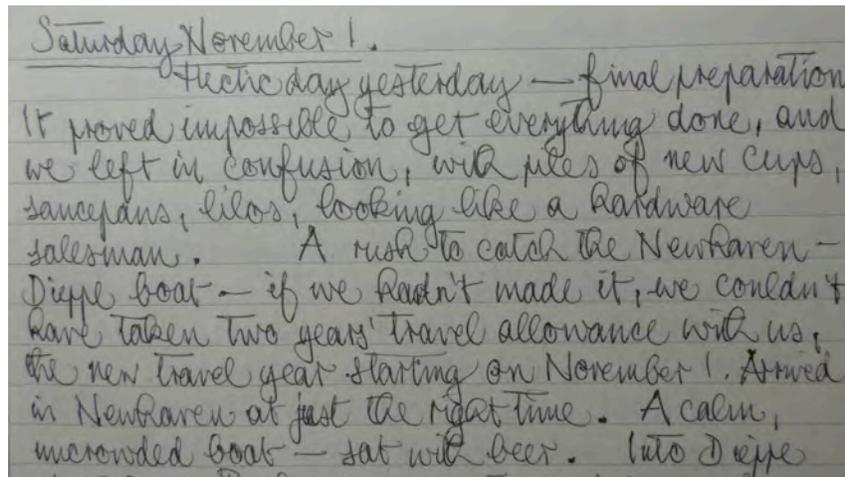
Travelling was an option that many people took up. First you needed the money. I easily found jobs, in a paper-clip factory, a petrol station, a department store, and saved up. Then it was wonderful to hit the road. They were heady times, where you took each day as it came, and in many ways I felt free.

In 1969, two friends, Rick and Mike asked me to drive overland to India with them in an old Land Rover. We arranged with Oxfam that we would travel around the sub-continent, visiting projects that they had sponsored, taking photographs and writing reports. We would come back with potentially useful material, which perhaps they could use for publicity. Remember, there was no such thing as a digital photograph that could be instantaneously sent back. India was a far-flung place, and photos and first-hand impressions were hard-won. We would be bringing rolls of film home with us, never seeing the shots until they were developed, perhaps months later, but it seemed like a promising idea. If Oxfam liked what we produced, perhaps it could lead to other opportunities.

There was no sponsorship for us – our expedition was too much of an unknown risk, but bizarrely we were able to go to the Heinz factory in Middlesex,

where they loaded up the Land Rover with free baked beans and tinned spaghetti. It was as though, as three eighteen year olds, we were taking a little piece of England with us, with our comfort food.

The morning I left home, I said goodbye to my mum, who was still in bed. She was in floods of tears, not knowing what would happen, when she would see me again. I was full of adrenalin and eager to be off. Neither of us knew what the future would hold.



Saturday November 1.
Hectic day yesterday - final preparations. It proved impossible to get everything done, and we left in confusion, with piles of new cups, saucepans, lilos, looking like a hardware salesman. A rush to catch the Newhaven-Dieppe boat - if we hadn't made it, we couldn't have taken two years' travel allowance with us, the new travel year starting on November 1. Arrived in Newhaven at just the right time. A calm, uncrowded boat - sat with beer. Into Dieppe

Green hardcover notebook, 1969

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Woke at 11.0 am, two men knocking on the side of the Land Rover. We open up. They tell us (in French) that they roam France and have no money for "pain". They are well washed and dressed. We pretend to misunderstand and then lie that we have only travellers cheques. They saunter off.

Monday November 3.

Woke at 7.0. A tractor obstructing the track back onto the road. Rick drove out through a farmyard – quickly. A hard day's drive. Over the Massif Central. Suddenly over a brow we came to a miniature Rio de Janeiro – Le Puy. Four pinnacles of rock – three with giant statues, one a great red Madonna and child visible many miles around – and the fourth a church with its walls sheer down the cliffs. The townsfolk in the streets seemed oblivious to the spectacle hovering over them. It was market day with rows and rows of cattle, and stalls of ugly trinkets and squares of soft leather - crowded with gesticulations.

Then down from the Massif on a twisting road hung on a precipice – farms and tall trees catching the falling sun in the depths below. A long hard drive through the dark to Avignon at 9.0 pm. Beer and wine in a bar – ‘Bar Provençal’ – and stopped for the night near a rubbish dump some kilometres out of town. Spaghetti around 12.0 am. Goat bells ringing in the distance – perhaps they'll visit us.

Just before bed, a .22 rifle not far away. Mike shone our spotlight, a pattering of feet, a groggy car heaving into action and struggling away up the hill.

2018

Mike and Rick were friends from school. Mike had spent part of his childhood in India, so our goal was familiar to him, whereas for Rick and myself we were heading into the unknown. Perhaps it was four years of sleeping in cramped school dormitories that had made the three of us able to squeeze at night into the back of our Land Rover, yet the days were so full, nothing would have kept us awake.

In later years, Mike went on to work in lonely outposts of the South Pacific, and Rick moved to the United States and worked in Silicone Valley, but none of us knew our futures then.

Friday November 7.

Cannes. Wandered in the cold shell of the resort. Bars and eating-places boarded up, whitewashed windows. Rows of iron seats – even so a lady charged us 9d for sitting there. Like a cold bath on a wintry night.

Monday November 10.

A misty morning in the Po valley. A line of spindly aspen trees, into the mist by a ditch. Woke to the sound of cars, tractors and people, but no-one seemed to mind us being there.

Drove through clearing wreaths of mist to the morning sun – Pavia, Mantova, Padova, Venezia. A fat man oozing over a bicycle, bristle-brush hair, cap, and a strawberry mark on his cheek. It is odd, driving through people's lives, daily chores. They are busy, on a bicycle, with a broom, and suddenly turn, all eyes, in surprise as we pass, and we see them no more. A beautiful walled town, Legnano, with turrets like Siena, and towns with huge campaniles, like Venice.

Along a misty causeway to Venice around 4.0 pm. It was a strange interlude – just a few hours wandering through this unique place. Bought sausages and aubergines for supper and wandered through evening into dark. Came through the archways and into the Piazza San Marco. It was huge and mysterious in the last light, its incongruous jumble of architecture, boys running with shouts and clattering tins together, looking nice for money. Pigeons swirling like shadows about the few people. The Cathedral had an aura, mystery – gold mosaic glinting in the darkness under the roof. People being so ordinary, but with serenity. An old lady going from shrine to shrine crossing herself. Priests blowing their noses and coming in late to evensong – a long droning chant – and a huge, fat priest standing in a corner pew.

Parked by the road outside Venice.



2018

I love Venice, and have been there since. The last time we went, Ali and I took the vaporetto from the airport, via Burano and down to the Lido, before turning to come back up to St Marks. As we went, a storm was blowing, so that we saw the perimeter of Venice through wild, pitching waves, the night skyline of waterfronts and campaniles lurching from side to side.

But there's more than wild storms pitching at Venice now. There are too many visitors. Residents are leaving in droves. I remember, years ago, taking an early morning commuter boat through the canals, enjoying the ordinariness of the city. Now, more and more, it's a showplace.

How can we travel through the world without destroying it?

In our Land Rover, we drove on, through Trieste to the Yugoslav border. Crossing a border can be dramatic, in ways we can't experience within Britain. You go through a fence and abruptly everything changes: cars, clothes, buildings, the look in people's eyes, the whole ambience of living.

Geography has a huge influence. Britain is an island, but step across to Calais and you are part of a landmass stretching all the way to Vladivostok.

Ant-like, we crept on.

Tuesday November 11.

Trieste – dreary outpost of Capitalism – blocks of cracked flats with windows like portholes, in old browns and pinks, clamped to hillsides like giant public conveniences. Old dirty trams; old down-at-heel people.

Soon after was the Yugoslav border. Although diluted Communism, it was apparent from the first. We changed money into dinars. Whereas Western notes have figureheads like kings, queens and great national heroes, dinars have pictures of huge factories, and a worker, complete with cap, goggles and spade.

Immediately the scene changed. No more advert boards crowding the roadside. Far fewer cars – old ramshackle lorries – rougher roads, only the main road tarmacked – fewer towns, fewer people. Drove through hills and forests to Ljubljana – small considering the area it serves. Out on the Zagreb road. Stopped in a small town for diesel and food. The people are dull and take no interest in us. Two men lounging in the butcher's scowled at us. At 4.0 in the afternoon, many men were standing around, which felt strange. The girls in the grocer's were friendly.

Turned off the Zagreb road to find somewhere for the night. Drove a long way, turned down a grassy lane, through woods, met horses and carts carrying wood. Finally stopped back near the main road. The people seem expressionless, characterless, in comparison to Italians and French.

Wednesday November 12.

Woken at 7.0, a tapping on the window. We looked at each other and wondered. It grew to a violent thump. We opened the door. A military policeman asked for passports. At first it was a bit tough. He didn't seem to understand our passports. I have two photos, one taken a long time ago, and a recent one; he wanted to know where these two people were. And how Mike could hold a British passport when he was born in Canada. Sign language everywhere.

He told us we had stopped in a military area. We struggled into clothes and followed his jeep to the military police station. He disappeared inside with our passports, appearing two hours later with a smile, setting us back on the road for Zagreb. A strange way to wake up.

A feeling of everything under state control. The people seem very much part of a rigid social system from which deviation is impossible, so all conform, and lose something of their individuality. We went through two road checks today. At one we had to answer a questionnaire about our journey. The road we are on, the main route through the whole country, is narrow, rough and crowded with lorries. We have passed several lorries up-side-down in the ditch today.

We turned off the main road to see Banja Luka. A fortnight ago it was struck by an earthquake, killing some dozen people. It took a couple of hours to get there, passing through collective farms, with enormous fields and minute houses. Some houses were just one room, right in the middle of a field.

A few kilometres before Banja Luka, cracks appeared in the houses. And then parts of walls lay as piles of bricks. In the town, the newer buildings had mostly borne the shock, but the older ones were dog-eared, chimneys, corners, walls, jagged, bricks in the streets. A terrible feeling of how the earthquake would have been: tottering insecurity and even buildings and the land itself shuddering.

Some streets were blocked off – there was probably a lot more damage there. Large army tents by the road. Masses of people just standing about. Workmen and lorries clearing up – pathetically boarding up broken walls with planks. One apartment block in the centre was most striking – privacy of rooms open to prying eyes – bottles still standing on a shelf, three floors up, curtains still drawn – shoes crushed in the rubble in the street. Damaged houses had red and yellow crosses scrawled on them. It was odd how little clearing up had been done. A feeling of resignation.

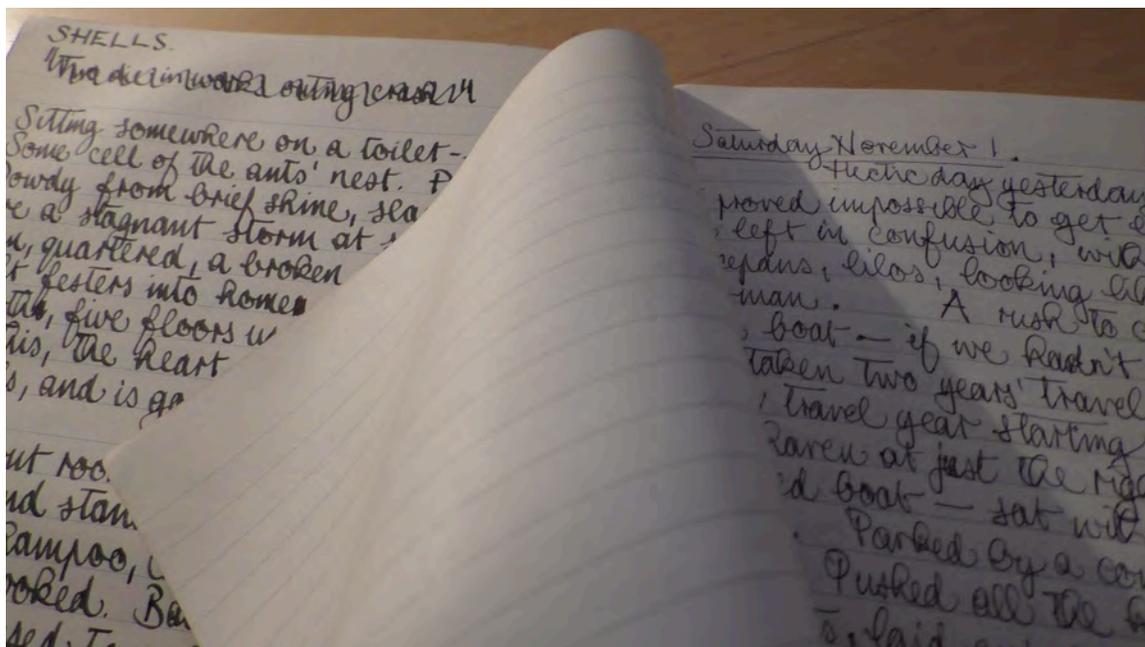
Drove back to the main road. Stopped in a lay-by.

2018

We'd heard about the earthquake on the news before we left England. Driving along, suddenly there was the sign - Banja Luka - so we thought we'd take a look. These days, we'd probably have driven straight on, knowing that onlookers aren't helpful in a crisis. But times were different then, with fewer people, and fewer on the move, or aware of the news. And we wouldn't then have considered whether or not we should go – we were curious eighteen-year-olds.

Many years later my mum said: "You wrote that poem just before you left home." I didn't know what she meant, but then I went back to the diary and found a poem written out carefully on the very page before the journey begins. Reading it now, whatever it means, it feels raw. "Five floors up but no floors" is like a premonition of Banja Luka.

And then there's the description of a road crash....



SHELLS

Sitting somewhere on a toilet-seat,
Some cell of the ants' nest. Peaks,
Dowdy from brief shine, slag Alps,
Are a stagnant storm at sea;

Then, quartered, a broken, gored nude,
Sight festers into home,
Hearth, five floors up but no floors,
'Til this, the heart itself, squelches,
Squeals, and is gone.

Roundabout room, waits with places
To turn, and stand again; razors,
And blue shampoo, chameleon-still
While unprovoked. Bath and basin,
Open palms, used to greeting and goodbye.
Things web day to day.

And newspapers thrust between wall
And chest: other shells turning,
Ebb and flow. Among the crackled flurry
Two hearts are splattered:
"Two people killed when a coach and
Two cars crashed on the M1 near
Collingtree, Northampton. The coach, on a
Works outing from Stoke-on-Trent,
Plunged down a 12-ft bank."

Shells, broken, flow under sea.
Their crests, all crests, fare
To fall.

Green notebook, 1969

Thursday November 13.

Wreaths by the road for crash victims – most just hung on trees. One an elaborate construction for two lorry drivers, with wreaths and two concrete books open, with writing and photographs. There are occasional churches, but not in every place. We passed a graveyard decked out with flowers.

Old men and women, their whole lives are the few cows, pigs or sheep which they sit by all day. One old woman whose whole life was one cow.

The main road has descended, scrawled like a knife through picture canvas, over the lives of the people. Yugoslavia in November is dark brown, ground of plough, people, tracks, carts, slatted fences, homes, leafless trees.

Drove all day. Through Belgrade, a city of huge, faceless buildings, and faceless people. Drove on, past another car crash, and stopped by the road.

Friday November 14.

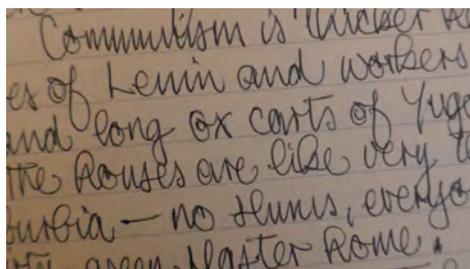
People's reactions as we pass are various. Children waving from fields, lorry-drivers, roadmen, waving, shouting, or glum faces. A soldier spat at us.

An ox lying splayed in a lay-by, a limp bag, a bloody head – hit by a lorry. Epitome of road slashing through country: an old man, following his two oxen across the road, oblivious of danger – one shouldn't blame him.

We don't know what the real time is. Our watches are the same as when we left England, and it's getting dark at 4.30, we must be wrong somewhere. Perhaps we'll see a clock in Istanbul.

South across featureless plain and into slight hills to Nis. A couple of mines. Then through the Dragoman Pass, main route between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, fierce fighting there in World War 2. Hills of small oaks, light brown and brittle. Woodmen almost camouflaged.

At the border they opened the back, saw loo paper, cutlery, stifled laughter and closed it again. A good road in Bulgaria. Spirit-level plain, hills suspended in haze. Huge collective farms, brown with plough. There seem fewer people about than in Yugoslavia. Communism is thicker here – large pictures of Lenin and workers. The old houses and long ox carts of Yugoslavia are nowhere. The houses are like very tattered English suburbia – no slums, everyone has a brick or dirty green plaster home.



2018

My biro shifting along the page, each glimpse given a moment. We were full of adrenaline, amazed at seeing such different worlds.

Almost fifty years later, these words are clear chinks through the shutters. What is time? A part of me is eighteen years old. Now.

Saturday November 15.

Up at 6.0, our time, trying to adjust better to the sun. Later in the day we saw a clock. We had been 1.25 hours early.

Freezing fog in Bulgaria. Huge placards looming from the gloom in towns. Grim, cold people – women with shovels, sleeves up, aprons, headscarves. Old women, backs, bodies bent, bow legs. Placards of workers, hammer raised. One raising a guided missile as a spear. In one town, a loudspeaker up a tree was blaring music. A crumbling church stood in the middle of a village, with a vast nest on it – a stork I think. Passed the army, dark green uniforms, marching through nowhere, most very sullen. Cadets, some looked no more than 12, in dark blue.

Stopped in a placarded town at a supermarket – a great slogan in red glaring down at the shoppers. Very basic foods – dry hunks of cheese. A jostle of people around one wall with slots and handles – jiggle the handle and a loaf appeared. Bought what we thought was red wine – it turned out to be a kind of blackberry brandy.

Drove through open, rolling hills, planted with meagre vines on concrete posts, for miles and miles. The posts reminded me of Great War graveyards. Also a few cotton fields.

At the Turkish border they thumped and prodded the Land Rover. The fat woman attendant in the gents asked if we were German. When I said we were English she was most approving. I felt we were welcome in Turkey after sullen Bulgaria. She stood by the gents door and looked through the washbasin mirrors at the urinals.

Through Adrianople (called Edirne). Immediately the people seemed personalities, and pleased to be so. Stopped just outside a town for the night. A pregnant cat. A thin dog stole the end of our cheese. A large family squatting around a rag of tent, not far away.

Sunday November 16.

Alarm at 6, but it was still dark, so we sat it out with coffee until 7. Drove on along the straight, featureless road, the odd little town clinging to it, to Istanbul. We had seen very few cars in Turkey. Now we suddenly found where they all were. The only English equivalent is fun-fare dodgems – red lights, one-way streets, even central

divisions on dual-carriageways, are irrelevant – and never a policeman in sight. All horns in permanent use.

Somehow we drove through, and found a market – chops, wine, cheese, potatoes. Wandered around – reek of fish and urine. Masses of beautiful fruit stalls. The cars are all tattered American monsters – Dodges, Plymouths, Chevrolets - Chicago with incongruous mosques and markets. Except for a very few hopeless beggars, everyone is trying to sell something, even if they've just picked it up from the gutter, or a stall. The prosperous had permanent stalls – caves of stalactite iron and brass. Tables of dog-eared comics and books. A man wandering around with one pair of baggy trousers, shouting. In the rubble of a fallen building: nuts, bolts, spare motor parts, broken motorbikes, delicately set out. An old, bristly man, hunched, with a water jug on his back. Filthy fish and sausage on black-dirt tables. An old woman sitting cross-legged in floppy trousers, hunched over two saucers of bird-seed – a crowd of pigeons nearby. Men with trays of combs and belts in every street, or sitting on the pavement with battered little weighing machines. More vital and human than de-personalised Bulgaria.

In our carcass car-park, horse bones by the sea. We are just about to eat rice covered in tomato ketchup and topped with fried bananas. We are surrounded by couple-filled cars.

2018

It's as though the world was coming at me hard and fast, with so many raw impressions. I'm not sure how nice I was. We were racing through, summing people up in an all-or-nothing way. Nothing is very subtle.

I suppose it was my breakout from childhood. It still pains me to think of leaving my mum in tears, the morning I left home. I was arrogant, unfeeling and bullish. But that's me writing now. At the time, I was just living day by day, trying to find something I could say was myself. The breaking free was part of what I needed to do.

Here are some notes from another visit to Istanbul, in July 1975. I was by then at film school, and seem to have a quieter eye, and be a little more considerate, and considered.

The long-held peace
thick carpets, the main
quarter-domes – with de
material, the huge sus
light holder with
ruins



ISTANBUL July 1975

The long-held peace of the mosque – thick carpets, the main dome and quarter domes, with designs like they are on material. The huge suspended circular light-holder with a few electric bulbs burning, and the bright lights on their stands beside the white space at the front.

The evening prayer. Men wander in, placing their shoes in lines of wooden racks across the floor, and kneel – figures dotted about. Then the tall elder, black-robed with a white hat, stands at the front. The men join him, standing in a long line from side

to side of the mosque. There is an opening chant from a man at the back. The elder continues, and chanting, leads the prayers, sometimes standing, sometimes kneeling, sometimes with his head to the floor – and always the line of men following. Some men run in late, place their shoes carefully, and join the line. Secondly, the men take places around the whole mosque, and the elder continues. The man at the back gives a final chant.

We sit on afterwards, myself and an Iranian man, and a Turkish man comes over to shake hands and talk. He says how Marx is wrong for not believing in God or an afterlife. Another Turk comes for a little and we agree the mosque is a fine place for all men to see God. The three of us again – the Iranian, speaking a little English and some Turkish, interprets (with a slight stutter). The Turk said how you can read in the Koran, or the Bible, how God created Adam and Eve, and so Darwin's Evolution cannot be right. I said it need not be relevant which is right – so many stories (Christ's, Mulla Nazruddin's) are starting-points for truths beyond a word-for-word interpretation: the Adam and Eve story is one way of saying that the awareness, the consciousness, of Man is born.

2018

I love those spontaneous discussions when you're on the road. You meet with people at random and start to talk. I like it when such conversations involve as much active listening as talking, so that there's a real exchange of ideas. The world is a better place if it is multi-faceted, with mutual respect and understanding of people's differences. I think it's dangerous to hold so hard to a point of view that you're not listening to others.

The next day I got up at dawn and sat in a square with my notebook. I felt almost as though I was sketching, but with words.

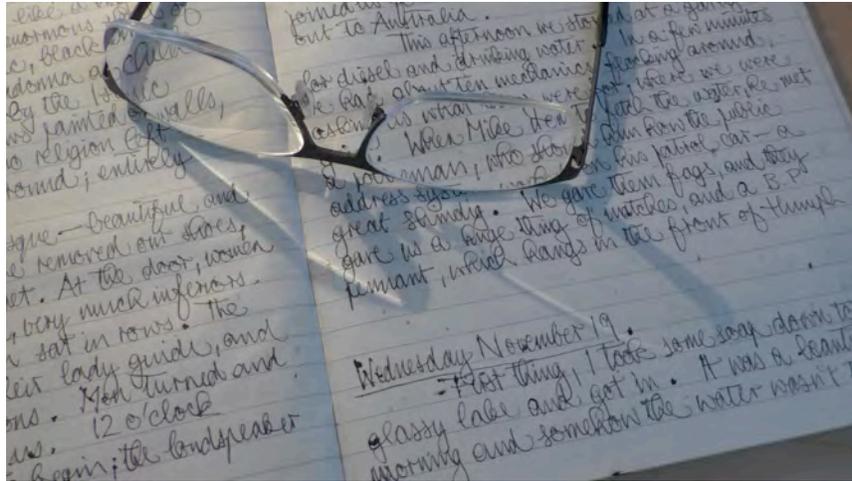
Istanbul starts its day. I sit opposite the mosque, under the trees. The tea-man comes around, moving the tables out a little and putting a chequered tablecloth over each. A flock of pigeons flies up and around the corner of the mosque. Music blares from a loudspeaker somewhere behind. Men set up their stalls in the road opposite the mosque's row of washing places: taut wires to hang children's clothes on; a pole with shoes tied together and slung over; boxes unpacked and little dresses shaken out. A soldier reads a newspaper on a bench. A man with half-moon glasses under a tatty 7-Up umbrella sells watches and jim-crack clocks, some with no face. The dark bent shape of a figure inside the mosque. Around the side, old women crouch amongst the pigeons with their little trays of seed. A group of dogs stay close together, wary now the night's emptiness is hard encroached upon – a few sitting at the side of the road, others standing, others venturing a few steps, wide-eyed at the new to-ing and fro-ing of the day. A man with his dome

forehead and cropped white hair and beard, crouches by a bus-stand near Galata Bridge, tapping his weighing-machine. The cloth-men are shouting their wares now, one with a big feather whisk keeps off the flies.



Sitting in a place tonight – two generously fleshed women came in and slumped themselves down. One with blonde hair frizzed out, and a short dress. The other in a cardigan with long hair taut with a rubber band then free down the back. Only a prostitute would sit in the middle of a café carefully doing her eye make-up, or against the wall, with a leg cocked horizontally over the other knee. They had a way of looking all their own – as if their eyes were sucking.

As I went across the Bosphorus on the ferry last night, minarets and domes of Topkapi, Sultan Ahmed, St Sophia, Yeni Çamii, Suleymanie, picked out against a gold sky. Boats large and small – an old barge, a little motorboat with a group of sunbathers on the roof, crowded ferries which list hard to one side as they come near the landing-stage, everyone bunched on one side to get off – all plying and hooting in the swell.



Green notebook, 1969, back on the road

Tuesday November 18.

We took the Land Rover on the ferry over the Bosphorus, drove off towards Ankara, and stopped in a wonderful lay-by beside a lake. The moon, mist and water were beautiful.

This afternoon we stopped at a garage for diesel and drinking water. Within a few minutes we had about ten mechanics flocking around, asking us what things were for, where we were going. When Mike went to fetch water, he met a policeman, who showed him how the public address system worked on his patrol car – a great shindig. We gave them fags, and they gave us a huge thing of matches and a BP pennant, which hangs now in the front of the Land Rover.

Wednesday November 19.

First thing, I took some soap down to the glassy lake and got in. It was wonderful to have the surface of the water right to my neck, and then stretching, with slight wisps of mist to the blue, distant shore.

We went on. At last rural Turkey began to appear. We drove through vast, barren hill-land, with hues of red, grey and brown. With villages and hamlets like fungus from the earth, earthy red roofs packed in a combe. The mosques are house-shaped, almost like their neighbours, with minarets at their sides. Some minarets are concrete, one was aluminium. The women wearing heavy, baggy trousers and large scarves over their heads, and either over their faces or not – it doesn't seem strictly important.

Thursday November 20.

Woke to a hot day. 230 miles to Sivas. Coming into a town, we met a lorry dragging a dead horse. People are brown, black hair, sparkle eyes, dirty clothes. They wave and shout, or look long and curiously. In one village we had to slow severely to avoid a black goat. Just as we were moving off again, a stone hit us with a hard crack, only just missing the window – our first direct hostility. Perhaps one shouldn't blame them – great noise and fumes through the heart of their whole lives, the village, and the goat their livelihood.

We gave a bloke a lift today – he clung onto the roof. We stopped at a garage just after dusk, miles from anywhere. A man, his wife and two little daughters. The wife peered at us from behind a glass door, but the girls stood around – torn black dresses, with trousers underneath, and large white bows in their hair. School uniform.

The country, the colours, are wonderful. Apart from a few sprinkles of yellow grass, and trees, there is no vegetation. Glowing, stony, raw umber hills, curving like blown canvas, held in by ropes of dry streams. Villages camouflaged with the land. The red becomes grey and green in shadow. Trees in the valley, grey, silver, red and green, like seaweed I saw in Malta. This is young rock, slowly being shaped by water. Cloud slipping in shadow on hills, like a clothes-washing-line on the move. Starlings, swirling with chatter over roofs – and buzzards, I think, turning over shapes of red hills. As we drive through, the landscape turns like sculpture. The towns and villages are not suffocating the land; they join, a part of the slow turn of earth, the people with them. The people are one with the ground – wood carts and men, women, children around, are coloured rich brown with their land.

We came to Sivas at 7, for food. We are immediately crowded with young men and children, happy, excited. “You speak English? What is your name?” they say and then babble on, unintelligibly, giggling, like the little girl in the fruit shop who insisted on giving me lots of toffees. Parked on the outskirts of town.

2018

Here is a place where over geological time the landscape has risen up, and people, in their scattered settlements, have found a way to live. We are not far from Mount Ararat, where Noah was said to have brought the Ark to rest after the flood.

I feared and loved the vastness of this place, so far removed from the gentle hills of home. I had a certain knowledge of landscape from my dad's work as a painter. He spent so much time in leafy valleys, wide mountainscapes and wild coastlines, often alone with his sketchbook. He seemed to be doing two things at once: looking at the wideness of a place, but also going deep into it, with close observations of fossils and fresh flowers. He seemed to be saying something about

the nature of time – time present and time deeply elsewhere, whether in the past or the future. It was as though, in his paintings, you could be here and not here at the same time, with close details yet also clear ways through, beyond definition. Without myself becoming a painter, I felt that he was showing a way here, towards some kind of an understanding of how we co-exist with the world around us.



I liked being in landscape, and wanted to be in a place where people lived closely with the land around them. A year or so later, I was again in Central Turkey, and spent a month in a small village amongst the volcanic rock pinnacles of Cappadocia.



TURKEY 1971

Friday February 26th

Ortahisar, a village in Cappadocia, Central Turkey. Orta means central, hisar means castle. 2000 years ago the Hittites first came here and hollowed out the giant, 90 metre pinnacle at its height. Three or four years ago they topped this fortress with a great sign: "ORTAHISAR", which lights up at night. Surrounding villages have done the same.



Mehmet has lived in Ortahisar all of his twenty-two years. He would like to move away, but has close family ties and makes out as best he can. He is proud of where he lives. He showed me the village as the sun went down. It is built mostly within the U of a steep gulley, where a small stream runs, and the whispering colours of silver birch trees stand tall. At the summit are the fortress and the dusty square, where the hotel and school face each other at either end.

We walked down the steep alleys. All the children ran about with catapults and hoops, and some of the bigger boys rode about on donkeys, and all in the black pinnies and white collars they have for school.

Far away the snowy shape of Mount Erçiyas was floating. In a series of eruptions, the last one around 9000 years ago, Mount Erçiyas covered the countryside for forty miles around with thick layers of ash and lava. The rock is sometimes hard, sometimes soft, so the weather has sculpted fantastic shapes, clefts and pinnacles, in which men have hewn homes, Byzantine churches and storehouses.

We walked up the other side of the gulley and looked back at the village, listening to the early evening sounds. The children laughing and chattering, and the women – in their baggy trousers and white flowing headscarves, calling after them. And the long braying of a donkey.



2018

I loved this time. Like Cliff and Vi in The Black Mountains, here were people who lived deeply in the place they knew. Life was full of challenges and hardships, but by retaining a close connection with their land and their landscape, they had, I felt, maintained something of great value.

The houses seem to scramble topsy-turvy on top of one another, all the way up the hill. New homes built among the ruins of the ancient. Sometimes amongst the rubble one can discover a beautiful carved hearth, and the red number plates of houses long since gone.

We looked over a wall, and there amongst a group of men was the black blood trickle of a sheep not long killed. Everywhere there are chips of animal bones in the streets – jawbones, femurs. We looked over the gulley at the slaughterhouse. It is carved into the rock at the edge of a sheer cliff. They were busy sluicing out the slaughterhouse, and from a hole in the cliff a great splattering of blood and water fell to the stream below, leaving a bright red line down the cliff.

At the çai-house I met also Ali Saçli (saçli means hair). I spent the evening with him, over kebab, salad, nuts and two bottles of sarab (wine). Ali told me about himself and his father. The father used to be a trader, travelling all over Turkey. Three times he went bankrupt at this. Then, seventeen years ago, he came back to Ortahisar and became a builder. The family has had many poor times. The father is now sixty-two – he looks ten years younger and is big and strong. Once, when it was very cold, the father had to go to Kayseri with two donkeys. On the way back he was caught in a very cold blizzard, and both the donkeys died. The father ran on to the next village and was safe.

Ali describes himself as “romantique”. When he feels angry he goes for a walk, and there is so much to look at in the countryside, he is soon calmed.



Next day I went to the outskirts of the village to see Ali and his father, who are mining out a storehouse for lemons. The lemons are grown on the coast, near Mersin, and are kept here in the cool stores, to delay their ripening until it's time to take them to market. The father screwed powder in brown paper, with a fuse in the midst, and rammed it into holes that Ali pounded out. When the fuse was alight, we all ran outside and.... poom! We skipped through the stink-bomb smelling smoke to see what was done. The father's clothes were really patches, not clothes. He, and a third fellow working there, laid down their coats in a corner of the store, amongst the rubble, and prayed.

In Ürgüp (the next town) yesterday we saw a dog with iron barbs about its neck. Mehmet told me there are wolves in the hills round about. Wolves always attack straight at the neck.

Tuesday March 2nd.

Last night, all the electricity was out in the village. The candles and oil lamps looked beautiful.

This morning I discovered a still, warm day. I got up and went for a long walk through the countryside. At times I could hardly muster my senses. Let me simply write out the notes I made at the time on the front-leaf of a book I had with me.

“Stillness. Sounds of distant cocks, dogs, donkeys. At a distance two men, dark shapes in the bright land, walk round and round a patch of field, their voices pummelling the stillness. I can see the seed swish from their throws. Then down in the valley, sounds of nothing but the birds. Fox tracks down the dry streambed, (which goes through a tunnel at one point). A dry vertebra-bone lies in the sand, and speedwell just begins to sheen the ground. The silver birch trees are still as the hills, along the valley, grey delicate strokes. I have never heard such silence. There is something of what the Bible writers meant by the Wilderness – a godlike sense of immensity. I suddenly discovered two men – the son ploughing, the father digging. Two eagles winging the valley. Hollowed cave: broken pot upturned, and a screwed-up bill from a shop in Kayseri. The rock pinnacles are like pots. And all the time the snow pinnacle of Erçiyes stands.”

As I came near the village again, I could see the great rock fortress standing high, and there were people ploughing and sowing – always we exchange “merhaba” (hello). I bought some bread and bacon, as I was hungry by now.

Wednesday March 3rd.

Last night a wind got up, and I shivered for a while until I heaped more blankets on. The wind is still blowing hard this morning, banging doors through the village, and shaking all the telegraph wires up and down.

The gale has raged all day, whipping up a mist of dust over the whole country, like a rough sea when one is snorkelling, clouds the subterranean-scape with sand. And I have felt in a rough sea today, perched up in my room, with the door rattling one side and the windows the other, and the sound of the wind over the roof. Somehow the dust gets in and covers everything with greyness. I have been in my room all day, venturing out, once for bread and eggs, and later for çai, a delicious sweet they just call “sucre”, and roasted peanuts.

Everyone has been in today – or coat-flapping, hat-flying through the dust.

Thursday March 4th.

Ali said that yesterday the good weather and the cold weather were fighting, and that today we should see which had won. And the cold has. It's been slightly snowing all the time. Ali says that March tends to be unsettled, but that by April the fine weather has begun. I'm feeling just a little depressed.

Yesterday evening I spent with Ali in the restaurant, and we drank three bottles of wine. All the time we say "aslan arcadas" (lion friend) to each other. He doesn't like the city, because he misses being able to go into the country and listen to the leaves on the trees singing. He is so sorry he has no room for me where I can stay. His grandfather was a Moslem priest, and he had a big house. When he died, the wealth was divided amongst Ali's father, his two uncles and his aunt, so that now Ali's father has a small house with many people inside. Perhaps next year he will build a bigger one.

Ali has many friends who went straight from high school to university, and now they are married. But they are not really happy – he has talked to them – because they haven't really come to understand life in so many ways. But Ali would like to go to university now. Sometime he must do two years' military service. If he reaches thirty-one without having done it, he must stop whatever he is doing and go for a soldier. Now he is twenty-three.

And then around 1.0 pm today, the snow softly moved off in a great grey bank, and the sun emerged. So I went out, not really knowing where I would walk. I went up through the village to the Nevsehir – Ürgüp road. There I met a fellow who proudly told me he was the assistant at the Paris Motel nearby, and he insisted I look it over. He showed me a dreadful group of concrete hutches, and I felt the hot shower water, which he proudly insisted I do.

2018

And this was just the beginning of all that followed. If you look at aerial photographs today, you can see houses and hotels all the way down the road to Ortahisar. Tourism and development have overlaid a rugged landscape, bringing in their wake a different life, and wealth and prosperity to certain parts of the community.

The tourists come to see the churches. From the fourth century onwards they were carved secretly by Christians seeking peace and contemplation, into the warren of tuff-stone pinnacles that fill the deep valleys.

I went off, down towards the Göreme valley, where the best churches in the region are found. The sun was getting warm now and the vast spread of the mountains was statuesque. To the left, the great treble pinnacle, beneath which the village of Uchisar

clusters. In the centre of my view was the muddle of pot-like pinnacles, which is the top end of Göreme. And to the right, Zelve, an area of red and pink spikes.

On an old map at the motel, I saw there was a church, Firkatan Kilisesi, somewhere in the top of Göreme. So I would walk and vaguely look for it. I started down through the great yellow pinnacles, and saw a place where openings were cut in the rock. There was total silence. I found a series of rooms. Outside again, I went around a corner and found a great frontage, with low doors and high windows. I stooped through the left door, and just to the left was a small chamber. I went in and there, on the opposite wall, in dull red paint, was a cross within a diamond. I had found an early Christian chapel and gave a kind of praise. I stooped out of the chapel, and then, for the first time, looked into the main chamber. I shivered. There was a great church. For moments I was frightened to enter. I was alone, in complete still silence. It was as if I was the first person to be here in almost 1300 years. I cautiously stepped in. It was about fifty feet long, with four pillars, one of them mostly gone, in the body of the church, and a slightly raised area at the far end. The roof was decorated with red painted zig-zag lines and crosses, sometimes the Cappadocian cross. I stood a long while. I have seldom been so moved.



2018

I was both on and in the landscape. I thought about Dad. He would sketch for hours in a place, seeing the broad sweep of it, yet through close attention and meticulous observation, going also deeply into the detail of what he saw. And here I was, inside the landscape, in a secret space, aware of the contemplative life of those who first lived here. It was, for me, as though the centuries had taken this

place beyond any doctrine. I could be simply moved by those who had played out with such commitment their efforts to explain the enigmas of existence.

Ali has an idea – that we should go to the moon. We will have wings, and if we should tire we can ride donkeys, or a horse and cart. We will take lots of food and have a big picnic. We shall stand atop the Ortahisar fortress and jump into the sky.

There is a big half-moon tonight.

Friday March 5th.

Kemal, the hunchback, keeps the fortress. We climbed up through the Hittite rooms and emerged under the big iron sign, covered in light bulbs.

Then he took me deep into the gully below the village and along a winding gorge. Eventually, we turned up from the stream and climbed through small, shelved fields of dry soil and vine stubs. Finally, high, high up in the yellow pinnacles he showed me Balkan – a group of several churches, some with scant frescoes, some with none, and also wine factories and living quarters. The pinnacles are so soft, they are slowly eroding, so that sometimes now only half a church stands open, perched high above the valley.



The frescoes intensify one's impressions. Most are severely defaced, but fresco is not particularly hardwearing under the best of conditions. Pictures of Christ, Mary, Joseph and the twelve apostles. In the most complete church, a tiny dome is hewn out, around and within which the Apostles stand. There are also graves, some for children, eroding to the open sun.

On our way up we found a tortoise, who seemed to be peering out of his own hewn cave, his shell.

We wandered back down the stream and sat picking bunches of springtime violets, which float in a glass on my table now, beside some apples we stopped for at Kemal's storehouse. And as we sat, I watched two women stoop to gather old roots, a dog asleep in the sun, two donkeys with their big saddles, and a man, spade after spade, slicing the soil. And I saw that the Christians, chip chipping out and painting their churches, were the same as these farmers, preparing their field.

Ortahisar has so much a sense of the turn of time – from high Erçiyes, which made the land the shape it is, to the glad boisterous Turks and their big lorries. Each is going about his own contribution, in his own time. From decay comes new growth – amongst the Hittite dwellings in the steep village, new homes are built, and the Christian churches are crumbling to dust in the valley, where violets grow.

Kemal is fine and smiling. He spent ten years in Istanbul, which has somehow left its traces, and now he is married with two children, one is two and the other just a baby. He is thirty-two. He skipped up and down the rocks at thrice my rate.



2018

Returning to the village four years later, I discovered that Kemal had died, the broken door of his storehouse sealed with cobwebs.

Sunday March 14th.

Yesterday I had a bath. The hot water heating system was caput, so the hotel chef heated a cauldron of water on a ring, and I stood and poured it over me in the old bath. It kept me warm for a while because by then it was getting very cold. Then in the evening a great snow blizzard blew up, and I went to bed about 9.30 just to keep warm.

This morning was crisp and cold with snow. Ali took me to his parents' house. Through the big wooden doors we stepped down into a dark place, with some sheep tied up in a corner. Then we went through a small door into the only living, and sleeping room. It was built a hundred years ago in Ali's grandmother's time, of good, solid stone. There is a stove, with the stovepipe running up and then right across the room, to pass out above the only little window. Ali opened this and threw seed to the pigeons outside. There is a large double bed, with a heart on the ironwork head, and the rest of the floor is covered in mattresses and quilts.

We took off our shoes and sat for a while, with apples, walnuts, raisins. Ali's mother was there, a lively old woman, who sat on her haunches with rheumatism, with her little grandson, whom she is looking after.

We went to Ali's sister's house next door, where she and another woman were making carpets. Two rough wooden looms were propped against the wall, and they were laboriously making really exquisite pieces. They would nimbly tie a row of pile to the strings already set on the loom, and then put a straight thread over the top of the pile, and thump it down hard, using a metal tool with teeth along the front. It takes them about three months to make a carpet roughly 4' x 6', and they sell them to shops in Ürgüp or Nevsehir. They have a beautiful trade. Many daughters and a little son of someone's ran about, with thumbs in their faces.

We went back to Ali's parents, and had a small meal of meat, cooked with egg, and bread. Ali's father came in, in his clothes of patches; he is very big, and he sat smiling and talking.

Thursday March 18th.

The horse had no exercise yesterday, so after eggs and çai, I went with Ali to the stable, a low and spooky place dug into the ground next to the house, full of dung. There we found the horse and cow tied up, and the father busy cutting out a new place for the sheep. Ali harnessed the horse to the cart, and then it began to rain. We took three heavy showers while we were out.

I don't think I've been in a horse-cart before. At first it felt as though only my skin held my bones together, and at times everything I saw was uncontrollably juddering up and down. After a while, though, it was better. We went down the steep road through Göreme, to the village of Avcılar, which is beautiful. The stream runs through it; the

mosque in the square is brash new, but somehow I didn't mind that. There was a wedding party up through the village in a shower of rain, with pipes and drums.

Ali's friend had gone to Nevsehir, so as it was raining we headed home. As we came up the hill the horse streamed about its buttocks with thick, soapy white sweat. At the house I took a little bread (ekmek) and meat, and some grape jam, tasting more like honey, which the mother had made. Her rheumatism is painful today – she waits for the warmth of summer.

Monday March 22nd.

A strange, thin, light-footed man in the village one day – his head was small and his face soft like plum-skin. He wore an ancient dusty suit that was very small for him. Down the bottom of the village, two small boys ran past me, stamping their small steps, and out across the great mole, shouting “Mustafa! Mustafa!”. Ahead of them was the man, his fragile figure bent forward as he made off at a hare's pace up the winding road. The two boys ran after, shouting, chucked a few stones as the man quickened his step, turned and stomped back.

Now and then a voice calls out in the square: “Ürgü-er-p! Ürgü-er-p!” or “evsehir-Nevsehi-i-r!”, as the minibus boys try for passengers.



The çai-house is constantly full of men playing trick-track or dominoes. The man who runs it goes about with a great black leather purse worn like a sporran all day, with cupfuls and empties. His nickname is Felek, which means God, and once someone scrawled in green paint on the wall outside, where people bring out the tables and chairs

to sit in the sun: ÇAI FELEK. He is quite tall, but thin, and people laugh and push him about a lot – and he laughs and tries to push them back.

Wednesday March 24th.

Yesterday morning I got up early and went for a walk down through the village, across the great mole in the gully, and wound up the dusty rut-worn road cut deep into the rock the other side, to look back at the village, teeming up its hill. It was just the time when half the village seemed to be making off up the road for a day in the fields – donkeys and carts, shouts and slow talk; the women with long white shrouds over their heads, the men astride their donkeys with their feet turned out close to the ground, the donkeys' little hooves tipping up the dust.



With everyone riding out to work, I found it very difficult to bring myself to take many photographs. It seemed to me a cheap intrusion – the camera being a matter-of-fact, mechanical block between any meaningful exchange of awareness. The peoples' timeworn context of going out to work in the fields was something very wonderful, which a clicking camera did no justice to. Trying to take pictures I found I was unable to appreciate their atmosphere, their message, as well as if I had been simply sitting by the roadside.

I began to think about the whole business of the twentieth century's communications explosion, and wondered whether we haven't in fact passed the stage when to know more and more about what is happening all over the world increases the individual's awareness – it has diluted his sense of locality, his own context and individuality. It seemed to me the people going up the road, shouting and talking, knew a whole world in itself. What was I doing, trying to make a scant imitation?

I met Mehmet and we went up through the village to where the new houses are, and outside one of them wedding celebrations were going on. The celebrations were being held outside the girl's family house, and then tomorrow she goes to Kayseri, to her husband.

It was a curious affair. First we watched three ropey musicians from Ürgüp, with a group of young fellows standing around. The first played an ancient clarinet, the second a kind of banjo, and the third a drum, which he thrapped with a pliable stick, and which looked more or less like an aluminium pot, with skin over the top. Their tune incessantly swayed and fell, and sometimes rose again. In front of them a boy of twelve or so, with a dirty cardigan and full-length dress on, had a castanet in each hand, and was thumping about to the music, in no apparently organised dance pattern. Once he turned a cartwheel.

Nearby a hundred women and young girls sat around, and a little way off the little girls played jump-rope. The women and girls all had their faces uncovered, and they were sitting there all afternoon. There were no older men, but twenty or thirty of the young fellows were up on a wall to get a good view. We joined them. An old woman was standing amidst the crowd, holding up all the wedding presents: six tumblers in a broken cardboard box; two shabby bedspreads, pink and blue; a big, shining steel pan, and so on. Then the bride came out of the house to sit amongst them. She wore vigorous red lipstick, had dark heavy eyebrows, and a white, kind of pop-up headdress, like a Madonna. Her dress was an incongruous Western-style suit, in chintzy pale yellow, which she swam about in, because it was too big. Meantime, all the fellows jostled on top of the wall.

This is the only social opportunity for the boys to see the girls. Pre-marital anything, even talking in the street, is forbidden, so these occasions at weddings are the only times when boys have the chance to make any kind of choice of their lifetime's partner. When a boy has made up his mind, at the family meal one day he will leave the room and refuse to eat, or else, fetch another fork and lay another place at the table, as a customary first sign that he wishes to marry. Then he will tell his mother which girl he has chosen. If the parents disapprove of the girl, he may not marry her, but providing a satisfactory arrangement is made between the parents of both the boy and the girl, the marriage may take place. Previous to the wedding, if the boy so much as sees the girl's face, the wedding may be cancelled.

This is how marriage is still practised in the villages of Turkey. I'm told that things are now more Western in the cities.

Then Ali came with the cart and horse for exercise, so we rode about for a while, until Mehmet and I went in for dominoes, and he beat me soundly.

Friday March 26th.

When I opened my door this morning, the sun was almost rising behind Mount Erçiyès, sending a great beam of light from the summit. And then it was as if the mountain opened once more, as the greatest fire burst from its midst, and the day began.

I bought biscuits and figs, and as there was no sign of Ali, I presumed he was staying at home to help his mother and with building the sheep place. So I set off for Zelve alone.

At first there was a high, high wind, as I climbed the steep, red and green-yellow ridge that divides the Ortahisar side from the Zelve, Avanos side. I came out onto a flat top, and walked over it to look down into Zelve, a smaller valley than I had imagined, filled with clustering pinnacles.

As I could see no easy way down, I decided to climb on over a further great ridge. I picked some wild flowers and pressed them in a book – a crocus, an iris, and a little blue flower I don't know. And I saw an eagle soaring on the up-current of the first ridge, where I saw one some days ago.

Suddenly I came out onto the top of the second ridge, and for a moment I was frightened, for the whole country loomed and stretched about me. Behind was the familiar peak of Uchisar. To the right, Erçiyes swept up like a great foaming wave, larger and higher in the sky at this angle. At my feet, the escarpment swept down away to a valley clustered with pinnacles. Avanos kept under the lee of its great red and blue ridge to the left, and ahead the green-yellows and reds and blues were brushed by the shadows of the clouds into a distant haze, where somewhere there would be Kayseri (or Caesarea as it was known in the time of St Paul). The dull red splashes through the rockscape made me think of the red stains under the slaughterhouse sluice. For a while I felt I had discovered myself riding on a great beast's back.

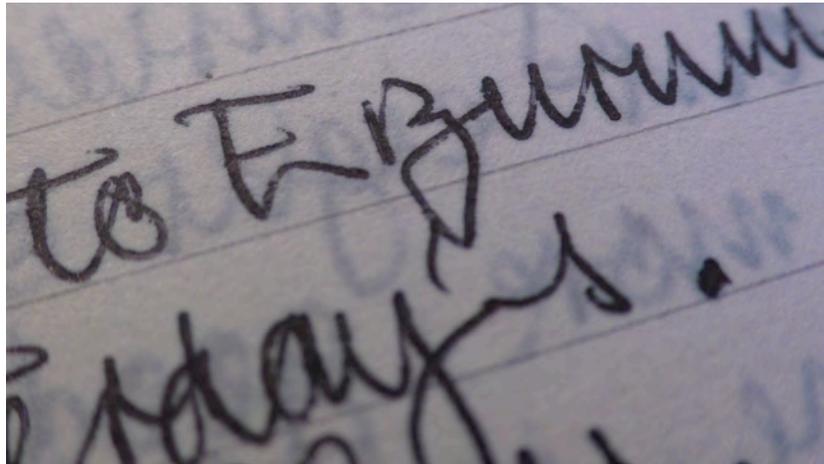
And the silence went right through me. Not the deep, enclosed silence of the church at Firkatan, but a wide silence extending to the heavens.



2018

This was the first time I can remember climbing a mountain on my own. Through my life I've loved trudging along high places, especially across The Black Mountains. The wind around my head, the unremitting contours, the deep sense of time.

Above Zelve, I looked out east into the distance. Somewhere down there was the rough road we had rattled along in our Land Rover.



1969

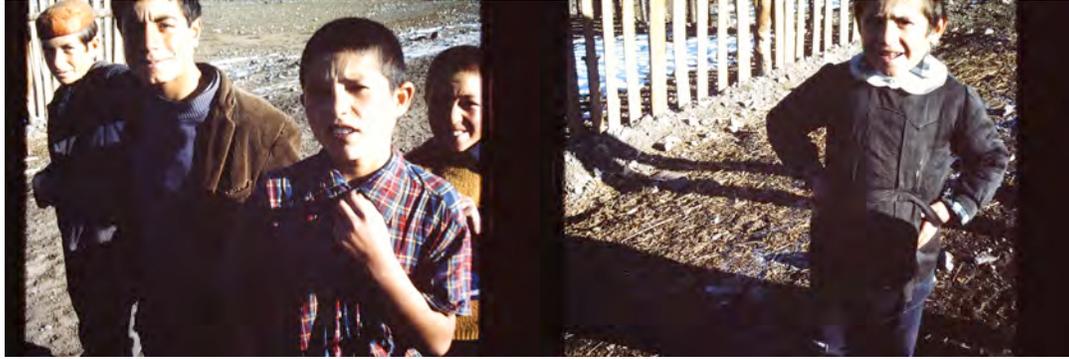
Saturday November 22.

We drove to Erzurum, an easy run compared to yesterday's. Silver birches, shadows in the valleys. Snow brushed on the mountains, like spilt flour. Picked up some colourful stones by a river. A loudspeaker blaring from a mosque over a village. Arrived late and parked outside the town.

Sunday November 23.

Last night we looked at a dead horse dump nearby. Heads, white and hard in the frozen moon, lips pealed back. Long thin legs. Skin-covered ribcages ice-cold. This morning we saw a boy waltzing along the road with a horse leg on his shoulder as a rifle.

Kids, masses of them. The boys all have skin-head hair. The girls are allowed to go about with their heads uncovered until about the age of 13, when all is covered up. The girls were very shy this morning and would turn tail almost at a turn of the head. At one point a man strolled up with a bright and shining gun, more of a status symbol than a used weapon, I think.



Turkish men tend to be very curious but standoffish when they see us, and polite when one talks to them. Turkish women, one never encounters. Young men and boys bustle and laugh, with endless unintelligible questions, but always with an undertone of politeness.

Into Erzurum for food. The shops look tremendous, with fruit decked outside, and cartons, bottles, combs, clothes pegs, tottering to the ceiling within. When we buy wine, it is brought from a dusty corner, as no-one drinks alcohol here. In Erzurum we met an American couple in a huge old van, trundling around as a way of life, on their way to Afghanistan. We had no hash for them.

We moved on, through Agri, and made the Iranian border, (across wide plains fringed by snowy peaks), by ten to five. We finally drove into Iran, putting our clocks forward an hour and a half, at around 9.30 pm.

We waited for ages in the light green, smoke-filled Turkish customs room, Yugoslav lorry drivers standing around. Eventually, an evil man in a shapeless suit, black-bristled and creased face, trudged out to the Land Rover. He insisted on seeing the engine number, which is somewhere in the folds of the engine, and which no-one has ever found. When he couldn't find it, he trudged back into the customs room, and that, for the moment, seemed to be that. There were a number of much pleasanter looking customs men around, who were perhaps the foul man's juniors. Soon one of these came along, and it was obvious from his expression that he thought old bristle face was a bit of a case. He sidled out to the Land Rover with us, shone his torch a few moments for form's sake, asked for a packet of English fags, and waved us into Iran with a good gleam in his eye. The Iran side was much simpler. We had to sign an undertaking not to sell the car, or to work in Iran.

We drove 20 kilometres to the first drear, desolate town, and parked just outside it. While we were eating, two or three faces peered in through the back. They wanted food, fags, to sell us their gloves, anything. We said no. They cheerily waved goodbye. We turned back to our food and in seconds they and the fridge-box, which was just outside the window, were gone without trace. Our first impression of Iran.

Monday November 24.

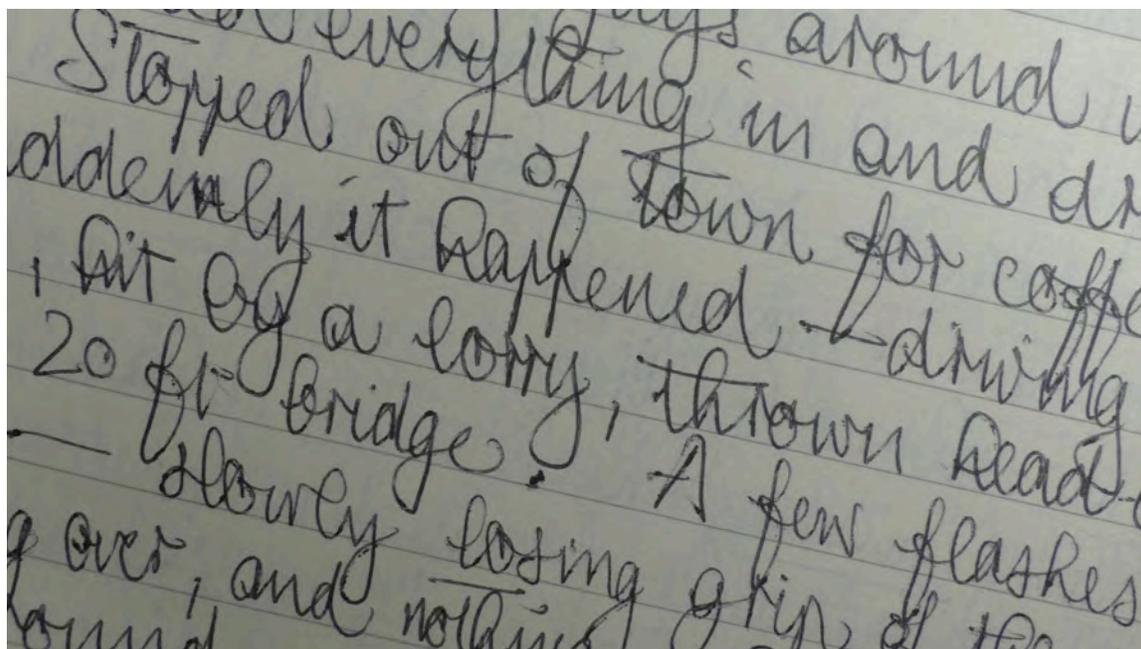
The impression was deepened this morning. We had left one small air vent open in the front. I peered through and saw a towel slowly moving through the vent. I shouted and the culprit ran off with nothing.

We met the Americans again and had a roadside chat. Drove, on good roads through Tabriz – a dull town – and stopped by a small place on the road to Tehran. The first nice Persian we've seen turned up soon after we'd parked and told us to lock up securely.

Tuesday November 25.

Crowds of young guys around when we woke. Crammed everything in and drove off in a huff. Stopped out of town for coffee. And then suddenly it happened – driving along about 10.30, hit by a lorry, thrown head-over-tail over a 20 ft bridge. A few flashes of consciousness – slowly losing grip of the road, a slight keeling over, and then nothing. Staggering around, lots of people around; a swig of whisky; asking Rick what country we were in. Vaguely saw the Land Rover, a twisted wreck of metal, and the roof lying somewhere quite different. Remember picking up my coat from some pile in the dust. Sat torn and bloody in a bumpy bus – Mike's back agony on the back seat. Some way into Zanjan. To some police station and then with Mike in a cramped little ambulance van to the hospital. Stitches in my head.

Stayed in hospital from Tuesday to Sunday, badly bruised, Mike flat on his back, trying to work out what had happened, what to do next.....



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Stopped out of town for coffee
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over, and nothing

2018

I didn't contact my parents. I had enough to deal with. I didn't need their anxiety as well. I wrote a letter, I think, perhaps a fortnight later, by which time I could send definite news. What was the point in worrying them unduly?

I never made a phone call while I was away. I wrote a few postcards and some airmail letterforms. I'm not sure whether you can still buy letterforms. They were made of light paper, so were cheaper than ordinary mail. There was limited space to write on, and then you folded them over and licked the glue on three sides to seal them down. Just enough space to write a quick impression, but not much more.

On reaching a city, you went to the main post office, to the 'poste restante' section and showed your passport. If you were lucky, someone might have written and it was a piece of magic to suddenly see familiar handwriting on an envelope. News from home – it was a rare thing.

One time my dad wrote with a definite request that I communicate more frequently. I tried, I think, but not very hard. I was alright, so why should anyone be worried? I wasn't thinking it through. My parents must have been so anxious, week after week with no word.

Decades later, in 2000, I was walking along a street in New Delhi with our daughter, Lucy. "Let's go in here, Dad" she said suddenly, and skipped up a dark and steep flight of stairs. Nervously, I followed, wondering where we were going. At the top was a small room full of computers. Lucy tapped away for twenty minutes or so, and as we left said she'd been in touch with friends in Thailand, Australia, Japan.

Back in 1969, in Zanjan, we were on our own. A few years ago, I wrote a fuller account of those days than I had managed at the time.

THE POMEGRANATE written in 2010

In 1969, my life lay inert as a blank page. I had no real idea of what to do with it. It was scary, and free. Each day was deep with experience. We placed them, one after another in a line - new roads, new towns - always riding on the brink, on the edge, never knowing what would happen next.

We'd driven through Europe, and across Central Turkey, and were two days into Iran. We were travelling across a wide stony desert. For some reason, the dead straight road traversed the desert along the top of a high embankment, the tarmac rather too narrow for two vehicles to pass easily. Ahead of us, an approaching lorry shimmered in the heat.

Mike was in the passenger seat, I was in the centre, frying on top of the engine, and Rick was driving. A week ago in Istanbul we'd bought a pomegranate, and the day before we'd chopped it open. I leant forward, unrestricted by a seatbelt, because no-one had them then, and gouged out some of the bright red seedy fruit from where it lay on the dash-board. My fingers were stained red. As I raised my head to drop the fruit into my mouth, I noticed the lorry again, about two hundred yards from us now, throwing up clouds of dust from its wheels. I crunched on the pomegranate. It's a frustrating fruit, juicy, and with a delicate taste, yet with hard seeds, which stick in the teeth.

I was easing a seed loose with my tongue, when I noticed Rick's hands on the steering-wheel. They were making little jerks. Then I looked out of the window, and saw that the lorry, which was fast approaching, wasn't giving way. It was driving straight down the centre of the narrow strip of tarmac. Rick's hands were jerking because he was trying to pull over, but if he pulled too far, the wheels would lose their grip on the gravelly surface on the side of the road, and we would plummet off the embankment.

From here on everything in my memory is in slow motion. Rick is trying to pull over, and the lorry thunders on, in the centre of the road. As it roars past, it catches the front wing of the Land Rover, directly in front of Mike. We immediately skid off the road. Just at this moment we come to the parapet of a bridge, and we descend down the steep bank to the side of it. Then the whole Land Rover goes into a forward somersault, and lands, twenty feet below, back on its wheels in a dry riverbed.

For a moment, everything is quiet. Then Rick gets out. I look at him blankly. I hear shouting in the distance, and then I climb out too. Mike hasn't moved. Dazed, I look around. People are stopping on the road above. There's no lorry there. Men are coming down the steep embankment, and they are picking up our things - blankets, clothes, pillows, which are strewn all over the place - and carrying them back up to their cars. Rick is pulling out our passports and money from our hiding place under the bed, and grabbing a couple of hold-alls. Then Mike lets out a yell of pain.

Up on the road, a big bus has stopped. Some students have come down and they speak some English. We ease Mike out of the Land Rover. With someone either side of him, he makes it up the slope, and lies down on the back seat of the bus. We get in too, and as the bus pulls away, we see the crowd below us, picking through all our stuff.

Mike has obviously hurt his back. He is bounced about on the rear seat of the bus as we drive for two hours to Zanjan, the next town. The hospital is clean and white, but has no x-ray machine. They heavily bandage Mike's torso.

After several days, arrangements are made, and he takes a taxi several hours to Tehran, flies back to London, on to Jersey, and there an x-ray tells him he has fractured two vertebrae. He's had a lucky escape.

In fact we all had. During those days in the hospital, the truth began to sink in. The roof of the Land Rover was re-enforced, because on the top was an old camera platform, for filming horse races and so on. If it had been a standard roof, it could have buckled while we somersaulted, and we'd have been crushed.



2018

I think these photos must have been taken by Rick. I think that's his shadow in one of them. He went back to the crash a day or two later. When we

finally got home to England, I had the film developed and found these photos amongst the others. They are slides, and I've squinted at them a few times over the years, holding them up to the light. Now I've got a digital scanner, and have looked at them closely for the first time.

When I wrote the piece in 2010, I thought that the roof platform had saved our lives. Looking now, though, the roof isn't there. Going back, also, to the original diary, I see it says: "Vaguely saw the Land Rover, a twisted wreck of metal, and the roof lying somewhere quite different." I can't believe how we came through.

Rick's big camera was stolen from the crash, so the only photos that survived of the trip were taken with my little Instamatic. Two films came home with me, twenty-four slides on each one. The camera itself was pinched from my bag when we were homeward-bound in Afghanistan, with a third film in it, so they were lost. Most of the time I never thought to take photos anyway. This was so far from our digital world.

2010 continued

The police went out and towed what was left of the Land Rover back into town, parking it outside the police station, which was directly next-door to the hospital. The word went round, and a number of shady blokes sidled onto the ward. "Land Rover?" they mumbled under their breath, with a thumb rubbed against a finger. I could do nothing. I had a stamp in my passport, saying I was driving through with a vehicle. There were heavy fines for foreigners attempting to trade cars. In any case, I was going to have to get a special customs document prepared, which would allow me out of Iran without the car. We were beholden to the chief of police.

There were a few things, though, which had survived the roadside plundering, and which were not part of the vehicle itself. Diesel cans, air mattresses, tins of baked beans, which had been donated before we set off. Bits of our fast dispersing corner of home. These things we could legitimately sell, and we staged an auction one day in the police-chief's front office. The shady blokes took it all, and we came away with the equivalent of thirty pounds.

I spent the week in hospital dodging Penicillin, which seemed to be everywhere. In the end I had a sign put up behind my bed, saying in Farsi: "Allergic to Penicillin". This did the trick for a while, until the day Rick and I left. I had quite a gash in my head, and a doctor was re-dressing it. He suddenly dowsed the wound with white powder. Luckily Rick saw what was happening, and as I began to keel over, he remonstrated with the doctor, who quickly got the swabs out. Ten minutes later, having regained my balance, and with a big white bandage around my head, we left the hospital,

and left town. No doubt the highest bidder took the Land Rover, and the police-chief pocketed the cash.

Part of the essence of this kind of travelling is that you're never totally sure what each day will bring. You learn to live lightly, and to be ready to adapt to changing circumstances. Our car accident was an instance of this. We'd set out from England with a plan, and the Land Rover had been our own little patch of home. Now they were both blown away. We'd been going to travel around India, photographing and writing about Oxfam projects, and now we had no camera and no transport. The trip became a different thing. Perhaps in some ways it became more vivid, because our comfort zone, our piece of home, was gone.

We took a bus to Tehran. We had decided to go on as far as we could on buses and trains. In Tehran we found a cheap hotel and wandered about, drinking thick soup, topped with yoghurt, and Iranian tea, which comes in little glasses, without milk; you dip a sugar lump in it, put this in your mouth, and drink the tea through the sugar.

2018

Every teahouse in Tehran had two prominent framed photographs, one of the Shah, (or Shahanshah, King of Kings) and another of the Shah's small son, in an attempt to ensure the son's succession. A kind of politics unfamiliar to us. If you toed the line, your freedom was restricted, but you lived with a degree of security.

Next day we boarded a long-distance bus, which was to take us south through Iran to Zahedan, a small town close to the Pakistan border. From there, we were told, we could take a train to the border, and then another train the four hundred miles to Quetta, the first town of any size in Pakistan.

We left Tehran about one pm, and drove with stops for meals, until we reached Kerman around eight the next morning. It was stony desert the whole way, with remote walled villages, shaped from the land. Once, during the night, an argument broke out amongst the crew. They stopped the bus while they shouted at each other. In the end, one of the drivers got out, shouting all the while, and we drove on. It was the middle of nowhere, and the night was cold.

The dawn was beautiful, discovering a clear depth of sky, and the glowing promise of warmth. It was the first of the month of Ramadan, during which Moslems should take no food during daylight hours. On reaching Kerman, we wondered where we could eat. Then we met a couple of high school boys, who wanted to practise their scanty English with us, and they took us to a dark back room, crowded with men tucking into omelettes and chapatti. We joined them.

We wandered around the town, with our two friends, until the bus left at 2.0 pm. It was a public holiday, so everyone stood about talking; everyone that is who was

male – in Moslem countries women are rarely seen in the streets, let alone standing talking. We went to see some lions and elephants, part of a circus that was in town. They were at the stadium, which was milling with people eager to enjoy themselves. But it seemed there was little to enjoy. We pushed through and caught a glimpse of the two elephants, who were in a kind of sunken pit; maybe it was once a swimming pool – I couldn't really tell with so many excited people all around. We elbowed through the other crush and just made out a lion through cracks in its boarded-up cage. Then we sat in the park, a small area of gravel paths, and parched grass to be kept off. Soon we had a crowd of high school kids around us. They knew something of Shakespeare, which was interesting, and they showed us a physics book, full of Boyle and Archimedes. Next morning, they all had some big exam to take.

The road was indicated by little more than where the wheels of lorries and buses had pushed stones to the side. We went up and down over the small, barren hills of the desert, and the bus kept up a relentless speed, which shuddered its whole frame, and made a kind of din that eventually becomes a headache, rather than a noise. On the whole journey from Kerman, reaching Zahedan around 1.30 am, we must have passed no more than half-a-dozen lorries – and no cars, never cars.

Zahedan suddenly appeared, a straggle of white lights in the darkness. We trundled down the silent main street to the bus station, and were shown to a small hotel – or “OTEL”, as the sign said, standing out from the complex strokes of Farsi, to beckon the Western traveller. We shook the door-handle and brought a bleary-eyed doorman from his bed under the stairs. There were no rooms left, so he took us over the street to a place where shady types were snoring heavily beneath a bright, naked bulb on a long wire from the high ceiling. There were two empty beds amongst them.

We had a good, though short sleep. It was great to lie down, as we hadn't since Tehran. At 7.0 am we had tea, egg and chapatti at the hotel – and I almost broke a tooth on a stone in my egg. We discovered we would have to take the bus to the border, as the train had unfortunately stopped running. As we left Zahedan, we went around a large roundabout and along a hundred yards of fine tarmac, before we hit the stones again. Also, there was a trelliswork, iron archway over the road, looking something like an overhead cable carrier. One finds this kind of thing outside most Iranian towns. It's all part of the Shahanshah's new image for the country, but I'm not quite sure what it's meant to prove or do.

We battered our way across the plain, the railway line gleaming smoothly beside us. An occasional camel-rider loped along in the distance. It was as if the ground, rather than the camel was moving, and that the camel and its rider were suspended, walking timelessly through the desert. Halfway to the border we passed a taxi that had broken down. The wild crowd of men in the bus sent up a shout of glee and laughter as we blared our horn and clouded them with dust. It was a young Malaysian couple, and she was not only pregnant but ill. On seeing the bus, they had decided to pay for the extra comfort of the taxi. None of us then realised this was to be the last comfort any of us

would see for some while. The taxi repaired, the couple turned up at the customs a short way behind us.

We were an hour or so at the few buildings and trees of the Iranian customs, while they wetted their fingers on their tongues, and frowned through the pile of passports. Then we were back in the bus, as the actual border was another featureless half-hour over the plain.

We drew up in front of a small concrete building and all the baggage was brought down from the roof. Someone official pointed to a group of mud huts a little way off. That was Pakistan, he said.

The railway line continued unbroken into the haze of the Pakistan sun. We walked over to the huts to find the customs and see what time the train came. There were no notices anywhere, but a number of people were standing about, and we found one who spoke some English. A train? He looked at us questioningly. There was, of course, the water train that came through once a week, he said, but that took no passengers. Apart from that he knew of none. Then, just how were we to travel, we asked him. We had to go on; returning to Iran was impossible, as our transit visas had been invalidated as we left the country. There was a bus, he said, which might come in the evening, and then leave first thing in the morning; but on the other hand, maybe it wouldn't come, in which case, we'd just have to see if it came the next day.

So there we were, just a few huts in the desert, with no way out until the next morning, or maybe the morning after that, or maybe sometime later still. There weren't even customs to occupy us; they were eighty-five miles up the road.

We looked around. There was a gruesome little hut; the darkness inside almost had to be pushed against. For a rupee one could join many others in lying in the thick dust of its floor. We decided we would look for somewhere else. Next to this, the only food was available – a large black stew pot, into which scraps of bone and meat were being dropped. Flies whined hysterically over the pile of meat still to be stewed. For as long as we could, we would go hungry.

A short way off was another line of huts. Halfway to them I came to an ancient, stone-dented signboard, on which one made out the words, in English: "Goodbye. You are now leaving Pakistan. Drive on the right." It looked ridiculous – and then I suddenly discovered I was standing in the middle of the road. From where I was, I could just make out two vague lines of stones over the barren ground. So that, sometime soon we hoped, was to be our way to Quetta. In the other line of huts, we found one no-one seemed to be using. It had no door, not much kind of a roof, and rat-holes in the corners, but it would be free, and without crowds of prying fingers, so we decided we'd sleep there.

We sat down. A figure crouched nearby, hung about with a few rags, his half-closed eyes fixed on us through strands of his frenzied, jet-black, mud-filled hair, which

hung in front of his face like dead things. A donkey, with sores on its back, plaintively brayed about the heat.

And then, wonderfully, the bus clattered out of the plain, late in the afternoon. The whole thing was delicately detailed in white dust: the bus itself, its towering roof of baggage, and the thirty or forty people that emerged. There were some Danes and Swedes, who would have disintegrated if one had touched them – they were nothing but dust. They said they had no money, and were going back to Europe. We kicked in the rat-holes in our hut and lay down. Nothing disturbed us, and the night was not too cold.

When we went over to the bus next morning, we found it swarming with people. It was like flies creeping over a giant bull, with the flies somehow in control. There were fifteen or twenty traders, desert-worn men with caution set in their eyes. They wound lengths of grimy cloth about their heads; their black and brown dhotis hung loose and limp with dirt to their ankles, and they wore pointed, black plastic shoes. The roof was being piled high with their vast bundles, wrapped in tarpaulins, or great pieces of cloth. It took two or three men to heave each one up the little ladders at the back of the bus, and it seemed no end of bundles might have been lifted up, with ceaseless shouts and gesticulations, before anyone thought of how much the roof would hold, or the engine would pull. If it hadn't been for the two grease-dripping mechanics, who had the great bonnet propped open, making final, careful polishings to the worn and tired engine, we'd have sat where we were for good.

But even their concern was only for the engine. The bus itself was past the stage of damage being noticeable. It was like old age as it sometimes appears in people; time takes on a permanency for them, and it seems they were never younger, nor ever could grow older.

We climbed in. The door was halfway along one side – a double-door of wood, metal and the points of nails. One climbed a few dented steps. Inside, it was like a shrunken iron foundry. The whole thing was black, sheet metal: the roof, the floor, and the tiny seats, which would rip open one's leg if one wasn't looking. The roof was about five feet high, and every space on the floor was piled with more bundles, so bent double, we made our way to some seats at the back. Straight upright, I could just sit down, with my knees hard against the seat in front.

We set off. The windows, just plates of glass in flimsy, wooden frames, immediately started a deafening clatter. They rattled themselves open as soon as one pulled them shut, so the dust had full sway. In about ten minutes, everything inside was white. I put a handkerchief over my face, but that was just worse, as the air was so hot.

Every now and then we stopped, and men and children, their clothes colourless with the desert, came running from a few squat, crumbling huts, some way from the road. Their eyes, their whole selves, were drawn in from the brightness. The shrouded forms of the womenfolk were motionless by the huts, their arms raised in feint protest against the sun. A couple of men would elbow their way into the bus, arguing a

place for themselves on someone's bundle on the floor, and we would start shatteringly on our way once more.

Mid-morning, we were suddenly at the customs post. We climbed out, the vibrations continuing in our bones and heads for some while. In front of the wooden veranda of the customs office, a notice-board read, in chipped paint: "Nok kundi Customs Post". It stood within a small plot, surrounded by stones that had at some distant time been laid out to look vaguely ornamental. They were a last, hoarse whisper of an English garden. Behind the building was a row of sand-silted cars – Swiss, British, German – abandoned just through want of some document. Their owners had had no choice. They couldn't go further without the correct papers, and couldn't go back with an expired Iranian visa. The cars were trapped. It was strange to see pieces of Europe sinking into the desert.

They were unloading the bus. The great bundles were set out in rows in front of the customs office, and the traders stood in groups, their arms folded, their dhotis sweeping down to the points of their shoes. The head customs official sat himself down behind a large table on the veranda, and a couple of his juniors hung around with rifles slung over their shoulders. None of them seemed particularly interested in us, and they had no wish to search our bags.

We sat down and began to wait, glad of the shelter of the veranda. All the bundles were being meticulously examined, and the officials and traders held an incessant argument. Then we got talking to a German, who was also on the bus. He said that he had been through Nok kundi several times before, and knew how things worked. It would be many hours before we were ready to leave. So we went off through the heat towards the low, mud buildings of the village, to look at least for tea.

And then the German told us all. The customs-men were not, as might seem, loyal servants of the government. The argument between them and the traders was in fact over bribes. The traders were, more truly, smugglers and the customs-men were just making a little extra on the side. They could well use this, apparently, as the government salary was a pittance. There was a small, battered suitcase, which two men lifted with difficulty. Gold, from the Persian Gulf, has a large market in India and Pakistan. In both countries there is the habit of holding a family's wealth in the form of gold bracelets, earrings, nose-pieces and so on, worn by the women. For Hindus, in fact, gold is sacred. The bundles held quantities of Western clothes. The German himself seemed to hold his heavy, bulging briefcase carefully. He said the smugglers sometimes took bicycles through the mountains, to avoid paying the bribes, but that if they were caught, they were more or less done for.

We came to the village – long, crumbling lines of buildings, with wide areas of rubble ground, and rubbish, between. A big lorry was standing there. In this part of the world, the lorries, rickshaw taxis, and buses to some extent, are taken as a real opportunity for something special. Their owners compete to see whose is decked out the most with bright, gaudy trinkets and decorations. They are covered in little pictures, in

clashing colours. Plastic flowers and bunches of grapes sprout from every corner. Tassels swing from the roof and around all the windows, and every conceivable shape of toy dog and dolly hangs stiffly on a string, like a dead thing. I remember one lorry in particular: the vague shape of an aeroplane, cut out in tin, was tacked to its side, and underneath one read in bold letters “Jet Boeing 707”. Our bus had decided it was too old for this sort of thing. Just a feint memory of red roses clung on by the steering wheel.

In the village a few little children ran about, keeping close to the walls through some vague instinct that it was safer there. They showed us their dark, wary eyes and sucked their thumbs. Mostly, though, life had shrivelled up in the sun.

Then we found an old sign, which told us of the ‘Tulist Hotel’, and a few black tables and benches took refuge under a torn, black tarpaulin, stretched on sticks. The tables receded into the dimness, where a rug hung over a doorway, and kept in dimmer things still.

We sat down and ordered ‘çai’. To one side was a large cooking range made of mud. A man sat cross-legged on the top, with two holes in front of him. Inside, two fires smouldered, fed through other holes in the side of the range. The enormous kettle boiled over one fire, and a stew-pot over the other. The man was busy cooking the stew. He pulled a large jawbone, still with its row of teeth, from the steaming pot, and with his fingers ripped off some remaining meat and gristle. Then he threw the bone past the tables into the dust outside. The only animals we saw in the village were a few rib-cage goats. The German fed one a piece of paper; it scrumpled it down and stood pleadingly for more. The ‘çai’ came in tiny, chipped teapots, with string or wire tying the lids to the handles, and with small, handle-less cups. We were thirsty.

Near the cooking range, a little boy sat on the floor. His arms and legs, one hardly noticed. He was just a tiny chest, heaving life feebly from the ground, and a large, keen-eyed head, which somehow still carried the wisp of a smile. He stared upward at the towering men above him. When we came back hours later, he was in just the same place.

At the customs office, the bargaining went on. We crept from shade to shade. Finally, an angry red sun on the horizon brought the day to earth.

By about 8.30 pm, the bus was piled high with contraband once more, and we were ready to start. It was over three hundred miles to Quetta. We would be there by five in the morning, said someone, or maybe six, thought another. Later nine was thought more likely. We finally reached Quetta around two in the afternoon.

Just before we left an argument started, one man sitting in the bus, another standing outside. Between them they managed to smash one of the plate-glass windows, so the dust had an even easier job.

Somehow the night passed. The cramped seat, the shuddering bus, the dust and the noise went into hour upon hour, and one existed in a haze of consciousness.

When we stopped two or three times for 'çai', the dim outlines of buildings and the jumping shadows of men crouched around small fires, abruptly appeared. Finally the sun rode up once more from distant hills. We stopped and walked about in the emptiness. Some of the men laid pieces of cloth on the stones and knelt, their foreheads to the earth, then stood, their lips quickly and silently playing out the ancient prayers. Then moments later we clattered on again.

A tin of oil split open on the roof just over our heads, and seeped through the cracks, covering the back of someone's coat, before they realised what was happening. The tin was thrown off and we drove on.

On the seat in front of us, there was an old woman with her daughter and granddaughter. They had a large bundle, full of ragged belongings, which the old woman tied up with big knots, dumped on the seat and climbed onto. When they sit down the women's legs just disappear. The daughter's huge baby trampled mercilessly on her lap, with its fat, powerful legs, then clutched a breast to its mouth for a moment, substituted a thumb, and slept.

Both the women wore black saris. The younger one had several gold earrings in holes punched through her lobes and also around the tops of each ear. She also had rings, bracelets and a nose-piece through more punched holes. The baby had little trousers of bright blue velvet. They were soaking wet so the old woman hung them limp on a bar across the window to dry. Not much later, she bought some tangerines from a man holding them up in weighing-scales at the window and wrapped them in the little trousers. Then she gave the baby a tangerine to eat.

There was a boy of about ten, a budding young smuggler, who spent his time baiting the two women, while the men watched and chuckled. There was no seat for him, so he tried edging a space next to the old woman. She pushed at him, with a few shrill, angry words, and the chuckles went round. Then he took to blowing clouds of smoke at their faces, and deafening their ears with wailing, high-pitched singing. The men loved him.

Elsewhere, another woman and her baby spent most of the time curled up, asleep on the seat, so they looked like just another bundle.

Then there was another German, somewhere in his thirties, who wore a torn, white mackintosh, and a head-cloth like T.E. Lawrence. He said they had refused to let him into Iran as he had no money, so back to Quetta was the only way he could go. He scrounged for 'çai' and cigarettes. As the day progressed, the engine required more and more attention. Every time we stopped, the German looked up and said "Oh, it's not pwosseeble!"

The pregnant Malaysian girl stayed in her seat at the front from Nok kundi to Quetta. She sat upright and still the whole way.

As we came towards Quetta, we progressed more and more slowly. The plain gave way to small, craggy hills and the road wound up and down, clinging precariously to their sides. Once, bounding up a hill, to get to the top without spluttering, a lorry coming down drove off the road to avoid us. We stopped and pushed it back on its way.

And then, incredibly, there was Quetta in the distance, spread out in a valley, indistinct in the heat. We descended the last hill and roared across the plain.

Just a few miles from the town, we stopped. This time it wasn't a breakdown, it was a customs post. Every bundle on the roof was brought down again. The post had been set up because Nok kundi was known to be unreliable. But here too the smugglers' wads appeared, and the bargaining began. This time it took only an hour and the bus was loaded up once more.

The first sign we were approaching the town was an ancient roadside hoarding: "Imdad Hotel, New Style Flush System", with a picture of a Western toilet complete with cistern. Had we reached civilization? Ten minutes later we booked into the Imdad. It had a cracked and decayed sense of grandeur long gone, with a circular fountain in an inner courtyard. But the fountain was dry, and as we were soon to discover, so were the bathroom taps, and the new style toilets too.

2018

Looking back, it sounds like we were having a dangerous and scary time. The car crash was dangerous, extremely, but otherwise we were simply taking things day by day, without the chance to stand back and consider.

It's a bit like my memories of severely burning both my hands in 1954 as a two-year-old – touching the unguarded bars of an electric fire, and subsequently losing all the fingers of my left hand. I spent years, until I was ten, in and out of hospital, sometimes there for months at a time. Mum and Dad, full of regret, would have been constantly yearning that I had never had the accident, but for me it was simply the life I knew, and I went on day by day.

Last week I had a surprise. Ali and I went to a craft fair, with many displays of weaving, beautiful work in wood, and jewellery. One of the jewellers was making outstanding pieces, but I was interested also in her name: Sarah Pulvertaft. I spoke to her directly: "You have an unusual name. I knew an orthopaedic surgeon called Guy Pulvertaft." Her eyes lit up. "He was my great uncle!" I showed her my hands, explaining that Guy had given me the tools to live my life.



We talked for some time. Rather than prosthetics, Guy had patiently reconstructed my left hand, using bone from my leg and skin from my stomach, to give me a firm grip, with never any numbness. He also made adjustments to the wonky fingers of my right hand. All in all, he worked a little miracle and gave me equipment that has served me loyally for six decades. As I said to Sarah, orthopaedic surgeons restore people's lives.

Ali came over and we talked about her dad, Reggie Merryweather, who had also been an orthopaedic surgeon, and knew Guy. There are to this day many people around Gloucestershire who remember Reggie, with their working arms and legs as witness to his skills. Perhaps all this is partly why I asked his daughter to marry me.

We talked about disability. I think the notion of being disabled can often set people apart in an unnecessary way. We all have differences, our own particular features. We're all human.

In 1969, as we travelled further east, I saw people who were so maimed, so different, it was impossible not to be shocked. There were stories of gangs kidnapping children, cutting off their hands or feet, and putting them on the streets to beg. There were people with leprosy, fingerless hands. I looked a bit like them. Sometimes people would notice my hands, and there was a common understanding. As we went into West Pakistan and then India, it was as though the notion of what it is to be human, and human suffering, took on a deeper form. Looking at it from my perspective, it seemed that at best it was a degree of acceptance that kept people going, from day to day. I've often felt that the notion of acceptance has helped me get through.

Green notebook, 1969

Today we saw a bearded man sitting in the street. In size, he was no bigger than a large baby.

Quetta. The town and its district were under British supervision until 1955 (being called the Baluchistan Agency). It is an evocative shell of colonialism. The Imdad Hotel has large, bare, cream-walled rooms with fans, set around its extinct fountain. Wide, dusty streets, with little stores, selling combs and Lipton's tea bags. The signs are almost all in English and tend to have a naivety about them. On the side of a bus in bold black letters: "LOCAL BUS". Then, "The PERFECT typing centre", "The Fancy Furniture Store", and "The Medical and Provision Store", which had a picture of a giraffe, with a bandage and safety pin around its neck, and a lot of pills going into its mouth.

Karachi. When men greet each other in the street, they always hug each other, on the right left and right side, and then shake each other by the hand. Occasionally one sees men walking hand in hand.

Sometimes men squat by a wall, urinating. As one walks through the streets, smells waft out: spiced frying, urine, incense, an open sewer, fruit and horse dung. Hopeless destitution is accepted as a matter of course. Cripples struggle about. One with no legs pushes himself around on a little board on wheels. Others without feet or fingers. Men lie sleeping on the pavements. One man we saw sleeping today – he had no eye, and flies festered around the hole.

We saw a large open space being used for worship instead of a mosque, as the only mosques in Karachi are small, in the back streets. Only recently becoming a large Muslim city (since Indian Independence from Britain in 1947, and Partition into India and West and East Pakistan) Karachi has no large old mosques.

China and Russia do a good trade with Pakistan. "The best buy, Russian TV sets" says one flashing advert. There are several Chinese dentists. They hang a sign outside, showing shining red lips and a set of white teeth, except for two gold ones.

We came upon a group of little boys playing cricket. The wicket was on one side of the road and the bowler on the other. It was quite a busy street. Pakistanis are very keen on cricket. On the large open space near the YMCA last Sunday morning, there must have been ten games in progress – some all dressed up in whites. They had even put up a little tent pavilion.

The prevailing noise of daytime Karachi is the motorcycle engines of the auto-rickshaws. I woke at night, and it was prayer time. A hum of life pervaded the air, and distinguished in this were the sounds of cars, trains, train whistles, the honk of boats in the harbour, dogs, cock crows, and over all of these the call to prayer of the mosque loudspeakers, near and far, right across the city.

Karachi to Bombay, deck class, on British India's ship Dwarka.

At 2.0 pm we moved into the customs shed, a seething mass of women in flowing saris, wearing gold in their ears and noses, and around their wrists; of men in Western dress, with their hair so brylcreamed it looks like liquorice; of bare-bottomed babies, some with gold even now; and above all, of baggage. Great bed rolls, metal trunks, buckets, cases.

We moved onto the ship. A cloth spread on the deck meant that the space was reserved, and every available place seemed to be covered. There was one man reserving space for 35. We settled for a corner by the main cargo hatch, and watched them unloading and loading. They took out sacks of dates; a lot had split open and the dates spilled out. The crane swung net-loads of sacks over the deck, almost braining people. They seemed oblivious until the cargo was about to hit them. When finished, they covered the hatch. There was a fantastic scrum for space on top – people and bags everywhere; we came off quite well. They pulled a canvas awning over the whole deck.



Even on deck, all the women and girls are in fabulous dresses and saris. In one family, two little girls were wearing green bows in their hair and wonderful green satin dresses, with gold braid. Next morning these came off, and trousers and thigh-length smocks went on, in pink satin with silver tinsels. I haven't seen any on the ship, but in Karachi one sometimes saw men in a fabulous style of coat: standing collar buttoned to the neck; tight sleeves; tight body and then flaring to just above the knee. Lots of buttons down the front.



There is a crowd of liquorice haired men next to us on the deck, sporting every kind of coiffure, and also electrical devices – tape recorders and huge transistor radios. They've been working on oilrigs in the Persian Gulf, returning home to Bombay.

We've had the Indian coast a few miles on our left most of the day – just a constant yellow line, with bits of green.

In the dim, early morning light, the surface of the sea was like cobwebs in dew. Then I watched the sun spring from the horizon. In about a minute it freed itself. As it struggled through the haze, it appeared like actual fire, not perfectly round.

At lunch we were talking to a Moslem man who moved from Bombay to Pakistan at Partition in 1947, now returning to visit relatives. He said that God had created Mankind as one, and not to have petty quarrels like those between Pakistan and India.

In the corner of the eating area, below decks, a large pipe is hanging down, made of sacking. When the meal is done, the metal trays in which the food is served are thrown under the tap and it is turned full on. In a rush of water, half-eaten pieces of chapatti, rice and beans go everywhere. The only drinking and washing tap is just by all of this.

Somehow the day has passed. We arrive in Bombay in the morning....

The land had disappeared again during the night and the first sign that we were nearing it again were the shapes of fishing vessels on the horizon, glowing in the first sun, their huge sails motionless in the calm air. They looked as they must have done for centuries.

The first we saw of Bombay was large, dull buildings and a fleet of destroyers. We docked around 9.0 am. I had expected boat slums, but there were none and the harbour was very clear. A massive, impatient queue formed at the immigration office on board. The police were called to control the crush, confiscating passports and wielding their truncheons. All foreigners were ushered into the first class lounge until the situation stabilized. We finally got ashore around 12.0 noon.

Bombay was far cleaner and less crowded than I had imagined, with large ex-colonial buildings - a brilliant architectural jumble of Victorian and Eastern styles. I saw no rickshaws, but lots of yellow and black taxis, and bizarrely, some rather battered red, double-decker buses. Perhaps they are hand-downs from London. Women had their faces uncovered and walked about freely, such a relief after Pakistan. There seemed to be fewer beggars and street sleepers than in Karachi. The men wore about half-in-half Western and Eastern dress.

Planes were doing fly-pasts and tents were being set up on some open ground. A big congress is starting on the 25th, to which Mrs Gandhi will come.

We went to the main train station waiting room to find a bench for the night and got talking with an Anglo-Indian man, a Catholic from Bangalore. He said Mrs Gandhi was the best person for India at the moment, but the problem was that politicians tended to seek power for its own sake. The Partition into India and Pakistan was really bad, as was Nehru's division of India into a federal system of states. People no longer thought of themselves as Indians, but as members of states, and this was causing friction in the country. Also, there is terrible corruption. The average policeman receives 50-60 rupees a day in bribes. He keeps 20, and the rest is distributed right up to the Chief of Police. He doesn't think India will ever be communist. There is a lot of trade with China, although the negotiations are bad, but a priority is to re-open negotiations with Pakistan. He thinks Vinoba Bhave is a good man. Since Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, Bhave has kept up Gandhi's campaign to encourage people to stay in their villages, rather than moving to mass slums in the cities. The villages of India need to be self-sufficient and well run. India is a rich country - it's just very over-populated.

The following afternoon we boarded a train, as third class passengers, unreserved, bound for Madras. There was such a scramble that we had to leap on while the train was still entering the station, and quickly jump up onto a luggage rack. Immediately a swarm set in below us, far too many people fighting for a seat. A large official came in and took people by the scruffs of their necks, including a woman and child, and threw them off. They gesticulated pathetically at the windows. The train pulled out, some still clinging on outside, trying to get in. They soon dropped off.

The luggage rack is about 1'6" wide and 6' long, with another small shelf above it, so you can't sit up straight. Not much room for two. It's Christmas day. I have just opened three Christmas parcels that we managed to salvage from the Land Rover: a plum pudding in a tin; three crackers and paper hats; and two plastic cowboys on horseback.

So this is India....

2018

I had wanted to go to India from the age of fifteen. The Beatles went, of course, which made it popular, but there was more to it than that. I felt it was a place where time would have a different quality. Someone had said: "When God made time in India, he made plenty of it", and I wanted to know what that meant. I felt that we were all chasing our tails in the West and that there was another way to be. From what I knew of India, it was a place where people had been considering the nature of existence for thousands of years.

Green notebook, 1969 - 1970

Madras. Took a bus down Mount Road, and further, to a district called Mylapore, to see the Hindu temple. It was a wonderful experience – the temple itself, the streets and stalls, the people – a real piece of India. In front of the temple was a large square pool, or tank, in which the towering gateways were reflected. All around the pool were steps where women and children, and one or two men wearing only loincloths, washed their clothes. You heard the constant thud of wet bundles thrown on the stone, and big squares of cloth were laid out in the sun.

The temple was dominated by two gateways, one much larger than the other. They are wedge-shaped and studded all over with carved figures, whose paint had delicately faded. They gave a vibrant feeling of teeming life.



The temple was open. We took off our shoes and went in. Inside the outer walls was dusty ground, and in the centre, a complex of shrines. People walked and talked, and children played, just as in the street outside. One could see little of the interiors of the shrines, just a dim light burning. A priest sat beside the entrance, cross-legged, giving white paste to people, which they smeared on their foreheads, and then knelt, forehead to the ground. There were two large shrines, where we were not allowed to go. It was good to see men and women worshipping on an equal status.

Sevagram, Wardha, north of Madras in the very centre of India. Gandhi founded this self-sufficient community, or ashram, in 1936. The peace and welcome were wonderful. Walking through it for the first time one sensed a beautiful atmosphere – the tidy, veranda-ed huts placed about, the little fences, trees, birds and soft sounds.

We were introduced to Asha Devi, who runs the ashram. She was sitting reading on a little lawn, dressed in a simple white sari. She has wonderful wide eyes, always showing her top teeth in a broad smile.

After some lunch, eating the produce of the ashram, we went out to the millet fields to harvest. Everyone has to do at least two hours manual work a day. We were with a group of small boys, and talked to the man in charge. He has thick, blue-tinted glasses, but prefers to peer over the top of them. He has been here since 1945 and he and his wife have brought up four children. There are 150 people in the ashram.

It was a good feeling, harvesting the millet. We cut off the heads and put them into baskets, which were tipped into a bullock cart. At last we were in direct contact with the actual circle of life, producing food. One might have thought it would be difficult to make the small boys work, but throughout, there was a sincere feeling of a commitment to the community.

In the evening we attended prayers. A woman sang, a man played a tambourine, and our friend from the fields brought a sitar. The music, more than anything, conveyed a sense of a sincere, devoted community. None of the children looked bored. Sometimes one, sometimes everyone sang. It was rhythmic and beautiful.

We went to see Vinoba Bhave. He lives at a small ashram called Go-Puri, a few miles from Sevagram. Now old, he has spent much of his life travelling from village to village in India. He has encouraged village communities to be strong and self-sufficient. Using simple technology, such as well digging, irrigation schemes, windmills and making cooking gas from cow dung, helps to prevent people in their millions from moving to the cities, where they live in slums and have no proper employment. By staying at Sevagram, Gandhi during his lifetime had begun this work.

We came to Vinoba's house, a white building standing on its own. There was Vinoba, behind the pillars, on the veranda. He was lying on a bed, his back to us, with a book close up to his eyes. His head and lower body were shrouded in white, his back was bare. We were quietly ushered to sit on the carpet in front of the bed. A number of men and women sat about in attendance. Vinoba is hard of hearing, so we had written down our questions, and they were passed to Vinoba, who slowly put down his book and took up the papers. He read through each one, moving them from side to side as he read each line. We talked quietly.

He began to move. He pulled the white cloth further over his head and around his body. He sat up, still with his back to us, took off his reading glasses and put on some dark glasses. Slowly he turned, lifting his legs, bare down from the knees, and swivelling until he sat facing us on the side of the bed. His benign head surveyed us. Under the white head-cloth he wore a large green balaclava, the peak of which obscured his right eye. The remaining eye glowed dimly through the dark glass. A thin, white bristle covered his lower face, and he continually sucked in his thin cheeks – a habit of his. He raised the sides of his nostrils to a wistful smile.

He motioned for a small table in front of him to be moved forward a little. He stood up, a tower of white above us, and slowly sat, cross-legged on the floor. The questions were put on the table, where also was an Oxford Dictionary.

He asked our names. Finding that Rick and I were 18, he asked if we could vote in England. I told him we could, as of yesterday. A man sat beside him and loudly repeated my answer, in Hindi, although Vinoba speaks good English.

Then he began to talk. He told us he was an old man, 75 years, and that he had finished his active work. Behind us, where we sat, was a graveyard, and he was just waiting, meditating. All this in a wistful, humorous tone.

As he could not hear us, the reason we had written out questions, he said, was so that he would speak. But now he had spoken, he need not answer our questions! He chuckled. Then he picked up our papers and chose my question: "What do you think will be the future of the ashram philosophy?" "Very good," he said. "Man is either to be

destroyed by the atom bomb or to adopt the idea of the small community. As he is not going to destroy himself, the ashram future is good. The cities, where Man lives now, are no kind of civilization, and they cannot therefore form a basis for Man's continued development."

Mrs Everhardt (who was with us) thought that although Vinoba could no longer walk, he could continue his work using other forms of transport. There was a silence, and then Vinoba said slowly: " "They also serve who only stand and wait", " and proceeded to recite the second half of Milton's sonnet 'On his Blindness'. Fifty-four years, he said, was enough for a life's work; it was time for him to retire from the active world. He was better employed now in thought and contemplation. It was for the young to carry on the active work.

Soon we all stood, and Vinoba was led down the steps from the veranda to a patch in the sun, on the bare ground. He sat on a small carpet and two large pillows were brought for his back. One of the men brought a red glass and trained the sun through it onto Vinoba's knee – he is having some pain there. Rick bought his book 'Talks on the Gita', and Vinoba wrote in the front: "Truth, love, compassion. Vinoba".

We walked away down the path, leaving him there, hunched in the sun.

Back at Sevagram, just before midnight, we walked quietly through the ashram and joined a group in meditation. It was New Year's Eve. As we sat, we passed in silence from the nineteen-sixties into the nineteen-seventies. I felt for the first time on this journey a deep and simple focus - through stillness - as though I had somehow touched India and India had touched me.

2018

Time doesn't have to be long to be meaningful. A few moments can be significant. Within all the noise and rush of India, here was a calm space. I realised that I needed to consider and recognise it. Perhaps this was part of the notion of God making plenty of time. Here were just a few minutes that went into my memory, and here I am now almost fifty years later, valuing them. It's as though such moments, such memories, are anchor points. Perhaps we each need a handful of them, which we can take out and revisit.

Since 1970, I've been in India again four times. It's a changed place, with its growing, prosperous middle class, but its heart, its old integrity, is still there. You can stand on a street corner and see all life: plush cars, naked sadhus, goats, sacred cows, beggars, the appalling accumulation of litter, boys on rooftops flying kites, deafening auto-rickshaws, elephants, massive lorries towering over mothers and babies. Some miraculous balancing act seems to prevent disasters at every turn, and if you zoom in – as though in a film – you can go beyond the cacophony, and sniff in the very air something time-worn, the accumulation of experience, that for me goes far beyond dogma, far beyond all our human words, beyond place and beyond time.



SERA-JEH MONASTERY, KARNATAKA

December 9th 1996

4.30 pm. I take my sketchbook to the big courtyard in front of the main building and settle down. There's no-one around. I start to draw the frontage, its pinnacles on the roof, the lines of windows, the entrance door. After just a few minutes, a monk appears. Seeing me, he wanders over, and with an amused look, compares the original to my sketch. He calls to another monk, who comes over. Within five minutes, fifty monks are surrounding me, jostling to see my work, all in a very good-natured way. Then there are so many that they are standing in front of me, obscuring the view. I gesticulate and they shuffle to the side, with great glee and constant chuckles. There's no way I can give up now! I complete the basic structure and then come to the sign above

the door: SERA MAHAYANA UNIVERSITY. That I do quite easily, but above that the name is written out in both Tibetan and Hindi. As I attempt to write these in, the crowd erupts with benign laughter, as letter by letter I make my marks.

And then it's time for evening prayers, and within moments they have all disappeared into the building, and the chanting begins.



**SELAQUI near DEHRA DUN
with Lucy, our daughter**

Monday 17th January 2000.

With Dolma, Gyalpo and their two-year-old daughter Tenzin. They live in a brick hut on some waste ground, where an orphanage is under construction. Gyalpo is Tibetan, a metalworker and Dolma runs a little school.

Lucy and I sat on the step outside the hut. Gyalpo and Tenzin and all the dogs ran about. When Dolma came back we all played Frisbee with the bucket lid for ages.

Now Lucy, Tenzin and Dolma are playing tickling games.

The crickets have started. The light is fading.

Then we watched an address on the television by the Dalai Lama to mark the Millennium. He said tellingly that the sunrise on New Year's Day was just another sunrise. We are all the same as we were and the responsibility is with each of us to either use or waste time.

Tenzin is now doing Lucy's hair.

Wednesday 19th Jan.

Last night the moon was clear and larger. Chimee the neighbour and her boyfriend lit a fire in a brazier, pouring on a lot of kerosene. It was lovely just to sit there for hours. Chimee grew up as a Tibetan orphan in Dharamsala. Her boyfriend works with Gyalpo. When the work is finished here they are going to Ladakh to get married. There is no dowry custom with Tibetans – if there were, Chimee says, she would be unlikely to have been able to marry, as an orphan.

As we sat outside, there was a big flare of fire and shouting from a nearby Indian family, camped out on the rough ground. Gyalpo went over and found that one boy had kicked over a can of kerosene. It had caught alight and severely burned the thigh of another boy. Gyalpo took him to a clinic on his scooter. I hope he's alright.

Dolma and Chimee have a little school with half-a-dozen of the Indian children who live on the site, and Tenzin. It's usually over in one of the buildings but seems to be based here at the hut in recent days, because of us. Lucy has just been blowing bubbles with them – a lot of hilarity.



Thursday 20th Jan.

Leaving last night was very heartfelt. Dolma sobbed on Lucy's shoulder and Tenzin lifted Lucy's hand to wipe away Dolma's tears. Before that we had had a very funny time, Tenzin putting head-dresses on me while I made funny faces. Then the walk over to the taxi and the drive away, the light at the little house receding and the realisation of a time ending. A time to keep safe. A time to build on. Real friends, and Dolma's friendship with Lucy more than one can write.

Friday 21st Jan.

We went to Old Delhi Station only to discover that the train to Jaipur left from a small station elsewhere. We took a rickshaw and seemed to go on and on through narrow backstreets. One was full of tyre recycling shops, a whole black landscape, another smelling of roasted nuts, and a market in a wider place with mounds of brightly coloured spices. We passed a small boy standing in the middle of a very busy junction with three donkeys heavily laden with panniers of rubble. One of the donkeys was stuck on its side, with the rubble tipped into the road, pinning it down. The boy was just standing there, bewildered, unable to move. A little further on, a man was lying on the narrow raised reservation in the middle of a hectic dual carriageway, fast asleep.

Monday 24th Jan.

The warbling of monkeys, the coo of pigeons, the slap-slap of clothes hitting stone as they are washed. Eagles wheeling overhead, the sun glistening on the water. Cormorants stationary on the turrets of a ruined island pavilion. Two boats, with fishermen adjusting their nets. A chipmunk very close on the parapet. We are in, I think, one of the most pervasively beautiful places I have ever seen, on a rooftop overlooking the main lake at Udaipur.



Wednesday 26th Jan.

9.15 am. I've just meditated beside the open window, the air a perfect temperature. All the sounds outside: people washing on the ghat close by; the plop of a frog jumping into the water; the distant burr of a boat. So this is cyclical time. I am here now, in a moment of what I can only, unashamedly call bliss, but I am also always here, this becomes part of my presence. Time present becomes time past but is also time future.

In 'City of Djinn's' William Dalrymple says that the word "paradise" derives from ancient Persian – pairi (around) and daeza (a wall) – via Greek and Latin into English. "Now, sitting in the Shalimar Garden, it was very easy to see why the Persian word for an enclosed garden had become an English synonym for bliss."

Everywhere is white, with flashes of brilliant colour. A kingfisher flies off from below my window and perches on a post near the group on the ghat. He is black and white on his front and turquoise blue on his back and tail. A crowd of women across the lake in saris, which seem brighter here than anywhere: orange, pink, blue, green, red.

Friday 28th Jan.

Last night we boarded the train and watched Udaipur receding in the glowing dusk light, a dry hilly landscape took us north. We seemed to have the compartment to ourselves. We were just settling down when suddenly at 11.0 pm a vast family got on and seemed to fill every available space with body and baggage. A well-girthed man in a longhi and a balaclava more like a Norman helmet stood and stared at Lucy and I as we occupied our reserved bunks. Another man appeared and attempted to persuade us to move somewhere else. We refused. There then followed at least an hour as they bedded down, including an argument with the ticket man. Sleep eluded both of us for most of the night – because it was quite cold, but also because of the cacophony of belches, farts and snores issuing from our companions.

India is a place of contrasts and extremes. Poverty and deprivation, heartfelt friendship and integrity, exquisite wealth and beauty – all are here, all a part of a multi-faceted whole. I cannot hope to grasp India by taking up one particular aspect. From this, I begin to understand that to know life at all, I have to hold it in a multitude of ways at the same time. Different pieces may not seem to connect, yet India tells me that they do. Only connect....

KYICHU, BHUTAN
May 2003

A pervasive sense of deep peace in this place. The old nun greets us – hands raised together, she slowly bows. More than any words, she seems to be saying that she recognises us as fellow people. We stop and bow also, knowing the presence, the ever-present integrity of the little gate, the garden and the temple.

We walk slowly clockwise around the outside of the temple, spinning each prayer wheel as we go, giving movement to each written invocation. The wheels squeak and turn on their mechanisms, and clear small bells ring. It is a ritual that for me can go far beyond particular belief. Mind and hand, gesture and footfall, an uncomplicated focussing of time, place and wakefulness.

This earth is better for the presence of this place. By quietly standing here, and listening, we can feel this, with no need of further proof.

2018

We had been to a wedding in Bhutan, and flew home from Calcutta, with a clear morning sky and a bank of thick white cloud to the north, the summits of Annapurna and Everest peaking through. We shouldn't be flying around the world in polluting aeroplanes, yet when I do, I love to sit by the window. I've never lost a childlike excitement of seeing the world in a way unknown before our times.

After the green plains of Central India, we flew up over Afghanistan, and I gazed for what seemed hours at its tractless landscape. Sometimes I saw a group of land coloured buildings. I imagined life in a place more remote than any I had known.

Back in 1970, Rick and I had returned to England overland, via Afghanistan, taking us three weeks, travelling hard most of the time. I wrote very little in my diary.

We came up the long, twisting road through the Khyber Pass to the Afghan border in an old bus, and then I remember waking from sleep as we crested a hill to see Kabul stretched out before us. Afghanistan was a wild place. Lying as a buffer state between the powers and influence of the Soviet Union and the Indian sub-continent, Afghanistan felt proud and defiant, in its own enclave. Some years later, the Soviets invaded, and the country became a war-torn place, continuing to this day.

We took the only road through the country, from Kabul to Kandahar and then on to Herat. Half of this road was financed by the Russians and half by the Americans, each at that time vying for influence. In my memory, the first half was littered with crashed and burnt out buses and lorries, there not through conflict, but just because they'd had an accident. The second half was quieter, and we passed many forts and walled towns, their mud ramparts seeming to grow out of the land.

In Kandahar, I remember, the toilet was a hole in the floor, with a fifty-foot drop below. In Herat, the hotel loudly played 'Come on Baby Light my Fire' by The Doors over and over, and there was a map in the foyer of Europe and Asia, with the route between London and Delhi well-thumbed.

The next day, we set off in a Transit van up to the Iranian border. We sat at the back. Four huge-shouldered men, massive and immobile, took up the rest of the seats. No-one spoke much. We got up to the border and were waved through. A hundred yards into Iran, a cheer went up and the van jerked to a stop, the sliding door was released and with shouts and laughs the four men eased themselves out. What followed made us laugh until we hurt. Each man was wearing a dozen coats, and layer by layer they peeled them off, making a massive pile of clothes on the ground. Here were coat traders, avoiding transfer tax at the border by actually wearing their wares. We all skipped about, piled back into the van with our foul smelling cargo, and carried on.

We were foul smelling too. In Tehran we had a hamam, allowing weeks of travel grime to emerge. Afterwards, we ran up the street, feeling half the weight.

We travelled north by train to the Turkish border where we sat in the tea-room for hours through the night. At one point, a man on an adjacent table stood up and fired a shot through the open window. It was incredibly loud. No cries of pain ensued from outside, and the man sat down again. We decided we were better off not knowing any more.

We took a long-distance bus straight through to Istanbul, and then a train across Europe, arriving at Victoria Station in London three days later. I was pleased to be home.

FOLLOWING: PART TWO 'HOME'

PART TWO: HOME

Soon after my return from India I go into a supermarket. Do I want Shredded Wheat or Wheatabix? Do I want large eggs or medium sized ones? Do I want spaghetti or macaroni? As I walk around, in my mind is the memory of a legless man sitting by a busy road on a tiny trolley. He holds up the handleless stump of his left arm, and I notice that his right hand is bloody and infected, because he uses it as his only form of propulsion.

How can it be fair if I forge ahead and establish myself in a full Western life? This is a question I've never really answered. The world was, and still is, plagued by inequality.

I tried to work out what to do.

1970

Lewis's department store, Broadmead, Bristol. General assistant. On my second day, I was told to go to the sixth floor, to the offices. Myself and this other boy were handcuffed to a large metal box on wheels. If anyone tried to interfere with us, we were told, we were to press an alarm and kick a concealed button. This would send six-foot rods out from the trolley in all directions, stopping it from moving.

We went in the staff lift to the ground floor, and proceeded to the in-house branch of Lloyds Bank. A couple of young men in suits were expecting us and guided us

through to a back office. There, we were released from the handcuffs, and nonchalantly the young men unlocked and opened the box. I have never seen so much cash in all my life. Stacks and stacks of notes of all values: 10 shillings, 1 pound, 5 pounds, 10 pounds, 50 pounds. This was yesterday's takings in the store – just a single day.

It was like being in a film, with bank clerks strolling over and taking stashes of the stuff, wandering off to count it up. I knew if I played my cards right, I could expect perhaps one single note in my pay packet at the end of the week.

It was early December and I was put on lift duty. The lady who normally did it was off sick. No doubt she'd picked up a bug, spending day after day in that confined space with the general public jammed in beside you. I'd been up and down with her a few times and knew that she kept up a constant banter: "Approaching Floor Two: ladies lingerie, kitchen ware, electrical appliances. Approaching Floor Three: curtains and cushions, men's wear, hi-fidelity. Approaching Floor Four: party accessories and Father Christmas's Grotto. I didn't know all that information off pat and in any case none of the staff would ever be in the lift with me. I just kept quiet and pulled the lever: away from me to open the doors, upright to close and rise, towards me to close and descend. Up and down, day after day. Afternoons were the worst, all the kids piling in on the ground floor and pouring out on the fourth because of Father Christmas. Then one time two boys raced in first, with a glance at me as they did so, and stood at the back as the lift filled up. They all piled out again as predicted and I just had a couple of grown-ups on the way down.

It took me a few minutes to work out what had happened. There was an appalling smell of rotten eggs in the lift. Eventually I noticed a wet patch and little pieces of broken glass in the far corner, where those boys had stood. They'd set off a stink bomb. To start with I felt sick, but there's a funny thing with bad smells – they wear off and you can get used to them. Within a short time I was enjoying myself, watching people's faces. They would swarm in, all preoccupied, and then in the quiet as everyone stood still and the lift ascended, people's mouths and noses twitched and they glanced from side to side, trying to work out who was the culprit. I think as the lift operator I was part of the machinery, so never suspected.

1971

I'd arrive at 7.30 am and we'd all pile into a van and drive off to an army base near Bath. I'd roll big drums of wire around, while Ray and the others re-fitted the electrics in the squash courts.

Then one day we did some work in the houses, re-doing circuits and so on. One bedroom had piles and piles of porn mags by the bed.

The whole place felt like there was a thumb pressing down on it.

I loved home. I used to walk from our house, up through the beech woods and over the hill to The Woolpack in Slad for a pint. The three small rooms of the pub have windows that peep across the valley towards Swifts Hill and Elcombe. The author Laurie Lee was often ensconced in a corner, under a sign advertising Cider With Rosie – either the book or the drink, you could take your pick.

On one occasion Laurie asked me if I found it difficult being my father's son. Dad was well respected as a painter within the Stroud community. I don't think I gave Laurie much of a reply. I loved my dad, and had never really thought of him in that way. And yet, perhaps there was some truth in Laurie's question. I was diffident and uncertain, and that's what he was noticing. I was, it's true, finding it hard to make my own way, but I had never consciously connected that to Dad's life.

In his work, Laurie mentions the Miss Ayres sisters, up at Snow's Farm, a beautiful house, with a walled garden. I remember walking past and seeing the two ancient spinsters hard at it, tending their immaculate flower beds, whilst themselves looking unkempt and dishevelled. When they could no longer cope, Irish Rosie, or Rosanna, came as a live-in carer: "To see the sisters out", as she put it. Rosie had her own remote cottage a long way further up the valley, and moved down to Snow's Farm for the duration. (She wasn't, incidentally, Laurie's Rosie.)

I used to see Rosanna at Diana Lodge's cottage, Trillgate, in the Slad Valley. Diana's was a meeting place for so many people. I remember when I was about eleven my family wondered what to do on Boxing Day, so we walked over Wickridge and down to Diana's around tea-time. About eighty people had had the same idea. Boxing Day Tea at Diana's became an institution for years ahead. They were long-drawn-out afternoons, with talk and cake and sandwiches. I met Ali there, who would later change my life.

Diana had grown up in the 1920s near Abergavenny, on the Welsh borders. When she was eighteen she took off to London, to work as an artist's model and, by all accounts, as a Tiller Girl. She knocked on the painter Oliver Lodge's door, to see if he needed a model, and not long after became his wife. Much later, she moved to Gloucestershire, became a painter herself, and converted to

Catholicism. Trillgate was a place at times filled with people, yet at other times a place of peace and contemplation.

The last occasion I remember meeting Rosanna was at The Woolpack. I popped in around lunchtime. She was sitting on a high stool at the bar, and had evidently been there some time. In a slurred voice she explained that she had come down to “tend the sisters’ graves”, in the churchyard across the road, and had called in at the pub on the way. Splayed randomly on the floor about her feet was a multitude of Spring flowers.

There was a richness of life all around me, but I still didn’t know what to do.

1971

Matson, Gloucester. Working in the petrol station. There’s hours when no-one comes in, but you can’t even go for a pee. You never know when the next person might appear. Then suddenly there are ten cars on the forecourt. It’s as though they’ve stopped just up the road until there’s a crowd, and then all driven in at the same time.

How are you supposed to do it all? You’re trying to keep an eye on who’s coming and going, zeroing the pumps when new people are wanting to fill up, and they’re getting impatient because you’ve not seen them. Then there’s the till, change going in and out, receipts and everything. And then there’s the worst thing of all: S+H Pink Stamps. Dear oh dear. They’re on a roll in sections of 100, horrible tiny sticky stamps. Somebody said the glue is made of fish - you can smell it on your fingers. And then you get the paper money all sticky. Peeling off notes from yourself, when you’re trying to close the till and look cool. You have to work out how many stamps to give people, depending on how much fuel they’ve bought, and then pull down the correct amount and try not to rip the stamps as you tear them off.

I embezzled a whole lot for my Mum. When she’d laboriously stuck them into at least ten books, which took many months, she finally got an ironing board. It immediately sheered off and had to be thrown away.

Erch, fish glue.

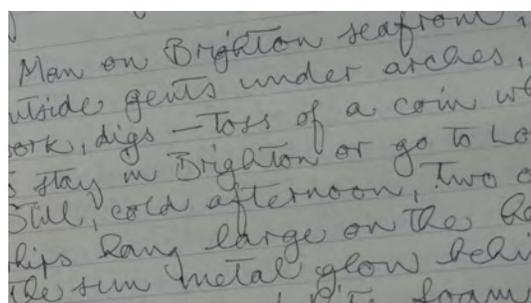
BRIGHTON 1971-72

Trying to become a teacher. If kids have a good start, perhaps society can be better. I shared a room with a couple of guys in a hostel at Percival Terrace on the seafront in Kemptown. We had a large room with three bay windows looking out to sea, so we could watch the ships in all lights and weathers as they made their way along the horizon.

I was, I'm sure, an intense companion. One of my roommates moved out as soon as he could. That left John, who was a really good friend for a several years. He was a Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead fan, and we played them very loudly. I was sorry to lose touch with him.

In the end I gave up trying to teach. I've had real respect for good teachers ever since, but I couldn't make it work for me.

While I was there, I used this notebook.



Man on Brighton seafront
outside gents under arches,
work, digs - toss of a coin wh
stay in Brighton or go to Lon
Still, cold afternoon, two o
ships hang large on the ho
the sun metal glow behin
foam



Man on Brighton seafront, standing outside gents under arches, wanting work, digs - toss of a coin whether to stay in Brighton or go to London. Still, cold afternoon, two or three ships hang large on the horizon, the sun, metal glow behind thin cloud. White foam and the dark sea. Solitary fisherman.

I seem to feel a delicate centre, which tremblingly I try to carry through all the contradictions and absurdities. But I am too afraid of that centre, I bottle it up, so it cannot breathe, cannot live its due. I am embarrassed by it, its contradictions, its lack of a general perspective and a goal in life – to such an extent that I know I have often not even written things in this notebook for fear of laying bare something fragile within me, which people might chance to glance at, and read, and buffet me.

I open the curtains and an old fellow with his stick is down on the seafront, in a black beret, with a pigeon on his shoulder.

A man must come to know his own pitch. He is like a string on a musical instrument. He must work to his own capacity, neither slacking nor straining himself. Then he will make a toneful contribution to the whole harmony – a tune where every man plays a different note, paces his own pitch.

Everything I think, or decide to do, or say, or write, I find an alternative, equally as valid. Indeed not one alternative, but many.

All the alternatives – which to take? The jackdaw lives his flight through the breeze without considering each motion.

A face and what is behind. It seems a face can hold as much truth as the head – perhaps others know me better than I know myself.

Notes for a film: Street scene. People walking up and down, esp. old people. Stop to talk in 2's and 3's. Close-ups of a stick; eyes; an old couple arm in arm, very happy together; the drip on the end of a very powdered old lady's nose; a tiny baby in a pram; the wheels of the pram squeakily turning; a very sad old face, cut to a group who suddenly burst into fits of laughter; Sainsbury's – young impatient people carloading food, and an old lady buys a Mother's Pride loaf she can hardly carry; adverts of the good life.

All this is going on, and one slowly begins to see the whole thing breaking up, unnoticed by the people themselves. Cracks in the walls; a snake in the gutter; insects crawling over the food; the tyres of the cars flat; rips in the shop awnings, pieces flapping in faces like ghost trains; someone's groceries spill on the pavement, people trample over them; shop-front glass smashed, graffiti on the walls; people urinating, squatting; maimed people; an old lady collapses and is left unnoticed; people staring into camera.

It begins to look like an Indian city – rubbish, street-beds, cows (still Western setting).

People's faces begin to take on a wise look. Old people, sitting on the pavement now, still look resigned, but now have a depth to their eyes – no longer bursts of laughter, but gentle benign chuckles. Flashes of white doves about, a beautiful girl, flowers, strong portraits of faces, flowers, doves, two strong horses trot by.

Junk shop near Brighton Station. Peering into the dusty window I see a glass case with a stuffed new-born pig staring out of it. Halfway down, its body divides in two - Siamese. There are two bits of hard Mother's Pride (bread) each side of the pig, and a scrap of paper on the case says: "Rare pork sandwich. £14."



A butterfly has slept all winter in my room. He patters against the glass in the warmth of the afternoon now. But it's not spring yet.

The glory of life is that it dies.

Living by the sea keeps one in mind of beyond....

I will come to you
and ride into oblivion
for the sake of two souls
who would never believe
they would come

decide how far you will go and
you will go to the end of it
find your flameful body and
climb it 'til you have
released its locks

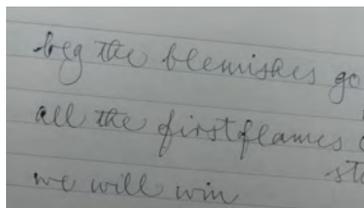
enjoy the distant mountains
beyond the flood-watered rivers
find in the mud-made towers
the carpeted sunful
freedom of your mind

give me the hand
give me the toes
find which way the pain lies
take your fill
see the bare bones of your wandering
see the brittle bones of your wandering

see me
who are you
and you too
see we

are the temple-top turrets
of our laughter
we are blankets in the wind
straining their pegs for strength

beg the blemishes go
all the firstflames
crack their stormbursts
we will win



1973

A new job, my first day. I report at a time and place and everyone piles into a car. We drive out of Bristol and after a while I realise we are approaching the village where my grandmother lives. We cruise around. I keep really quiet, not letting on I know the place intimately. Someone is dropped off in a cul-de-sac, and we move on. Then we stop at the top of my Grandmum's road. I really don't want to get out and have to call on all her neighbours. Someone else is let out and we move on to another village.

Eventually I am dropped off. I'm given a portfolio and told to work my way along a street of detached houses. It's dark by now.

Ding-dong. I wait a while, then see an approaching figure behind the frosted glass. Here goes.

"Well, that's sort of more my husband's department, and he's not home yet."

Next one. "Ar, ner mate. I'm not interested in art."

I'm going all along the row without even getting a look in. Then, near the end, a husband, wife and two kids all come to the door together.

"Good evening," I say. "I wondered if I could show you a collection of original paintings that are all very reasonably priced."

"Oo, yes, that sounds interesting."

I open up the portfolio on the sitting room floor and they all gather round. I spread out my wares. I honestly hadn't realised before this quite how hideous they all are. African tribesmen mostly, depicted with a few minimal strokes: the shaft of a long spear; the curve of a shield; quick lines for the body; and maybe a couple of flicks for the headdress. And all on boards of black velvet.

The family are taking a genuine interest, passing them around and comparing them. I'm horrified. There's a distinct possibility they might want to buy one of these awful things. I think it's my body language more than anything I say - gathering the paintings back in at every opportunity, until I can finally close the portfolio and thank them for their time.

We head back to Bristol. That job lasted about six hours with no reward. Back to the Evening Post jobs section again.

1973

Working with Hillary, painting and decorating. We go to people's houses and try to look professional, wearing boiler suits and carrying piles of dustsheets. She is much more expert than I am. Using a roller, I seem to create a fine spray, which subtly covers much more than the walls – my hands and head, and the carpets beyond the dustsheets.

At one house, in a well-healed village, Hillary tactfully suggests I might be better off doing some outside work. With an open pot of exterior gloss and a brush, I carefully climb the long ladder, over twenty feet up the side of the house. I'm to re-paint the weatherboarding, on the outside edge of the eave. I have to get paint on the brush and then lean out to put it on. I have a bad head for heights, so try not to look down.

"Hell-er-o!" The street is very quiet, so the voice behind me on the road must be addressing me. I retract the brush carefully and turn my head.

"Ah! I'm so sorry, I thought you were someone else." It's the vicar.

I stare at him, and because of my high position on the ladder, the rooflines of beautiful cottages are stacked up behind him at strange angles. I feel scared and dizzy, and turning back to the ladder I drop the brush. I watch it fall to the ground, and am thankful – so far – I'm not following it.

"Have a lovely day," says the vicar, losing interest in me and sauntering off, unaware that he almost sent me speeding up to heaven.

I tremble and look down. There's white paint from the brush on the immaculate lawn.

I really don't want to let Hillary down, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to carry on with this job.

2018

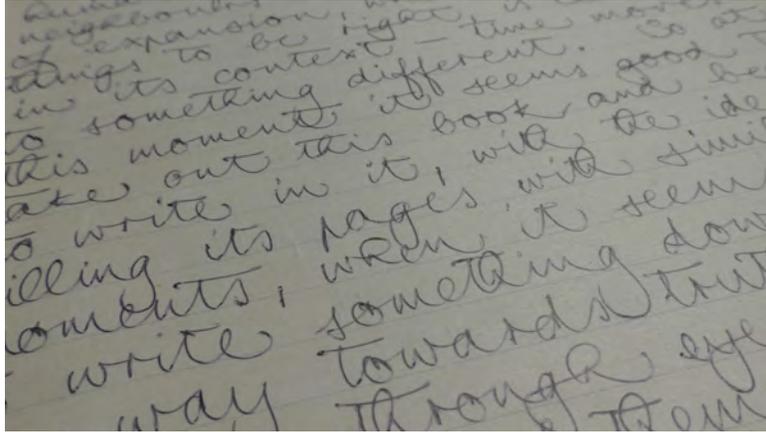
This was a difficult time for me. I felt strange in the world. I managed with my burnt hands, but they made it hard for me to grasp things wholeheartedly. They also made me self-conscious. Somehow I was being prevented from getting on with my life, and was going around in repetitive circles in my head. And I was lonely.

It's always been true, though - the bridge between youth and self-hood can be long and rickety. How do you go out confidently when you feel scared and empty inside? How do you come to be able to put your hand on your heart and feel you belong? It's as though you're in a trap that no-one else can really see. And the more you're trapped, the more introspective you become, the less able to be of any use to anyone else, or yourself.

I still have days like that, finding it hard to grasp the world. Doubt and diffidence can run deep. But do I wish that I had sailed through, always confident, always successful? No. The world is multi-layered and complex. Difficult times can make one know the world more deeply.

In Brighton I had hidden myself away in the college darkroom, printing black and white photos of a stark world, of lonely men walking the seafront, of huge leafless fallen trees. And writing, I was often writing. Perhaps I could somehow bring words and pictures together.





New notebook, January 1974

The discovery of what may be called truth can only come through the individual, through his experience. And he is part of an ever-changing human fabric – he changes, his neighbours change. A moment of expansion, when one senses things to be right, is centred in its own context – then time moves on to something different. So at this moment it seems good to take out this book and begin to write in it, with the idea of filling its pages with similar moments, when it seems good to write something down, because my way towards truth is through glimpses, through eye-glints, and writing some of them down may prove somehow accumulative, may be some kind of building-block. It will be like a book of word photographs, for a photograph captures an instant of time.

People race about largely so that they do not have to sit down with themselves. One's own company should be a good and precious thing to be nurtured, over time, patiently, as a new house grows and becomes itself. Today's virtue is to "do". Awareness comes also by being.

I feel innocent sometimes, but check myself against this. I believe the world is becoming too interconnected, too interdependent so that it is as if one can only be full if one has made it with great tracts of experience. I believe in contexts, in knowing one's own world fully, from the heart. Human contexts are to do with strengths and limitations. Know vague boundaries to yourself and respect and delight in those of others. Delight in the man who has seen very little yet knows himself.

Would I could get closer to my own heart, I feel a stranger with myself continually. I grasp at my validity. I know the way of my own world is there. Is there for me to stand and pace in it. In fact I will probably never step completely through this strangeness, this self-consciousness, and will live having the occasional glimpse through at myself.

The point is that all this is over-intellectual. Self-consciousness does not help towards consciousness of self. I have to act and be as I feel within me, without worrying so much what effect I have on others. I give something positive to myself and others by being, not by thinking about it.

Yet if I say be myself without worrying about the effect I have on others, what about ethics, respect for people? When I went to India I read something of Gandhi and his strong ideals of non-violence and asceticism and respect for others: "I will not have electricity in my hut until the smallest hut in India has it," he wrote. Whether or not Gandhi practised what he preached is not important – his ideas seemed very relevant to me, relevant to me as a Westerner. It seemed that greed was the greatest eroding factor in the West, and only a philosophy as strong as Gandhi's would make any real headway against its tide. To be unselfish, to respect others and look for their goodness, to try to give – these are what seemed important.

So I thought I would be a teacher. And what happened was that I found myself in a vacuum: I had nothing to give, because I wasn't being myself. To give is a vacuous concept on its own. To be, to become, even if it is somehow at the expense of others, is of first importance.

That's what identity is, individuation. How can one be of any use at all unless one really makes sure one is what one feels oneself to be inside? Sometimes I wish I could totally blow off with anger, and have a flow out of the fire of myself – and always it seems it is against my nature. I have some respect for people who get really angry.

By this struggle for identity, I mean a search for individual honesty, rather than in any hierarchical way a striving for success. I may have as much respect for the failure, the man who has no idea what to do with his life, as for the strong successful person. Doubting seems to me to be the first building block of honesty. Certainly it's something not to fester with, but I respect doubt.

Thinking, thinking, yes all this thinking, which leads me so easily to doubt, to alternatives I can't choose between, to that state of paralysis when I feel incapable of anything. It is possible by thinking to devastate everything, so that action seems futile.

FLAT-HEAD

Low line of the desert
tight-lipped

They have pulled down all the
tea-houses

with their jabbering
flattened the camels
even
the old hills

Now there is nothing in the
flat world
to look at
nowhere to walk
that takes you further
than where you were

I kick a stone

and wince

for the desert is
no more than my own head

All in the head. So I must jump out of it for a while – be silly, reckless, why not?

1974

The pin mill, deep in the valley below Painswick. It doesn't make pins, but paperclips. The main shed has about forty machines, set in motion by drive shafts overhead. You flick a leather belt over a wheel that then begins to move, making the machines twist and turn, spitting out paper clips and butcher's pins of different shapes and sizes. The noise is horrendous.

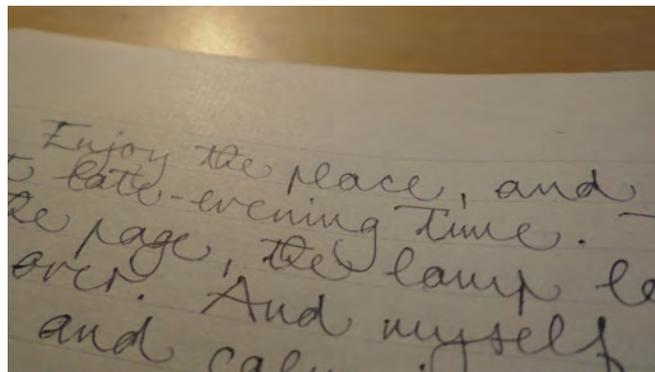
Ken shows me the place outside the office, where the foreman was found dead early one morning about fifteen years ago, hanging from a beam.

Some days, instead of doing clips, I'm put on the thumb-ring machine. It's like a penance. On the clips, at least you can move around. With the thumb-ring machine you're stuck in one place all the time. Thumb-rings are on the spines of binder files. They are the metal rim to the hole you put your thumb through to pull the file out of a shelf.

The strips of metal are in packs about eighteen inches long. You feed one into the machine. Then you pull the huge cast-iron handle through 180 degrees, and you can hear the clunk as a ring is pressed out. It drops into a bucket. Then you return the handle, push the strip in some more, and do it all again. You take it all slowly, because you don't want to cut yourself on the strips, and because the manager, who wanders around in a daze, has no idea how many you should make in a day. On and on, you go into some other space, far beyond boredom.

Some days are very different. I go out on the van, quite often as the driver. All the paperclips are the same, but they are sold under different names. I drive around the district, dropping off box-loads of clips and piles of pop-out sheets to all the 'home-workers'. These are mainly women, with babies and toddlers at home, wanting a little extra income. They have to press out the boxes from the printed sheets, all with different brand names, fold each tiny box, glue it, weigh the clips and pack each box with the correct weight. It's really fiddly work, and they're paid a pittance.

Next time you use a paperclip, spare a thought for the packers.



Notebook 1974

Enjoy the place, and the quiet late-evening time. The pen and the page, the lamp low peering over. And myself, slow breathing and calm in myself.

I saw the poverty of India, its slow churn of life, and I returned to question the tick of Western life right down the line. Society starts with the individual, and it seemed to me – and seems as strongly so now – that the Western individual has got himself into a competitive frame of mind he cannot pull himself out of, and it is this competitiveness which is making him burst life's resources at the seams. Nature, and humankind, cannot take this battering.

So I became strongly anti-competitive, and lost myself in the process. The world will only grow with me if I am myself. Somehow, somewhere there is a way to be, without having to club the world to be it.

I grow, I feel very good sometimes, constructive – like now, because I am able to express things that are very important to me.

To know how to act - I must feel for my centre, seek it out, an area of my consciousness where I sense about things: “this is right”. Even if this is selfish, nothing will follow right without it. Even if it takes years.

Through this centring I seek out my shape, my line of activity. All the time I was trying to become a teacher, my centre was suffocating, to such an extent, now and then, that I wanted to do myself in.

I’m really looking forward to the film course.

2018

I’d applied to the National Film School at Beaconsfield, but had been so terrified by the interview that I’d done myself no favours and they had turned me down. They had asked me to sit within a circle of twelve men, most of them in their fifties, several with hair hanging well below their shoulders. One after another, they fired me with intense questions about genres and other filmic concepts. I floundered repeatedly.

I also wrote to the film school at Guildford Art College. They said they had one place left and I could come along for an interview. I’d never filmed anything, but I had all my black and white photos. Because it was an art school, I thought it would be good to turn up with a portfolio, so I made one, and filled it with photos spray-mounted onto white card.

When I got there, two friendly tutors took me into a small room, which was incredibly hot, because it was February and the heating was turned up. We talked for a while and then I opened the portfolio. The white card was too thin for my spray-mounting, and sheet after sheet buckled in the tropical air. “Oh well - that’s that, then,” I said to myself, my armpits awash. Gathering up the debris, I didn’t notice that my companions were having a brief conflagration. As I was about to take my leave... there and then, they offered me a place. “No marks for the photos, but we’d like you to come.”

It was the best thing that had happened to me in my adult life. I wasn't being handed a rejection slip. Perhaps I could make something of myself after all.

And then an even better thing happened.

1974 Easter

I arrive at her door, in Goodge Street, off Tottenham Court Road. She's invited me to stay. The dark hall is long and narrow, and we have to push past several bikes. One of them is a tandem. We go upstairs and have tea, and then Ali suggests we go for a spin. At one in the morning we're speeding around Hyde Park Corner. She's up in front, her long blonde hair flying. I'm swept off my feet.



PROVENCE Summer 1974

We went to a village in Northern Provence, which Ali had known since she was a child. Back then, in the early 'sixties, its ancient alleyways had climbed the hill to the church and belfry, and below the village in the valley were olive groves and orchards, descending to the River Verdon. It was a remote place, with many of the houses in ruins.

Ali hadn't been there for some years. Although she was aware that vast changes had been taking place, she gasped as we approached, coming from Riez to

the view over the valley. The village was still there in the distance, but the River Verdon and the whole landscape before it had disappeared. In its place now was a vast, turquoise lake, shimmering in the sun, there to supply water to Nice and Cannes. With the dam in place, the water had taken many months to creep across the land, arriving at the foot of the village only weeks before our visit.

We walked up through the narrow streets to a house just below the church, where Ali had stayed many times. Although mid-summer, it was closed up. We went to see Madame Coindet, bent with age in her tiny doorway, and she gave us the huge key. We stayed some days, expecting every hour that holidaymakers might arrive to fill the house, but no-one came.



I remember Annie with her goats, herding them up the Rue Grande. And I remember the evening with the one-armed projectionist, who showed us ‘20,000 Leagues Under the Sea’ on a sheet undulating in the breeze. The men wore blue ‘vêtements de travail’ and sat about a lot.

Now, in 2018, the village is in essence the same shape, but is such a different place. It’s much tidier, with almost every dwelling restored. In high summer, along the lakeside road, it’s sometimes difficult to find a place to park. As well as French, there are Dutch, German, English, Belgians and many others. You feel here so clearly the success of the project for peace and co-existence across Europe since the Second World War, with every nationality sitting in the restaurants, watching the setting sun across the lake.

We’ve seen it all down the years, but in August 1974 I had only just arrived.

The earth is so red, the red tiles, red gashes of the new roads around the lake. Swifts fly over the village, and two pigeons are silhouetted on a beam down in the dark, disused barn across the alley from the window where I write.

There is a strong feeling of old growth and time in Provence, like the chattering stream and ruffling light leaves of the wizened ash trees, the staring goatherd and couched red roofs of the farms that have known their way down long centuries. The nightjar made a first testing call just now, as the clear sky fades, the hard dark line of the ridge cut out from it, a silver birch tree swaying like reeds in water. The bark of a dog on a distant farm.

Down in the square in the evenings the old women sit sewing in a row outside the boulangerie, while the men play boule. There is a wonderfully cuddly short fat man, whose legs are pliable as rubber, bending forwards and backwards as he walks. I spoke for a while to another old man one morning when I got the bread, who had thin strands of white hair, a few stumps of brown teeth in his open smiling mouth, and was wearing blue dungarees. He had been left on the beach at Dunkirk and spent the last three years of the war in a German camp. He liked the new lake – most people seem to, which I find unexpected but basically encouraging. Or do I? I'm not sure – it's confusing. The people feel that the lake brings the promise of a new future, and I suppose it's good that they should see it that way, rather than having feelings of regret at the loss of the old village. Is it good for man to adapt easily to fast changes? Is it romantic nostalgia to regret the passing of old ways? Perhaps to adapt is man's only way now. Perhaps this village will find a new and good future, whereas as a remote hill village she was falling into ruin. Who can tell? She crouches now like a surprised cat, this strange barrier to her old valley livelihood, the lake, having only a few weeks ago finally crept up to her very paws. The goatman with his herd are making their way along the opposite brink.

Why must the world be so interconnected now? Why should this tiny village suddenly have to pay court to the thirsts of Nice and Cannes, fifty miles away? We forget the individual, like the farmer at Fontaine L'Eveque, down by the river, whose beautiful world was totally destroyed, and minorities, and think only of the mass. Everywhere is levelled to the Martini umbrella. This village stands now poised on the brink of an unknown future.

In 1976, while I was in England, Ali stayed in the village with her sister Celia, and wrote in my notebook.

We went and helped chop vegetables for the Pistou at Les Cavalets this afternoon because Madame has burnt her hand. Annie was gutting fish with her hands on the big, thick chopping table. She said about work that a man's got to work, work is the most important thing and comes before everything – I don't think she knows about leisure at all. She has got fourteen goats and they are milked morning and evening and she makes cheese with the milk and sells it. In the winter everyday she takes them up the mountain and stays with them until four in the afternoon. She has got two small children and a small round husband and her mother and grandmother also live in the village so all the work gets spread around.

There's a terrific storm rumbling about the valley, it has done it every day for six days. It changes the landscape totally.

There has just been a very, very dramatic hailstorm with thunder and lightning and the sun shining all the time. A sailing boat tacked its way up through the strangest lights and patterns on the water, it must have been a weird experience being in the boat. The water now has a green deep quality like looking into a huge aquarium.

I could sit in this window for hours. It is the highest window in the village, all the voices and smells drift up.

Four cheerful old spinsters sitting knitting and drinking tea at Les Cavalets. Annie's children returning from the fields in a cart with Auntie in a straw hat and the old grandma in black pushing it. The child was covered with garlands of flowers from head to toe. Earlier on I was talking to Annie and she used to be a shepherdess up in the very high mountains near Digne. She's a wonderful strong person with a really pretty face.

A curious thing happened today. I washed some things and hung them on the line feeling quite pleased and went out for a few hours. When I came back all my things had disappeared except Celia's shirt and my socks. Somebody had stolen my white Indian t-shirt, a handmade nightie and 4 pairs of knickers. Cece thought it might be some kind of pervy person who'd take ladies' underclothes. I told the curé and dear man walked all around with his bible praying to St Antoine he was so concerned. In fact everyone was more concerned than me, it seemed such an absurd thing to do. Now we have to guard the washing line and stay in especially.

One old man in the village always stops and talks to us, he wears green corduroy trousers, and he had a big bucket full of old bread and a white box of sugar lumps he'd found in the campers' dustbin – chuckle! chuckle! He wasn't ashamed but rather proud of what he'd found, he's a lovely twinkling old man.

Some people really have to work to live and be happy. All the women have big strong calf muscles from walking and strong, strong hands from binding and pulling and pushing and carrying hay and beans and buckets and children.

In some ways in a village like this people are exposed as to what they are. There is such a division here between the peasants and workers, and the rather self-conscious builders of a new community of artists and architects and sailors (on the lake). I know where the real caring and strength and friendship lies and who are the people who have put themselves out enough to be friends.

The lake has dropped 2 – 3 feet in 2 weeks and looks quite unnatural. It's upsetting to find a rusting bicycle half in the mud, a boot and half a wooden cart sticking up, and a funny little dead tree with oak apples still on it, and I saw a chicken feed thing and a chain. They couldn't pick up everything.

(Just had a letter from Pip, that's nice.)

Each time I walk down the village there's a little row of ladies who ask me concernedly if I've found my washing yet, and it really makes me want to laugh.

“Alors! Par exemple, ils sont perdus comme meme, zut c'est la vie.” “C'est les tourists.”

Perhaps secretly they've all got my knickers on.

Two-day hibernation in wind and rain and thunder and the odd flash of lightening. Lights went out this afternoon and my back gets stiff sitting in the window, but we keep laughing. In fact I sometimes think we are going completely mad. It's amazing the English skill of talking about the weather and saying the same things over and over again in different ways.

Great, the sky is breaking up and it's getting lighter, but still no electricity. I expect the water is dripping out of the bottom of the fridge by now.

It's lovely outside now. Everybody is out and walking about wellington-booted with plastic bags gathering up snails. Snails for supper everyone! It's like being in the village in the winter, I think I would like it. I find it easy to do things because it's a necessity to do something when there are absolutely no distractions – no people, no radio, tele, newspapers, telephone or anything, it's quite unique and very good. I will value this time, these weird rainy days, when I'm at home and working.

This morning we had breakfast in the funny dingy little kitchen with its fireplace, and afterwards I sat with Cece and rubbed out a huge pile of Rosemary and Thyme which gave us dirty hands and hay fever and I sat thinking that it would be good to put that sort of peace in your pocket and just get it out and look at it sometimes.

It was dark and pouring outside, and didn't get light until 6 pm this evening. Now the sun has just come out before going down and is really sparkling and twinkling on the water, it's beautiful. It certainly makes you appreciate this place when you've been forced to stay in all day in the dark.

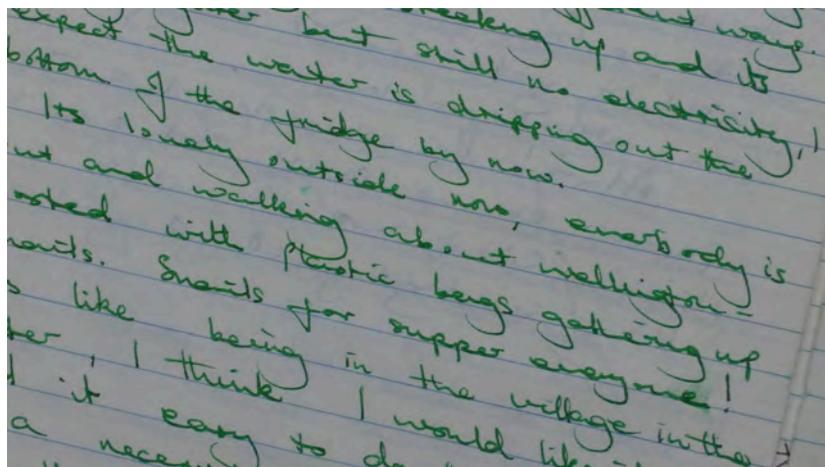
Le Pistou Thursday 11th August 76

People don't change at all, over the ages inside; the real fun is in music and food and wine and each other – it always was.

Behind the medieval wall harlequined musicians with bells and fiddles and tambourines singing about “soleil”. Dancing reels that would make a Scotsman laugh in his grave. And a large old puppet dancing too. Bohème, troubadours, diamonds and harlequins, clapping, broken bottles, roaming hands and squeals and all above dark dark medieval streets and a feeling and richness in the air so old and pleased.

Dancing on the trestle table which bent and bent in the middle but didn't break. Everyone dancing together.

All the while three children sat on an empty stage miming the music with cardboard boxes and fell asleep quite peacefully. The busy dogs as usual charging in, having a quick dance, quick pee and off again – very busy. I thought I'd write down a few scraps from my head. Perhaps you had troubadours and bells and songs in a dream. Perhaps we had a dance, I think we did.



I loved her very, very much. I was all the while in England, working on a film, having just finished the film course.

I'd started the course with a love of words and all my crumpled photographs. Somehow the course enhanced the two, so that I began to tell stories with words and pictures combined. I loved the whole process. The two-year course was intense, with just twelve students, all helping each other on each other's projects, as camera and sound crews, drumming into you the need to work well together, if you wanted a successful film. I loved the dialogue between the story and

all the physical detail that filmmaking involved. I discovered that I really liked editing. This seemed to me to be where all the parts of the process came together. After all the filming, it was in the edit that the story was honed and focussed. Unlike the director or the producer, I loved being the hands-on, practical one who frame by frame, foot by foot, brought a film together. I had found my craft, my down to earth, day by day activity that at last gave me a place I could thrive in. I could do it with my hands, and it has sustained me all through my working life, as an editor and in recent years shooting and editing films of my own.

Leaving film school in 1976, I found work editing three films about Tibetan Buddhism (Tibet – A Buddhist Trilogy). These films have had a deep and lasting effect on how I see the world. In the editing of these films we were concerned with stillness and contemplation, about staying with an image - of a building, a monk, a painting or a statue - until as a viewer you came to a state of mind beyond the everyday. Most documentaries are processed in the edit into a concise and often fast-paced finished film, and most of my work for television has been in that vein. But film can also very powerfully slow one down, encouraging the viewer to see the world in a focussed and attentive way, far beyond how we normally experience our surroundings in everyday life. Throughout all of my work in television, this frame of mind has sat somewhere on my shoulder.

For myself, this isn't a recipe to drift off into a mystical place. It's a conversation about how to improve this world, a dialogue between the here and now and something else, which is also deeply human. There's a telling moment in A Buddhist Trilogy. An abbot is leading a prayer, in deep meditative contemplation. He hears some people passing close by and turns to greet them with a broad smile, before returning to the prayer. He is in the everyday and fully part of the ritual at the same time.

The Tibetan films open at Sera, in South India, so having edited the films, I took the chance twenty years later to go there myself (and sketch the exterior of the temple!). India has always been a melting pot of people and culture, and in 1959, when the Chinese invaded Tibet and 80,000 Tibetan refugees arrived in India, a group of them were given land in Karnataka, and set up a community there, known as Sera. There are villages, farms, nunneries and monasteries – with a closeness between the everyday life and the contemplative. As I went around, from orchard to threshing floor, to visits for tea and chats, I would also enter the quiet spaces of the monasteries. Here I found statues of the Buddha, Hayagriva, Tara, and other deities. They emanated a sense of focus that I found powerful and wise. I felt that here was a tradition of thought stretching back over many centuries, with a depth of experience, but which I could come to and interrelate with in the present. It was as though I was witnessing a series of advices. It was up to me to apprehend them in my own way, without fear, nor with any sense that I would be an outsider if I failed to be an unquestioning devotee.

As I say, working on these films has had a lifelong impression on me. Many years later, we re-edited the trilogy into a single film. Originally we had worked with 16 mm film, but now all was digital. I am part of the only generation that has experienced the change from physical editing, cutting and splicing with 16 mm editing machines, to the slick world of digital editing.

After making the change, for some time I missed the hands-on craft of film editing – using just a mouse and keyboard seemed somehow very detached in comparison. But to go back to 16 mm editing now would be very frustrating. Digital software is so fast and full of options that were unavailable on film. There is a malleability that was unimaginable before.

One thing I like in particular is the digital ‘timeline’. You are essentially doing what an editor has always done – selecting and placing shots one after another to make sequences. However, instead of just making a roll of film, which you can only see if you play it through, you can now see the film graphically as a line of shots on the digital work screen. What you can then do is pick up these shots individually with the mouse and shuffle and re-arrange them with real alacrity, in a way that was possible but far more difficult in a film edit. It means you can now try things out and experiment in new ways. All of this fundamentally changes the whole cognitive process of the edit. It makes it more complex, but in many ways more sophisticated. You can refine and embellish the edit in so many ways.

I think that the digital era has also changed the act of writing in a similar way. A digital word processor essentially makes an edited timeline, where you can insert and delete words, save phrases and put them in a new place, and so on. Writing can become a much more malleable process than was practical with pen and paper. I love handwriting, its physical nature, the personal connection to a friend’s pen and ink in a handwritten letter. I love going back to my diaries, seeing the smudge of a leaky biro - the only pen I had to hand as I scribbled away on some bus or train. I go on writing by hand, but when I need to, digital writing can provide an opening into a different kind of thought process and fluency.

As well as the stillness of the Tibetan films, there is of course also the opposite. Whatever the medium, writing, still photography, film or painting, an essential task is often the same – to capture movement. Life is in a constant state of flux, and we try to reflect it. With my dad’s influence, I’ve always loved to see the ever-changing nature of landscape, and the constant flow of the sea.



August 1976

MONTE ARGENTARIO

A rugged peninsula on the west coast of Italy.

I love to watch the movement of the sea. I went down with Ali this evening and saw it, and we have come up now and are waiting outside our tent while the fire burns low to cook big kebabs over the embers.

All day the wind has blown, and the clouds were low enough to blur the small scrubby hills on this peninsula. A few drops of rain fell in the afternoon, but otherwise all rode in suspense, and the trees and scrub, the olive grove where we are, all turned back and forth with great business. Perhaps there had been a storm out at sea, and today has brought its remnants to shore. Yesterday there were just a few waves that splashed over the rocks where we sat, and the day before the sea was calm as sleep, with a rise and fall like deep breath.

Today the water was dark in the bay with flotsam of small pieces of seaweed that browned the high curve of each wave. From our rock we watched them hurl all the energy the wind had given them against the broken line of the shore. The swell, and then the first real curve as the force deflects back from the shallowing bed. And this builds to a brown fold the length of the bay, which crests and foams. Here is its height, the strong curve built from the swell to tip, where the spray comes like a crowd's first moment of applause, and the shadowy tranquil space beyond, where the wave draws. Plunge, and the foam rides the rocks and drains them, drawn back as white filigree to face the next swell.



We watched for a long time, and I took some photos. A lump of rock stuck out like a gargoyle of a toad – he kept his place stolidly as spray regularly concealed him and revealed him, with streams from his nostrils and a dripping chin.

We climbed the hill again, and the sun appeared below the thick clouds near the horizon. A flood of fire-coloured light broke through into the space between the earth and the clouds, the clouds a heavy grey blanched with light, and the wind-flurried land glowing as never all day. And the sea: I looked through the field-glasses and slowly rode up the line of reflected sun – the waves were picked and gilded like I've never seen, the light flat and pared and flecked. I think of the pattern formed in the weathered plaster on the wall of a ruined farm up the hill from here, like old lard.

The wind continued to blow hard on-shore, so the clouds cleared right off after our kebabs. Now the moon has not long come up over the hill in a starry sky, and the stones around the embers may stay warm until early morning.

There are so many kinds of rock on the shore: sandstone; granite; flecks and seams of this orange which I believe is partly iron; marble, in small round pebbles and in its first crystalline state as a patch on a granite boulder. All slowly grinding. Ali says this peninsula is where all the rocks of Italy end.

On the shore also are drift-planks, soft at the ends and gone orange from salt and saturation. A broken rudder. A large bleached tree trunk. Many coloured bottles, plastic. And the needle of a syringe.

Snorkelling in the water, I like to ride with the swell, near the rocks, looking up at the surface, how it coils and bursts, surrounding me with tickling white bubbles. The first time, I saw an octopus way down. He stayed very still, hoping he was camouflaged, and then stealthily moved across to the cover of a rock, displaying each tendril and his weird body and eyes as he went. The odd shapes of God's own.

Another time, I swam round the point and came to a dark cave where the sea had split off the rock to deepen and open a crack. I ventured to its mouth, the water slip slopping back in the dark, like saliva. I disturbed a thousand blue fish, each a fleck of light as they dashed past me and out of the shadow. Sometimes there are plastic bags underwater, like jellyfish. Plastic is horrible – bottles and bags dumped indiscriminately.

Down the path from our camp I saw what I thought was a pile of light-coloured boulders in a gully. On going closer, I saw that they were all plastic bags full of tins and packaging, bleached in the sun. The geology of the future.

2018

The geology of the future... I wrote that in 1976. Since then, people have done virtually nothing to deal with the problem. We are trashing our only world. As a consequence, future life is now far from predictable.

This evening a car went blaring at each corner around the valley above us, and not long after came blaring back again. One could predict what would happen. The road around the peninsula from St Stephano to Port Ercole loses its tarmac soon after the turn down to where we are. So many people see the stony track as an illegitimate thoroughfare and come back, thinking our small road is more eligible, being metal. So down they come – we hear them parping all down the little valley, and jump out as they reach our cul-de-sac olive-grove asking bewilderedly: “Scuse, scuse. Porto Ercole?...” And I’ve perfected a phrase in Italian explaining that if they’ll persevere with the stony track for a valley or two they’ll reach their comforting town bars. The car this evening parped its way down and I was ready with my phrase. A young English couple stepped out of a sleek car, impeccably dressed, glancing at our dishevelled campsite and the rubbish further on down, intoning in loud voices: “Where the hell are we?”

2018

Time is a malleable thing. We condense it continually in our minds, flicking through a fid of memory.

In 1976 we had a great summer. Then, as the years progressed we had three children. With Ali, with some luck - and work - we made our family. I came to know where I belonged. All those bedtime stories, birthdays, walks of a hundred yards - with little ones - that would take all afternoon, as we moved from leaf to stone to flower.

And now, after forty years of marriage, we have two grandsons. I could never have imagined how much I would love these two little boys.



And as we moved through the decades, our home gradually accumulated all the little belongings and oddities of family life.

When you fully open the bathroom door, the brass knob on the inside slides into a groove on the window shelf. Nothing was designed here, it was simply that the height of the knob was just lower than the shelf, and it gradually rubbed a notch in the wood. It's useful because you can keep the door open by sliding it on.

Then when you close the door, there's a little bolt. Without saying anything, Jack put it on when he was about thirteen, wanting more privacy. We'd never locked the door before. I don't remember, but there must have been an understanding that if the door was closed, someone was in the bathroom and you didn't go in. He made a good job of the bolt. It's still just as he fitted it, more than twenty years ago.



Just inside the door is a tiny child's chair, with no arms, but a straight back and rush seat that's broken and frayed. A lot of the cream paintwork has rubbed off, exposing the wood. It was my grandmother's, and it sat beside the loo in her bathroom, in the nineteen-fifties. She lived in a block of flats in London. If you sat on the loo at night with the light off, the headlights from taxis would sweep up the wall and stop on the ceiling. You'd hear shouts and the slamming of doors, and then with a revving up and moving off, the lights would swing over the bath and disappear behind the taps. And what does the little chair see now? Our grandsons' nightclothes and bath toys.

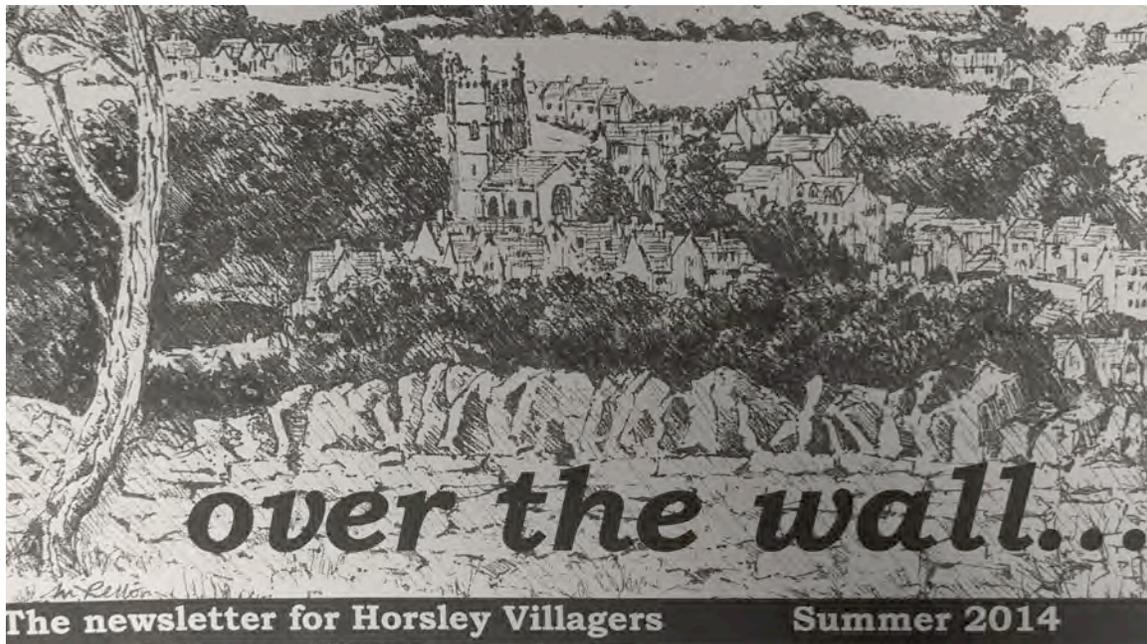


Beside the washbasin is a little tile, no more than two inches across. It's always been there, not for any reason or purpose. On it is a detailed picture of a ship in full sail – you can really feel the wind. Scattered across the sky in the background are the Vs of five birds, riding the weather. It makes a good clue in a treasure hunt, where people rush around the house, finding scraps of information. How many birds are behind the ship on the tile? Five, they whisper to me, handing back the written clue. Here in one place is all the adrenalin of movement, and a still and lasting detail of home.



I don't remember where the tile came from, but I'm sure it was there in our first bathroom when we were first together, sitting on the white tiles of the windowsill. The bathroom was tagged on the back of the farm cottage where we lived, and could be an ice-box. One winter ice cascaded down the inside of the frosted panes of the window and across the white tiles, cracking and loosening them. Sometimes, running the bath, the little room would fill with steam so you could hardly see. I remember we were both sitting in the bath one evening, and I stood up to get out. Hanging on a nail above the bath was a basketwork cupboard, with a spider plant in a pot on top of it. You saw spider plants a lot then, with thin green leaves trailing down. My shoulder caught the cupboard as I stood up, bringing it and the spider plant plunging into the bath. Instantly the water was filled with shells from the seaside, bars of soap and mud from the spider plant. We laughed a lot. Ali's shampoo session had to wait.

All the associations of one small tile, still here, in a safer bathroom. Every room in the house has its imprint, all the little details of time and occupancy. A painting by Diana Lodge of her caravan in the Black Mountains, a tiny chest of drawers, where you can find glass sweets from Venice, a line of old diaries and notebooks, and some back copies of the village magazine.



OVER THE WALL

30th June 2012

OUR CAT

We've got a photo of our cat Lim, lying on the floor, looking into the open pages of a book. I'm sure he could read. I'm sure he could also speak English – he just never thought it necessary. He certainly communicated, vocally and by other means, all the time. When Barney was born at home, Lim's knowing and penetrating yowls could be heard from room to room. He knew something painful and momentous was happening. At other times, when he realised that you were packing a suitcase, preparing to go away - your shoes, waiting by the back door, would be sprayed into. When a child was ill, Lim would quietly sit close by, with a gentle paw on the child's leg. He was twenty-one when he died – a great age for a cat.



He spent his first years living with us in a cottage out at Binley Farm, when Lucy and Jack were small. The cottage was the first in a row of three. Next-door were Sue, Dennis and the boys. Den drove the tractor on the farm. At the far end was Den's old mum, surviving his dad who had also worked on the farm.

One day two men were repairing Mother's roof. They climbed up a long ladder and re-hung some of the tiles. That evening, long after they'd finished and gone, we heard a yowling. We knew it was Lim, but as with some sounds, it was difficult to locate. Then we realised that he was in the roof space above our bedroom. I went outside, and looking up, saw that by some stroke of luck there was a loose stone right up under the eaves. I found the builders' ladder, stacked up in the farmyard, and set it against the end gable of the cottage. When I reached the giddy top, sure enough, I could push a stone to one side. A little face appeared, and Lim, smothered in cobwebs, wriggled through. He came very gently into my arms, and we returned to safety.

There was only one explanation. When the builders had gone off for lunch, Lim must have clambered up the long ladder and gone in through the hole they'd made in

the roof. Then in the afternoon, they had come back and sealed him in. Eventually, he'd made his way along the connecting roof space, and hearing our voices below had yowled for help.

The old saying comes to mind: "Curiosity killed the cat". But not with Lim as the cat. He was made of stronger stuff.

2018

This is a scrapbook of words, bringing disparate pieces together. A diary entry here, a quick thought there. Now that I feel I have found my place, it's a way of grasping some pieces of myself, and assembling them.

I often edit a documentary in a similar way, taking a group of film clips and working with them in a timeline. You hope that the different elements will find a new chemistry and make new connections as they come together.

In a film, for example, you may have an interview with someone talking about the future, and then, as they continue talking in voice over, you cut to people on a windblown beach, looking out to sea, into the unknown. You have set two things side by side, and made something new.



All the closeness of belonging, coupled with the pull to open spaces. I love striding far and wide with friends, bowling a conversation along, step by step. And yet I also like being alone in landscape. Your surroundings become more present and you see and hear them in far greater detail. This is when I think about my dad, out sketching on his own, seeing the form and density of a landscape, yet also understanding its levity, its transitory nature.

This is why I love The Black Mountains - as solid sandstone, yet also as canvas, billowing in the wind.

1975

The caravan. To be able just to be today, is refreshing. To let the day go, without being concerned about its passing. To measure the moon climbing from the abrupt line of the ridge. Which looks more solid – the hard clear cold blue of the sky, or the mottled, now shadowy mountain? Two jets have just slid across the sky, their hard course not shared by anything in the valley; one of them cut below the ridge and then appeared again.

Clear, clear sky, with the brightening moon. A delicate pink now above the ridge – there must be a good sunset way over. Everything is so still: only a slight movement from two clothes pegs on the line catching the air, make me look up, thinking someone is there.

To gradually find an inner stillness.

I am at Diana Lodge's caravan in the mountains, down the field from Cliff and Vi's farm. The caravan is a place of stillness and contemplation.





Mid-March, 1975. Difficult to write, just with a candle. Cliff didn't look so well today as he did last September when Ali and I came up before. He had a blue jaw today, as he brought the cows home – but his eyes really sparkle. His talk was of the weather and the damp winter. He looked down the valley, with the steadiness of a lifetime, spoke of fine days and wet days. His whole concern – it's his livelihood, I suppose, how the weather works.

I went straight off for a walk up the valley, turned round and round in the road with fresh air and the sound of the stream, the shapes of the fields between their hedges, and sheep. I've looked forward to this for some time, in the humdrum of film school at Guildford, and my cooped up little room. I took some photographs of a ribcage waterfall in the stream and climbed up out of the valley. Cliff was right, how the water has bogged the ground.

He was telling me how he heard dogs on the mountain. He went out and met Gordon coming along - he'd heard them too. They both went up and looked about for a long time, but found none. And the sheep were all alright today. A year ago stray dogs had 16 sheep.

Cliff used to go over to school the other side of the mountain. There was a school at Tin Town, the makeshift community set up to build the big dam for the reservoir. He stayed with his auntie. He went over on the Monday and back on the

Friday. If there was any mist, one of the big boys would come with him as far as the top above Capel, where he could see his way home. Over there, he used to gather sticks and go round the cottages selling them for a penny a bundle. Then he could go in and get four Woodbine for two-pence at the little shop.

When they were building the dam, the doctor had to come sometimes from Hay, on his hunter. He would go away up the path from Capel, and over the top they put big stones every ten yards or so, numbered, so he could find his way if it were night, or misty. In the cold, someone would have to keep the horse walking round and round while he went in to give treatment.

I feel almost more at peace sitting here in the caravan than I have ever consciously felt before. Stillness. The sound of the stream in the valley, and a vague sound of vastness - the mountain. I feel an independence, an autonomy.

2018

To be alone, yet also to belong, to be connected, through home and through work.

The editing is where a film is honed into shape, but to work with the whole process of making a film from the initial idea, to planning, shooting and finally editing has been a real extension for me over these last few years.

I've recently made a film called 'These People We Love' about people living with dementia and those who care for them. It's a life-changing challenge for someone to discover that their nearest and dearest is progressively losing their short-term memory. Someone with dementia can be bright and sociable, but have no idea what they did or said just two minutes before, so they become confused and less and less able to cope with daily life. In the end, the disability can go further. People become incontinent, and that can be too hard for a single carer to deal with, and the only option is the move to a specialist care home.

Four years ago I made a previous film about dementia with Chris and Emma, who organise a Memory Walk, meeting regularly in a park on the edge of Stroud. Because it's in a familiar setting, some of the walkers with dementia remember being there before, which is reassuring for them. But the walk is also of real benefit to the carers. Many are looking after their loved ones day and night, so have no chance to have a social life of their own. The walk is a time to check in with other carers, comparing notes with people who are living through the same difficulties and experiences.

We had talked about making another film, looking more closely at the lives of carers. My immediate thought was that such a film should be realistic about the difficulties, but should also be optimistic. There was no point in making a film that had no light in it. I started filming on a bright, early winter's day, following the Memory Walk, making its way beside a beautiful lake, with ducks and swans.

I work with a small 'camcorder' camera, which is very unobtrusive. I don't arrive with a film crew, waving lenses and microphones. For people with a very tender story to tell, that could be intimidating. Having taken the walk on previous occasions, with no camera, I was a familiar and hopefully unthreatening presence. I showed my camera at the beginning, so people knew what I was doing, and was then able to walk along, chatting and filming at the same time.

I came with a rudimentary understanding of dementia, but with an open mind. I wanted simply to listen, without preconceptions. A camera, in the right circumstances, seems often to provide a focus for people to say what they really feel. As long as the filming is done in a trusting way, with the motive being to shed light on the subject for the benefit of others, we can chat without anxiety. I always make sure that the main contributors in an edited film have the chance to see the film before it's completed. To say difficult things in an honest way in front of a camera is a deep and generous thing to do, and as the person behind the lens I need always to remember and respect that.

So I filmed the walk in the park, and came home with footage of heartfelt encounters with Clive and Anne, Adam and Alison. Because I make films with no-one breathing down my neck – be they a producer or television executive – I can work intuitively, allowing the filming to take its own course. The next event was a pre-Christmas lunch in a nearby village hall, so I went along. Chatting with Clive, he told me that the time had come for Anne to go into a Care Home. I then met Clive again in January, and went with him to visit Anne, now installed in the Home. By listening, and responding to what came up, I was able to tell a central story – the move from home to Care Home. This was done without setting anything up for the filming, so came over, I think, in an authentic way.

A film like this doesn't aim to be in any way definitive, saying all there is to say about dementia. There's no voiceover commentary, feeding you facts. Your understanding as a viewer comes through listening, and through considering the implications of what you're hearing. I see the film as a small window, leading you through and beyond what is there. My hope is that the film can then be a catalyst for a much wider discussion. For example, Clive at one point in the film, says that in caring for Anne, he doesn't get angry. Anne will have forgotten the cause within moments, so there's no point - he would be the only sufferer. Such a moment is specific in the film, but has far wider implications in terms of attitudes and survival strategies.

(I like this notion that a work is more than the sum of its parts. The same can be said about painting, where you may see much more than the framed paint on the canvas. And I think the same can be true of books, taking you beyond the words.)

After decades as a television editor, I love working on film projects like the dementia film, where I'm involved from the beginning to the end of the process. I love talking closely and honestly with people. I love the dialogue between being technical, with the filming, and being intuitive, in the telling of the story. And I like working on subjects that are really worthwhile. With an aging population, dementia is more prevalent. In the same way that awareness of disability has, I think, progressed significantly in this country over the last twenty years, it would be good if our awareness of dementia becomes common parlance, amongst people of all ages.

Ali has really helped me to make these films. When she comes to an event, she gives me an objective overview and points out people it would be interesting to talk with. Then in the edit, she is my most acute critic.

She has helped me in my life in so many ways, consistently – beyond words.

BILLY'S CLOTHES 2016

The first thing we knew
I'd made a mistake
was our daughter's text:

“looks like you've taken
all of billy's clothes”.

They're moving so I'd
filled my car with stuff.
Take the bureaux
that should fit, you'd said.

I went up to their bedroom
and thought brilliant
you've already put the
drawers on the floor, so the desk
was light to carry downstairs
and out to the car.

Then the drawers,
one two three
filled to the brim
with neatly folded baby-grows
tiny t-shirts and other things
I imagine

each drawer slotted into
the bureaux, and
pip's your granddad
the whole thing
eased into the car.

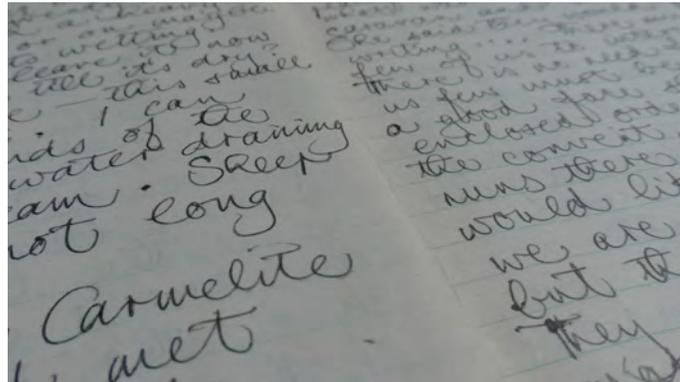
Good job.

But then back at our's
in the evening the text came.

You said you'd told me
to take the bureaux but
leave the drawers, which
perhaps you had, but I'm
going a bit deaf,
so probably didn't hear.

All those lovely
presents from people,
so many little things.
At least, you said, his
Moomin suit was on the line
so he'd still have something to wear.

Don't worry, Billy,
it's safe to say this is the
only time in your life
when I'll be taking away
all of your clothes.



August 1976

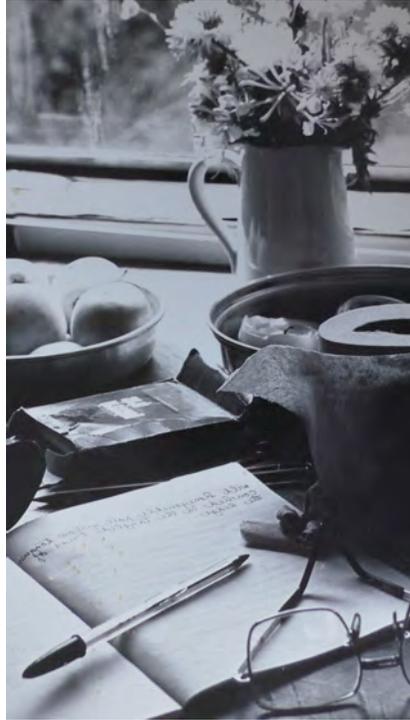
I have arranged with Diana to stay in her other caravan above Llandovery, and call in at the Carmelite Convent to collect the key. It's an enclosed order and the nuns never leave the convent.

When I arrive a nun opens a grill in the big front door to see who is there, and asks me to go into an adjoining room. It is small, with two doors facing one another, a low partition across the centre and two upright chairs, one on either side of the partition. Mother Michael comes in through the opposite door, and we talk across the divide.

She asks me what I will do in the caravan, and I say I will write. She says they will pray for my writing. I thank her, and then there's a pause. Perhaps she understands my unsaid question.

"We are here to intercede," she says. "There is no need for many, but a few of us must be here." What a good face she has, so peaceful.

There are twelve nuns at the moment. I would like fourteen, she says. We are allowed up to twenty-one, but that would be too many. They grow all their own vegetables, make their own bread, have a wood fire burner, and even have a solar heating device on the new cellblock. Each nun had an old railway guard's van for a cell for some years. Then the vans began to get too old so the cellblock was built.



I'm happy here in the little caravan – this small cell as Diana calls it.

Two spherical candles, one blue one red, which we bought at Hood Fayre two weeks ago, burn on the table by me, as the rain comes down.

Three carts were hastily tracted down the lane half-an-hour ago to bring in the hay from other fields the Lewis' have. The eastern hills were gradually taken by the coming rain clouds, even an occasional flash high up and the long pause for thunder. The wind came, sending the ash leaves over the caravan's head shimmering in one's ears, and then it went through the grasses and the trees all down the side of the field in the gully. I wandered down some way from the caravan, with bursts of breeze, and then a lull. Suddenly the rain came again and I ran back up the field.

The flowers here are wonderful. White bramble flowers, wild honeysuckle - pale yellow tongues couched in the tangled truss of the hedge. The blue and white flowers in the jug are fine by themselves, they are quiet and still.

OVER THE WALL
26th June 2011

THE PENNY DROPPED

Men with purses, they're not very cool. But I wouldn't like to walk around with loads of loose change weighing down my trousers, so one has to have something. My purse is secreted inside my wallet - there are places for bank notes and credit cards, and there's a little pocket with a popper for cash.

I went to buy a sandwich, took out about the right money, closed my wallet and returned it to my back pocket. The man handed me the sandwich, and a penny change. I should have put it in a charity box, but left the shop and arrived back on the busy street still holding the coin. I really didn't want the rigmarole of retrieving my wallet and opening the purse, so I dropped the penny into my pocket and went off for lunch.

Two evenings later, I take a little walk down the lane from home. The leaves in the big ash and sycamores are rustling as though they are pleased it has stopped raining. As I'm gazing up, I put my hand into my pocket. It's normally empty - I certainly don't carry a handkerchief - but there's something in the bottom. I pull out the penny.

I walk on down the lane, holding the penny but not really wanting it. Suddenly, without thinking, I toss it into the hedge, and it disappears immediately into a profusion of withered garlic leaves, cow parsley, dandelions and nettles. I stride straight on, with no exact idea of where the penny has fallen.

So that's where it will stay, slipping into the earth as the greenery diminishes. And it will lie there perhaps for millennia.

Will there ever be a day when some sentient being, of human or later origin, picks it up, turns it over, and puts it in its pocket - much as we do, on lucky days in these same hills, when we find a Roman coin?



2018

Sometimes people say that you should always look forwards towards the future. And yet reading my notebooks has enriched my present.

In ancient Greek, 'chronos' means the linear passage of time, from present day to present day. But the Greeks also had another word for time, 'kairos', describing significant time - such as my moment in India, moving from one decade into another. Such a time seems to take on another, non-linear, dimension.

I like to think that there can be a dialogue between these notions of time. I've made a film called 'The Walk', in which I take a favourite route through the woods and fields near home. I take the same walk five times through a year, in different seasons, and in the edit I've intercut between ice, snow, spring flowers, summer and autumn leaves. It's as though all the seasons are present at once.

When someone dies I sometimes have the strong sense that their whole life becomes present - that they are both old and young at the same time. I wonder... Could it be possible to think of stepping through the treadmill of time, so that time becomes ever-present? Can time bring both chronos and kairos together? In the same way that my dad saw landscape in different time-frames, can I see time as complex and multi-layered?

I ask these questions tentatively, because they have huge implications. I am immersed in all the details of my present life, and can but peep into the spaces between all of these words.

AUTUMN
2016

the head, the hand and the pen
the thought and the action
intent and outcome
consideration
and declaration

tampering with the ink
the rigmarole of well-formed vowels
the articulacy of a good 'a'....
connecting the
nib's scrape, the dot and dash
the gradual delineation
of the page

imagine your paper
whipped away by the wind
your words become
leaf freckles, the stalk and veins
are the spread of your hand
carried high
 in the wide air

eyes upturned
the dark shape
a triumph in the brightness
when the breeze unconcerned
picks you up
and you drop
 to the lake

consonants
faint impressions of the pen
turn on the surface
so the sun responds to flat faces
lights the autumn in them
gives context and
minute glimpses
 of significance

until a squall
drives you and a
whole host of flotsam
up to the far end
and it becomes saturated
and drawn
 beneath the surface

the hand, the word
the notion
 in hibernation



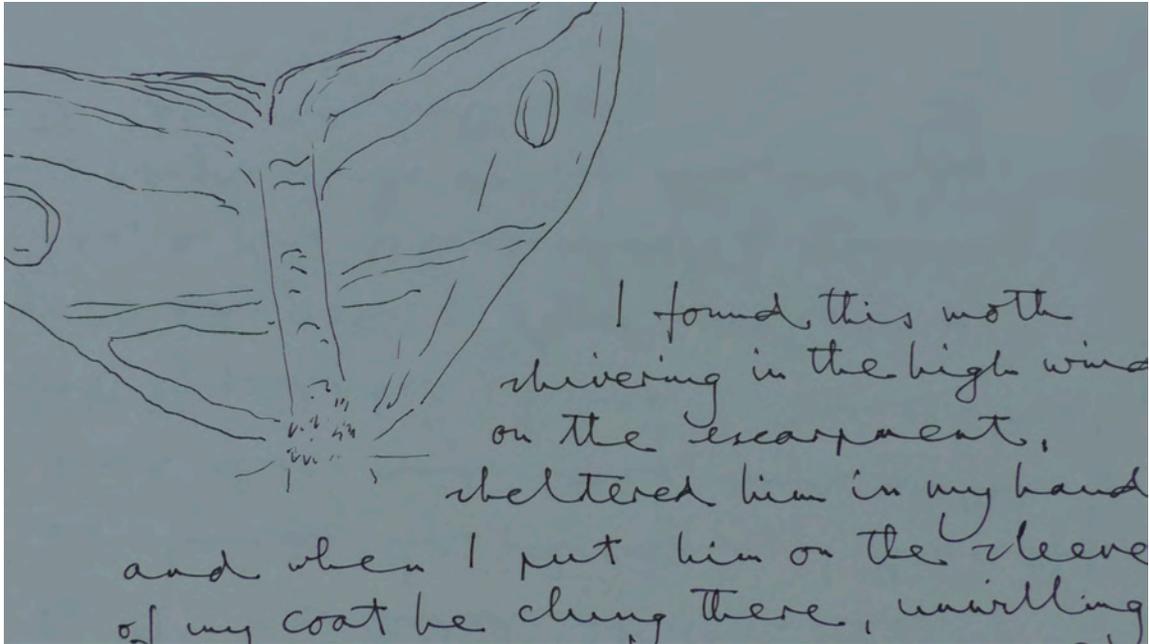
OVER THE WALL
2nd January 2011

MYSTERY

Apart from a sprinkling of silver sugar balls, our Christmas cake had just one decoration on its icy top. No more than an inch high, a little Santa Claus sits crouched on a sledge. He wears a thick warm hat with a point, and a coat that amply covers him, even over his feet. His shoulders are hunched, his mittened hands held together on his knee. It is as if he is travelling fast. His head is turned to look behind him and his long beard trails over his shoulder, as if in the wind. But his face is the most finely worked part of the figure. Apart from the beard, he has a bushy moustache, and eyes that stare with a riveting expression. He has a look of either keen fear or surprise, it's hard to say which.

Ali unearthed him some years ago while digging in the garden. It took a lot of scrubbing to clean him up. Perhaps he had felt the roots of cabbages and push of swelling parsnips around him for a hundred years. Who knows when he left the comfort of a cottage shelf and was banished to the cold ground? It is as though his staring eyes are now a look of wonder at his new stroke of fortune.

What counts though is that this tiny figure is infused with mystery, which gives it a power that would not be present if we knew everything about it. We live in a world where the dominant mindset is keen to solve and explain all mysteries, and it's true that this provides us with huge benefits. But I think it's good to keep and respect also a sense of the mysterious, the ambiguous, of paradox and conundrum. We would live in a blander world without them.



1995

I found this moth shivering in the high wind on the escarpment, sheltered him in my hand and when I put him on the sleeve of my coat he clung there, unwilling to move. Coming down into the Capel valley I put him above my breast pocket and he clung on like a badge. Then the sun came out quite strong and I descended steeply to this secluded fold in the mountains, beside the stream. I took off my coat, and shoes and socks, and walked down a bit to paddle. When I came back, my badge had gone. And just now, writing this, a big black beetle walked across the page and on up the valley, not stopping to take any interest.

The Black Mountains. A dog barks at Gordon's up the lane. The call of sheep and shrill lambs in the valley. I can hear the rush of the river as it winds amongst the trees, that are still largely bare of leaves. The last hour of sun casts distinct shadows across the fields, tracks long out of use show themselves. Treetops are picked out by the sun until its descent has them join the general hazy depth of the valley. So this is now (the dog still barks, and a fly scampers across this page and flies). Lambs run in the field by the little farm. (I watch from high, high up on the opposite mountain.) I see Vi from this distance scurry from barn to back door. When last I sat here, last year, Cliff walked, albeit with a stick, up the field. And now he is no more. And now is now. Hold a life in time's palm. Hold the zigzag paths on the old mountain, the extinct rivulets, the ruined farm. Hold the sun in its descent, hold the bee whisking past me in the breeze, hold my shadow on the lichen-mapped rocks. Hold a time and it exists also tomorrow, hold a life and it exists also for always.

OVER THE WALL
26th September 2014

THE FUTURE?

Last year I edited a film for BBC4 called 'Photographing Africa', about Harry Hook, a photographer, born in Kenya. One of the stories in the film is about Harry returning to look for five Samburu women he photographed thirty years ago. He discovers that one of the women has died of Aids, another has disappeared, possibly to the city, and he finds the other three. They have all given up their nomadic lives, and in settled homesteads are surrounded by children and grandchildren.

Harry asks each of them when has been the happiest time of their lives. Surrounded by their families, and with no longer the grind of life on the move, all of them say with a broad grin: "Now!"

Then Harry asks one of the women an extra question. "And what about the future?" She looks at him quizzically and says: "Well, none of us know that." It's as though, in her world, where drought and famine make life unpredictable, she's stating the obvious.

2018

To travel or not to travel. There will come a time, I think, not far ahead, when those of us who fly from place to place will have to draw in our wings, because our planes have for decades been unsustainably polluting, and we will have to face the consequences. We will not lose our yearning to seek out new horizons, but will, I think, need to find new ways - or old ways - to move about discerningly, travelling perhaps less far, staying closer to home.

THE WIND
18th August 2018

I stand on the Cotswold escarpment looking west across the Severn Estuary and The Forest of Dean. In the distance is the long outline of The Black Mountains. At the southern end, distinctly separate from its surroundings, is Sugar Loaf. I'm going there today, to climb it for the first time.



The mountain has its name because it resembles a conical sugar loaf. Until the end of the nineteenth century, refined sugar wasn't sold loose in bags but as a hard, steep-sided cone, or loaf, needing special scissors to break pieces off. In reality, the summit of the mountain has a flat ridge of a hundred yards or so, but from many angles this isn't clear, so it seems to stand with an abrupt and pointed top. Sugar Loaf has a strong presence to it.

I park to the north of the mountain and set off through high-hedged lanes, then find the path that strikes steeply uphill. I mount a stile, scattering the sheep well ensconced beneath its timbers, and puff my way up a boundary fence. Below it, a field sweeps down to a remote cottage, whitewashed but well weathered, with a distant figure moving about beyond, silhouetted against a huge bonfire. A life is there, within all the contexts of this place, that I will never know.

On up from the fence, the path enters thick bracken. I'm indebted to those whose boots have kept the way through. I breathe deeply, sucking in extra levels of air. I stop, bracken fronds waving high on either side, and look back at the valley with its barns and farms way below. I turn again, and high above up the path I see a couple briefly checking the map before they move on and disappear. I have two immediate thoughts: I'm enjoying being alone and they are changing that; and then gladness that there are others on the path, were I to fade from want of breath.

I reach the couple's pausing point, then soon above come to a fork in the path. I'm sure my map is too small a scale to shed any light, so leave it unopened, and decide on the right-hand, steeper option. I labour up, then come to where I can peer into to a valley off to the left, only to see the couple climbing the path at the far

end. Should I have gone that way? It's too late to turn back, so on I go, hoping that the view ahead will open up.

And it does. One step at a time, the full size and shape of Sugar Loaf appears. The bracken gives way to short heather and the path levels to a gentler climb. I'm approaching the mountain on its eastern flank. It rises steeply to south and north, with the flat length of the summit along the top. I can see rocks jutting up on the skyline, and many tiny human figures, singly and in groups.

I'm on the right path, heading straight for the southern end. A long way ahead, two figures are approaching. I know that the swish-swish of my trousers and the ruffling breeze through the heather will be broken by voices – I will speak for the first time since leaving Ali at home hours before. Not far from me they stop - two young guys - to discuss the view with the aid of a map. I come up. We are all so full of the day and the landscape, the talk trips out before we know it. They are loving this place.

“What's that mountain in front of us?” they ask. I turn to look and say: “That's Skirrid”. “Ah, that's The Skirrid.” Like Sugar Loaf, here's a mountain so familiar over the years, yet I've never climbed it. At our height we're looking down on it, with its crag at one end and a long tapering tail. “Are you going to climb it?” I ask. “No,” they say in unison, “we're heading back now.” I explain Ali and I stayed in a caravan last year, looking up at Sugar Loaf, but never made the climb. “So today's the day.” “You'll love it,” they say, “but it's windy! Don't get blown away!”

They romp on down the hill, leaving me to consider the summit, and my shortness of breath. I can either go straight up the southern end, steeper and steeper as it ascends, or I can take the long path, skirting to the right. I can see distant figures making a gentler approach to the top from the far end. After some long breaths, I head off to the right.

People are passing me on their way down. There's a straggling group, with various adults and a host of ten-year-olds of many nationalities. The children have the stare of concentration. It's obvious that none of them have ever done anything like this before.

As I come to the far end, the force of the wind picks up. Climbing the shoulder, I'm buffeted and pummelled. It's hard to place my feet. A big bearded man in an orange anorak passes me, on his way down. We make expressions – raised eyebrows and pulled jaws – but he's blurred, like an action photo.

I strike up to my left, negotiating enormous boulders. I see that people have crept in behind big rocks, out of the wind, and I scramble in too. In the calmer air, my whole head glows.

“We won the race!” shouts a small boy, hunkered down beside his dad, as his mum and sister come panting up. Another man appears, clutching a tiny child. “I was here ten years ago,” he says. “It was just as windy as this!”

I munch my ham sandwich and an apple. I’m looking out across the way I’ve come, the land sweeping down from my throbbing, booted feet. The long path, where I met the boys with the map, the line where the heather starts, the column of smoke from the bonfire in the valley, and Skirrid, like a knuckle prodding up from a gentler sea of hills and fields. Behind all of this, the dark shapes of The Forest of Dean, the distinctive signature of May Hill, with its topknot of trees, and the long skyline of the Cotswolds and home. You can see Sugar Loaf from so many places, so you can see so many places from Sugar Loaf.

I ease myself up, step between the sheltering picnickers, and emerge from the big rocks into the full force of the wind. I can see my eyelashes flickering like timelapse film. I stand, trembling, facing north. In the valley below is the caravan, tucked under a hedge, where we stayed last year. Then lump behind lump, the Black Mountains march westwards, merging into the Brecon Beacons in the blue.

Down to my left is Abergavenny, the jumble of roofs in the main town contrasting with the straight, boxlike ‘sixties buildings of Michael Hall Hospital, on the outskirts, where Cliff died more than a decade ago. Up behind, a road glints in the sunlight as it rises past Blorenge Mountain and disappears towards Blaenavon and the industrial valleys. Below me is the River Usk, the village of Gilwern, and then Crickhowell, where a year ago Vi, well cared for but forgetful, passed away in a nursing home. And then I look to the foot of Sugar Loaf, and the paths ascending from the western side. On this, a Saturday in August, there must be two or three hundred people on the paths, bent into the wind. It’s like a pilgrimage.

As they near the top, people are shouting, wordlessly, from the effort and the joy of reaching the summit. Little children run, almost whipped skywards in the wind, their parents scampering after them. There are couples taking selfies by the trig-point, their phones juddering; a lady with a mass of hair covering her face cries with despair as her sandwich whips away from her grasp; and there’s a man all in brown, as thin as a nail paring, sprinting up and over without a sideways glance, gone in a moment, disappearing into the depths between here and Skirrid.

And I stand, having a blow today, beyond our space as a family, with our son Barney about to marry Naomi, our daughter Lucy and her husband Tim expecting a sister for Billy, and our son Jack, his wife Tamara, and little Ollie. I blow praises into the air for Tamara, who has severe cancer, and stare into the future.

TO BE
2016

to be eloquent
and lost for words

to steel ourselves
with accuracy

yet remain
elliptical

to be here, and there
in the same place

to be and not to be
at the same time

to find form
and amorphousness

to test the weight of things
yet know their levity

to take the road
yet see multiple digressions

to throw the whole thing
skywards

yet see blue
beneath my feet

there are languages
beyond our words

the witty one
and the tongue-tied

fog and clarity
you may find either

as you
reach the ridge

the close detail of a clear day
and depth of mist

here and not here
at the same time

at no time
nowhere

Tamara Heywood
29th June 1980 – 17th December 2018

Bella Tamara Telling
born 24th February 2019

I have previously self-published 'To Be' and 'Flat-Head'
in 'Spring Head and other poems 1966-2016'

and 'Billy's Clothes' and 'Autumn'
in 'Moving On and other poems 2016'.

All other writing is published here for the first time.

Many of my films, including 'These People We Love'
and 'The Walk', can be viewed on my website.

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